

A GREAT MASS OF DEPRAVED AND DEGENERATE: THE AMERICAN FEDERATION
OF LABOR'S FIGHT TO RESTRICT IMMIGRATION, EXCLUDE UNDESIRABLES, AND
KEEP LABOR AMERICAN IN THE 1920s

by

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Abstract

The American Federation of Labor was a staunch supporter of immigration restriction in the 1920s, and lobbied for the passage of the Immigration Act of 1924, which heavily restricted incoming Eastern and Southern European immigration. Though the AFL denied that they were prejudiced against the affected immigrant groups, they used language which denoted ethnic hierarchies and a desire to preserve American identity. The AFL held an exclusionary attitude towards immigrants, minorities, and women in regards to both who should be allowed in America, and who should be allowed in a trade union.

Previous labor histories have characterized the AFL as wary of high levels of immigration for fear of the threats immigrants posed to union bargaining power. Using official AFL publications, AFL leaders' personal correspondence, and contemporary labor news, this thesis aims to push back against that characterization, and suggest that AFL leadership was prejudiced against perceived un-American peoples. As anti-immigrant rhetoric increases in our country daily, it is time to reexamine the nature of the AFL's attitude towards immigrants, minorities and women workers more critically. A century later, understanding the connections between American workers' attitudes towards subjugated groups and national trends of rising conservatism and nativism is more important than ever.

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In May of 1924, the most restrictive immigration act in American history was signed into law. The Immigration Act of 1924, or the Johnson-Reed Act, reduced the inflow of immigrants into the United States by assigning annual quotas to almost all foreign nationalities.¹ The quotas were set at 2% of existing immigrant populations, based on the 1890 census. The 1924 Act was not the first of its kind: it followed both the Immigration Acts of 1917 and 1921, which created provisional immigration quotas and restrictions. The Immigration Act of 1924 is significant for the unprecedented level of restrictions it enacted, as well as the implications it had for designating ethnic and racial groups. It sorted ethnic groups and nationalities into concrete racial categories, designating them as desirables and undesirables, and halting immigration from undesirable regions for decades. While the act is now remembered as having been supported by prejudiced and nationalist groups like the Ku Klux Klan and eugenicists, it was extremely popular nationally. The Act was supported by many diverse organizations and groups, including one ardent lobbyist, the American Federation of Labor (AFL).

After World War I, as questions about globalization and American identity came to the forefront, many began to see America as a country with strong, unique values and traditions that needed protection from outside forces. Serious conversations about restricting immigration from other countries began, with a focus on countries which Americans had become more familiar with during the war. Soldiers' experiences and the nationalism that arose out of war propaganda convinced many Americans that Eastern and Southern Europe were underdeveloped and extremely poor. The Russian Revolution in 1917 made people even more nervous that Europe was a hotbed for political turmoil and war, and that immigrants hailing from there would bring over their issues, including communism and illness. Restriction of immigration became a popular

¹ The Americas were excluded from quotas.

sentiment, though the countries that should be restricted, methods of restriction, and the extent of restriction was hotly debated. Every American, organization, and political group, had an opinion on immigration restriction.

The American Federation of Labor, led by its founder and longtime president Samuel Gompers, was created as an alliance of craft unions in 1886, and was the largest union group by the beginning of the 1920s. At the national level, the AFL primarily fought for higher wages, shorter working days, and the abolition of child labor. AFL leaders took a firm stance on the issue of immigration. They denounced “open” immigration as a tool used by employers like US Steel to reduce workers’ wages and replace American workers. Starting around 1918 the *American Federationist*, the American Federation of Labor’s annual labor news publication, put out frequent editorials calling for a complete halt of incoming immigrants, citing the damage that high numbers of incoming immigrant workers could do to the union gains made through bargaining during the War. Close inspection of AFL materials and correspondence reveals that the American Federation of Labor participated in the nativist movement of the 1920s through its fervent support of the Immigration Act of 1924, supporting the exclusion of outsiders in want of a homogeneous, White American society.

Critical examination of AFL statements and actions surrounding the passage of the Immigration Act of 1924 reveals that there were much stronger motivations driving the AFL than just protecting bargaining power. Its statements contained much of the same language used by the nativists of the era: people who wanted to preserve the idea of a distinct, white, American identity and tradition, which necessarily meant excluding immigrants who could bring in their own identities and change the perceived cultural and ethnic makeup of America. Some ideas emphasized by nativists included the need to preserve the English language as the only language

spoken in the US, preparing so-called American foods, playing American music, and keeping a traditional family dynamic with conservative gender roles. Nativists decidedly did not include African American or Native American traditions or foods in their concept of America. The AFL referenced ideas of the threatened American identity both in *American Federationist* and in private correspondence. Though AFL leaders, including Gompers, claimed that they did not support prejudice, their claim is not mirrored in their actions and statements.

There is extensive scholarship on the growth of white supremacy and the development of modern racial ideas during the 1920s. Most scholars argue that the Immigration Act of 1924 was one of the first pieces of major legislation which took nativist prejudice to the federal level.² However, the relationship between organized labor and the nativist movement is rarely explored in depth. With few exceptions, major works on the labor movement and the American Federation of Labor after World War I do not explore the subject of immigration, only mentioning that labor was anti-immigration for strategic reasons. A more critical look at the documents of the AFL in this period reveals the extent to which it was concerned with restricting incoming immigrants from undesirable countries, and the potential damage immigrants could do to American society and institutions. The nativism and prejudice of the American Federation of Labor is evidenced by the language it used in its literature and statements, the extent of its efforts to lobby for immigration restriction, as well as its exclusionary attitude towards non-white and non-male workers.

²See T. A. Lane, *Solidarity or Survival? American Labor and European Immigrants, 1830-1924* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987); Mae Ngai, "The Architecture of Race in American Immigration Law: A Reexamination of the Immigration Act of 1924," *The Journal of American History* 86, no. 1 (June 1999): 67-92; John Higham, *Strangers in the Land* (Newark: Rutgers University Press, 1955); David J. Goldberg, *Discontented America: The United States in the 1920s* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); David R. Roediger, *Working Towards Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White: The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs*, (New York: Basic Books, 2005).

Studying the American Federation of Labor's actions in a period of extensive immigration restriction can help to understand what has historically motivated anti-immigrant sentiment and how anti-immigrant rhetoric has been weaponized by, and against, different demographics in the United States. Though in the 1920s organized labor was not yet at the peak of its power, the AFL was by far the most significant representative of the working class in America. Their place as the representative of labor is demonstrated by their prominence in congressional hearings over immigration, whether AFL representatives were actually present in hearings, or they were mentioned in testimonies. The AFL's high membership and national prominence makes it a good marker of a popular, well-known organization, which makes examining their relationship to national issues more critical. As immigration, citizenship, and immigrant workers continue to be some of the most important issues in our political scene today, studying the Immigration Act of 1924 and the AFL's involvement with immigration restriction can help us understand how nativism and anti-immigrant discrimination affect policy and the working world in the present day.

The American Federation of Labor and Nativism

The American Federation of Labor was a conglomeration of labor unions founded in 1886. It rose to be the most populous labor union in the country over the next few decades. Primarily made up of skilled trade unions like the Cigarmakers' International Union, the AFL fought for higher wages and shorter working days for its members. Although by 1921 the AFL represented more than three million workers, it was relatively exclusive in its membership,

especially compared to industrial unions like the Industrial Workers of the World, a smaller but extremely active and radical union for unskilled workers. Nevertheless, the AFL was the largest and the most politically significant union group in the country: its leaders, like longtime president Samuel Gompers, were household names, men who used their popularity to make statements about political issues that affected workers. The AFL and other unions also did not yet possess immense political power: though the AFL had a relatively vast membership for the time and some power in Congress, labor as a whole did not yet have the strength nationally that it would in the next few decades. However, this did not stop it from participating in national debates and lobbying for pro-labor bills. Gompers, specifically, frequently testified in Congress and made headlines nationally for his statements regarding labor. The AFL's annual publication *American Federationist*, which consisted of labor-related comics and stories, released information about strikes and legislation, and editorials from leaders. The AFL used this platform as well as its political power and influence over the working world to push its agenda on issues like the 8-hour day and wages. In the early 1920s, the AFL used its political power to push heavily for immigration restriction.³

The Immigration Act of 1924 was the result of decades of increasing prejudice, race science, white supremacy, and fear of international strife. *Nativism*, most broadly defined as a prejudiced attitude towards people from foreign or outsider backgrounds, was at an all-time high at the beginning of the decade. It was during this period that more people began to think of America as a definitively white (specifically Northern European), Protestant country. This idea required lines to be drawn between different heritage groups, especially in Europe, in order to

³ Lynn Dumenil, *The Modern Temper: American Culture and Society in the 1920s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995): 64; David J. Goldberg, *Discontented America: The United States in the 1920s* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999): 144.

actualize the idea of *100% Americans*, a popular term at the time which embodied all the values and adjectives that went along with American Protestant whiteness. The cultural lines drawn were heavily reflective of the recent World War.

Nativism, though prejudicial by definition, represented a wide spectrum of anti-immigrant beliefs: on the most extreme end of the spectrum was the second iteration of the Ku Klux Klan, a revamping of the violent, racist fraternal organization from the 1860s. The Klan returned in 1917, gaining immense political power between 1920 and 1925. While it still held extremely racist views of African Americans, it primarily turned its vitriol towards Jews, Catholics, and Eastern and Southern European immigrants at this time, creating a concrete definition of whiteness which often surpassed skin color, especially in the case of Eastern Europeans. In fact, many popular conspiracies surrounding immigrants were propagated by the Klan, including the notion that immigrants steal jobs (though, the Klan was decidedly anti-union). Although “whiteness” was defined differently by different groups, it generally referred to people of Northern or Northwestern European descent. Along with the actual ethnic background, whiteness was associated with civilization, hygiene, and intelligence. This is why, despite their skin color, the impoverished and uneducated immigrants from Poland and Russia were excluded from whiteness. While most Americans did not like the Klan or agree with all of the Klan’s statements, the exclusion of Jews, Catholics, and European immigrants from 100% Americanism was very widely accepted.⁴

American Federation of Labor leaders, like all labor leaders at the time, were vocally in opposition to the Ku Klux Klan, though this was primarily because of the Klan’s pro-business (anti-union) stance. In fact, the AFL officially denounced “[the Klan’s] efforts to... promote

⁴ Linda Gordon, *The Second Coming of the KKK* (New York: Liveright, 2017): 55.

religious intolerance, racial antagonisms, and bigotry.”⁵ However, it did not mirror this anti-racist sentiment in its actions, privately or publicly. The AFL actively demonstrated nativist views, particularly towards immigrants from Southern and Eastern European countries. The AFL lobbied for extreme immigration restriction between 1918 and 1924, citing the alleged threat that incoming immigrants posed to American workers. However, it is apparent when viewing AFL statements and documents that it was uniquely invested in the passage of immigration restriction compared to other labor organizations. It is also apparent that the AFL repeated nativist and extremely prejudiced language, similar to the Klan which it denounced. Finally, it held an attitude of exclusion towards not only immigrants but also women, African Americans, and unskilled, lower class workers.

The American Federation of Labor published thousands of articles, editorials, and essays through several mediums between 1917 and 1924, mostly related to child labor, wage increases, strikes, and other contemporary labor issues. Between the articles about labor issues, pieces about immigration permeated every corner of their publications. In the 1923 issue of *American Federationist*, of the 195 articles and essays featured, 20 mention immigration, making just over 10% of the pieces in that issue.⁶ The vast majority of the pieces regarding immigration use nativist language or reference prejudicial concepts about immigrant groups. The extent of AFL leaders’ interest in immigration restriction, as well as the language used in their writing, reveals a very heightened concern with the cause of immigration restriction, and specifically with the restriction of certain groups of immigrants. Closer examination of AFL publications is needed to understand the motivations behind the AFL’s focus on immigration restriction.

⁵ “Ku Klux Klan,” *American Federationist* 30 (1923): 919.

⁶ Any articles or essays that feature the words “immigration” or “immigrant,” as found by the author.

The AFL's motivation for including so much pro-restriction rhetoric in their spaces is often explained away by labor historians as purely strategic. The fact that AFL president Samuel Gompers was himself both Jewish and an immigrant from the United Kingdom has led some to believe that Gompers could not personally hold nativist views. Likewise, many AFL members in the 1920s were immigrants of German or Irish descent, and so it is easy to imagine that they would have empathized with the incoming Eastern and Southern European immigrants. Confusion about possible immigrant nativism comes from a modern misconception that has to do with our racial understandings from the post-World War II era. Most of our racial categories today did not exist or were very different in the 1920s, most significantly in relation to whiteness. In the 1920s, the white race, the object of the Klan's and eugenicists' concern, was generally considered to only include people of Northwestern European descent, such as English, French, and Dutch. Irish and German immigrants were slowly integrated into the definition of whiteness over the 19th century. Italians, Eastern Europeans, and Southern Europeans were not yet viewed as fully white. So, despite the fact that many AFL members were children or grandchildren of immigrants, they themselves identified as white Americans, and viewed incoming immigrants as nonwhites who would not assimilate as well into American culture as they and their families had. This is the popular concept of the American melting pot, in which after a generation or two, immigrants become folded into American society. In turn, old immigrants adopt the nativism of American society as well, and direct prejudice towards new immigrants.

Nativist and Discriminatory Language

Nativists did not treat all immigrants equally: it created a hierarchy of all incoming immigrants, in which Northern and Western Europeans were at the top. Likewise, the American Federation of Labor was not concerned about all immigrants, it was only concerned about restricting immigrants with specific ethnic backgrounds. Although conversations about immigration in the years 1917-1924 pertained mostly to immigrants of Southern and Eastern European descent, the AFL's treatment of Asian immigrants should not be overlooked, as these immigrants were the earliest targets of AFL anti-immigrant aggression. As early as the founding of the AFL in 1886, anti-Chinese pamphlets and essays were published by leaders such as Gompers, which framed Chinese immigrants as "coolies" – immigrants imported by employers to replace striking workers or weaken unions.⁷ In the case of Chinese immigrants, Gompers and others made no attempt to mask their prejudice. In fact, Chinese immigrants were frequently used as examples of the worst immigrants who were so unamerican that they could never possibly be assimilated.⁸ The language used in descriptions of Chinese people was extremely derogatory: references to insects and animals were common.

Gompers himself, in 1902, co-wrote a pamphlet called "Meat vs. Rice: American Manhood Against Asiatic Coolieism," in which he not only argues that Chinese laborers were intentionally taking labor away from American workers, but that Chinese people lacked morals and standards of living which would qualify them to live among whites in America.⁹ Longtime AFL Secretary Frank Morrison agreed. In the 39th annual convention of the Federation, Morrison, a prominent leader in the AFL, stated that Asian people could live on less food than

⁷ Edgar A. Perkins, "Where the Union Label Had its Beginning," *American Federationist* 29 (1922): 218.

⁸ Samuel Gompers, "To Abraham Baroff," *The Samuel Gompers Papers*, eds. Peter J. Albert and Grace Palladino (Champaign, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009): 12:415.

⁹ Samuel Gompers and Herman Gutstadt, "Meat vs. Rice: American Manhood against Asiatic Coolieism - Which Shall Survive?" (Columbus, OH: American Federation of Labor, 1902): 4.

whites, and “if there is going to be a struggle between the Orientals and the [whites] I want to see the white race in America and the Oriental race across the ocean.”¹⁰ In this statement, Morrison clearly admitted, on official record, that he believed in the fundamental difference of races, and that Asian people were not just a threat to American workers but to the safety and livelihood of “the Occidental race.” These kinds of statements were repeated by some of the key leaders in the AFL. These statements, among others, dehumanize Asian immigrants and frame them as animalistic. While the AFL framed European immigrants as undesirables and not fit for American life, it posited Chinese immigrants as literally evil, sometimes even making statements about race wars and race science. This racial hierarchy, though not as fully formed as some others used by more ardent racists, would go on to inform the quotas used in the Immigration Act of 1924: while Chinese people were already fully excluded from immigration, the Act would extend this to include Japanese, Indian (in a contentious trial), and all other Asian people in this characterization.¹¹

The prejudice shown in the language used to describe Southern and Eastern European immigrants is much less explicit in its violence. However, when analyzed with nativist arguments and language in mind, there are clear similarities between the prejudice towards Asian immigrants and the prejudice towards European immigrants. Words like “desirables” and “undesirables,” used as nouns, populate the essays in *American Federationist* meant to argue for restriction of European immigrants. The idea of a singular pure American identity, which stood to be corrupted by outside forces, is one used by both the AFL and groups like the Ku Klux Klan, despite the AFL’s fervent criticism of the Klan. In the AFL’s case, it often argued that

¹⁰ *Report of Proceedings of the Thirty-Ninth Annual Convention of the American Federation of Labor* (Washington, D.C.: The Law Reporter Printing Company, 1919): 366.

¹¹ Ngai, “The Architecture of Race in American Immigration Law,” 70.

immigrants coming to America needed to be assimilated, in order to preserve the American identity of the country, and prevent other cultures and ideas from overpowering that. Gompers and others referenced the “American standard of living” frequently, meaning not just the level of comfort and wealth that Americans had compared to other countries, but also the way they conducted themselves and their morals.¹² Gompers

There was an assumption made by AFL leaders about European immigrants that immigrants, on their own, could not assimilate; they would come to America bringing their values and practices and continue practicing them, unless forced to learn American ways of life.¹³ This was not a new idea. Nativists of the 1910s were keen on the idea of actively Americanizing immigrants by helping them learn English and inviting them to barbecues. But in the more panicked, exclusionary culture of the early 1920s, the lack of assimilation was the argument made for the temporary total pause on immigration, an idea which was proposed in Congress several times in different forms and heavily supported by the AFL. Proponents argued that the inflow of immigrants would overwhelm the country and result in a mayhem of crime and a broader loss of American culture.¹⁴ In one 1916 hearing, Secretary Morrison argued that when Americans commit crimes they are punished, but when “a man or a great body of men who come into this country and destroy the living conditions of the wageworkers... that is not considered a crime.”¹⁵ His rhetoric pitted Americans against criminal immigrants who were coming to destroy

¹² “Gompers Asks Wide Cost of Living Inquiry,” *The Brooklyn Daily Times*, December 12, 1920.

¹³ “Excerpts from the Proceedings of the Industrial Conference in Washington, D.C.,” *The Samuel Gompers Papers*, eds. Peter J. Albert and Grace Palladino (Campaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 11:160.

¹⁴ “Excerpts from the Minutes of a Meeting of the Executive Council of the AFL,” *Gompers Papers* 11:312.

¹⁵ Hearings before the Committee on Immigration and Naturalization on H.R. 558, House of Representatives, 64th Cong., 1st sess., 1916, 7.

American lives. These kinds of characterizations are the heart of the nativism that defined the 1920s.

Though the AFL's leaders did not outright call themselves prejudiced, as other nativist groups did, it accepted and enthusiastically participated in the central idea of nativism: that American culture and people needed protection from outsiders, who wanted to take advantage of American privileges like high wages, but would ruin the freedom and culture that made America special. AFL members even complained when immigrants used too many resources, such as public school education for children, despite the common complaint that immigrants were uneducated.¹⁶ There is a disconnect in logic here: the AFL wanted immigrants to assimilate and become American, but when immigrants sent their children to school to learn English and socialize with American children, they were using up resources that should be saved for real Americans. The disconnect is not just ignorance. It shows that these leaders, Samuel Gompers, Frank Morrison, and others, wanted to restrict immigration in order to keep out people who were unworthy of American resources.

Gompers was specifically concerned with the sole use of the English language. As mentioned above, AFL leaders were major proponents of the literacy test for incoming immigrants, a system that required immigrants to prove upon arrival to the United States that they could read at a basic level in their native language (or any language).¹⁷ This test would supposedly prevent people who were unable to work or learn skills from entering the country. That Gompers and other leaders wanted to enforce a literacy test demonstrates that they wanted to keep out uneducated and low- or unskilled immigrants, and especially immigrants who would

¹⁶ Frank Morrison, "Free Immigration Means Bread Lines for American Workers, Says Leader," *Burlington Daily News*, April 19, 1921.

¹⁷ Gompers, "To Peter Snyder," *Samuel Gompers Papers* 12, 164.

use resources without contributing to society.¹⁸ Leaders also were concerned with the use of foreign languages in their unions, even in unions made up primarily of one ethnic group, such as garment workers who were mostly Jewish and spoke Yiddish in union meetings.¹⁹

The concern with garment workers specifically challenges the notion that leaders merely wanted unions to use English for ease of communication. The garment workers were already union members, so they posed no threat to “American” workers. Spoken language clearly meant something more significant to AFL leaders and reflected on both the workers and the organization. Gompers vocally associated the English language with America, and many leaders believed (or argued) that in order to truly be American and understand America, workers must use the English language exclusively.²⁰

The AFL claimed that immigrants from Eastern Europe were difficult to organize due to their recent history of serfdom, and that was a significant reason for enforcing quotas on those groups.²¹ Ironically, the fact that it refused to speak foreign languages with immigrant workers shows that they failed to even attempt to organize immigrants. In contrast, the IWW published informational pamphlets in foreign languages for immigrant workers and even hired foreign language speakers to help organize workers, which the AFL never did.²² The disparity between these two groups’ attitudes towards foreign language is notable, but the AFL’s insistence on speaking English reveals that only workers who spoke English and shared 100% American values deserved respect.

¹⁸ “Report of the Legislative Committee,” *American Federationist* 30 (1923): 181.

¹⁹ “Memorandum of a Conference with James Davis,” *Samuel Gompers Papers* 12, 210.

²⁰ Robert Asher, “Union Nativism and the Immigrant Response,” *Labor History* 23 (1982): 334.

²¹ Morrison, “Free Immigration Means Bread Lines” *Burlington Daily News*, April 19, 1921.

²² “Pamphlet in Russian,” *Solidarity*, May 28, 1921; Asher, “Union Nativism,” 333.

AFL leaders used nativist language at every turn. AFL publications in which writers called for immigration restriction to protect workers would call immigrants “undesirables” who threatened the American way of life, frequently in the same sentence.²³ Editorials complaining about the economic ramifications of unrestricted immigration suddenly swung to vile characterizations of immigrants. Though somewhat less dehumanizing than the extreme racial insults used towards Chinese immigrants, the accusations against Southern and Eastern European immigrants included “less inclined to resist oppression,” and a “great mass of depraved and degenerate.”²⁴ Frank Morrison wrote in an opinion piece in April of 1921 that he did not want to deny opportunity to any man or woman, yet continued by stating that Eastern European immigrants had been “imbued with the economic concept of the serf,” and could not adjust to the freedom and hard-working attitude of American workers.²⁵ The idea that immigrants were unable to leave behind the conditions of their home country, and would taint American society, was extremely common in AFL statements.

The repeated insistence that Eastern and Southern Europeans were incapable of adjusting to the American way of life, and that they were inclined to accept torturous working conditions, dehumanized those groups and set them apart as almost a different species. Though some, like Morrison, insisted that they did not believe in denying opportunities to any specific groups, his is clearly untrue. The discrimination towards Chinese immigrants was violent, and showed the limits of the belief of AFL leaders in opportunities for everyone. Though most nativists did not claim to hate Europeans, nobody, including Gompers, hid their disdain for Chinese immigrant

²³ “*Spokesman Review*, Spokane, Washington,” from “Gary, the 12-Hour Apostle,” *American Federationist* 30 (1923): 558.

²⁴ Gompers, “Wide-Open Immigration;” “Europe Seeks to Unload Undesirables on U.S.,” *The Connecticut Labor News*, October 20, 1923.

²⁵ Morrison, “Free Immigration Means Bread Lines,” *Burlington Daily News*, April 19, 1921.

workers. The Chinese acted as a kind of symbol in AFL writing, representing to unionists the worst kind of worker, one who would work for nothing and followed any orders, in turn selling out organized labor. Historians who characterize the AFL as only fighting immigration for economic purposes do not acknowledge the level of nativist, anti-Asian and anti-Slavic language used, even in official AFL statements. Although AFL leaders' language towards European immigrants did not reach the level of violence and racism as that directed towards Asian immigrants, the specific and uniquely violent language used to describe Asian immigrants should not be ignored in conversations about AFL leaders' nativism.

Extent of AFL Involvement in Immigration Restriction

In their public discussion of immigration and immigrants, AFL personnel repeated a few key arguments that tied the issues of immigration and labor together. These arguments were made by AFL President Gompers, Secretary Morrison, Secretary of Labor James Davis, and were published in the *American Federationist*, repeated in speeches, and delivered to and published in labor newspapers across the nation. These leaders frequently stressed, often in the middle of anti-immigrant tirades, that they stood firmly against prejudice toward any specific groups. This kind of hypocrisy is found in many statements. There are several issues with the public statements made by the AFL regarding its arguments for immigration restriction, including inconsistencies and clearly prejudiced language.

The foremost argument made by the AFL in support of immigration restriction was that high levels of immigration severely hinder labor bargaining. The prevailing notion at the time was that the best union bargaining is done under conditions of low unemployment, and high levels of immigration would result in a surplus of labor, and thus no bargaining. This was followed by references to Chinese “coolies,” again framing them as people who were effectively purchased and brought into the United States by corporations to replace striking workers. Though Chinese immigration was banned under the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, AFL leaders insisted that without immediate restriction, corporations would begin the same sort of activities with Eastern and Southern European immigrants.²⁶ Leaders often insisted that any bargaining gains such as higher wages, shorter days, and better conditions would be completely undone if unrestricted immigration were allowed to continue. This argument relied on the assumption that AFL jobs could have plausibly been taken by immigrants. While some steel workers were represented by the AFL, the organization was in reality mostly made up of skilled trade unions, like cigar makers and garment workers, trades not often populated by uneducated immigrants.

The second face of the AFL’s argument for immigration restriction was that the biggest proponents of “wide-open immigration” were employers, particularly steel factory owners.²⁷ It was explained in several *American Federationist* editorials and statements that factory owners were threatened by low unemployment and unions’ movement for an eight-hour workday.²⁸ This meant that employers like the United States Steel Corporation were desperate to bring in workers from anywhere, creating a labor surplus to weaken organized labor’s progress and strength.

²⁶ Gompers, “To Abraham Baroff,” *The Samuel Gompers Papers* 12, 415.

²⁷ Samuel Gompers, “America Wants no Wide-Open Immigration,” *American Federationist* 30: (1923): 657.

²⁸ Stanley Lebergott, “Annual Estimates of Unemployment in the United States, 1900-1954,” in *The Measurement and Behavior of Unemployment*, edited by the National Bureau Committee for Economic Research (Washington, D.C., NBER, 1957), 215.

Unions across many industries fought for and gained wage increases during the First World War, due to the scarcity in labor, and, according to the AFL, the stagnation in incoming immigrants.²⁹

There was a period of lowered wages and high unemployment in 1920 due to the return to peacetime, and labor was scarcely ready to lose any more of their gains. In its statements, the AFL framed employers as the sole proponent behind the pro-immigration group in American politics, who wanted to defeat unions at any cost. The AFL claimed that “Steel and other big interests are ‘up and doing’ every minute,” putting all their attention towards “the ‘liberalization...’ of the immigration laws.”³⁰ The AFL accused any politicians that defended immigration of being in the pocket of employers, or at least evidence of the strong lobbying power of the Steel trust. This put immigration on the same footing as any other key issue for workers in the fight against exploitative employers.

The AFL took a uniquely hard stance on immigration restriction relative to other prominent unions. *American Federationist* included several editorials and updates in every issue on immigration levels, statuses of immigration bills in Congress, and general pleas for restriction.³¹ The AFL specifically asked in many articles for a complete ban on incoming immigration in order to make time to deal with the new immigrants that had thus far failed to assimilate. Almost no other labor newspapers mentioned immigration or restriction, outside of basic headlines. In fact, the hundreds of labor newspapers across the country for the most part only mentioned immigration to report when the AFL made a statement about it. A notable exception is *Industrial Solidarity* (later *Solidarity*), the newspaper of the Industrial Workers of

²⁹ James M. O’Connor, “A Year’s Battle that Has Cost a Million,” *American Federationist* 30 (1923): 50.

³⁰ “Labor Must Not be Swamped,” *American Federationist* 30 (1923): 843.

³¹ “Report of the Legislative Committee: Immigration,” *American Federationist* 29 (1922): 695; Legislative Committee reports were published in every issue, and every report contained a summary of immigration bills currently in Congress.

the World. The IWW, a union much more sympathetic to the Bolsheviks, still made little mention of immigration legislation, but in its newspaper encouraged members to educate their immigrant coworkers and bring them to IWW meetings.³² Nonetheless, the AFL mentioned immigration far more than any other labor organization. Even the *Federated Press Bulletin*, one of the labor newspapers most closely associated with the AFL, did not publish arguments for or against restriction.

The calls for restriction were not just in *American Federationist*: they pervaded every convention of the American Federation of Labor between 1919 and 1924, as well as speeches, private correspondence, and petitions to Congress. In the *New York Times*, the AFL published a column in 1921 that included a “Declaration of Principles.” Of the 24 principles listed, “prohibition of immigration for a period of not less than two years” was the tenth.³³ AFL leadership made sure that virtually every representation of its organization included a mention of immigration restriction. When it was announced that Gompers was reelected as AFL president in 1922, the subheadline of political issues most important to the leader listed immigration restriction as the second, after sales tax.³⁴ The need for immigration restriction was clearly so central to the AFL that even independent labor newspapers included it in virtually every piece about them. Again, these articles about AFL news were frequently the only mention of immigration, restriction or otherwise, in the entire newspaper; most of the articles were opinion pieces sent in by AFL leaders such as Secretary Morrison.

The AFL, and Samuel Gompers in particular, went so far as to testify in Congress on several occasions throughout the early 1920s to plead for immigration restriction: first, for a

³² International Workers of the World, “Pamphlet in Russian,” *Solidarity* (1921): 2.

³³ Gompers, “Excerpts from an article in the New York Times,” *The Samuel Gompers Papers* 11, 422.

³⁴ “Gompers Again Re-Elected,” *The Connecticut Labor News*, June 23, 1922.

temporary complete ban on immigration, then for the 3% (later 2%) quota system that would eventually become the Immigration Act of 1924.³⁵ In a 1916 hearing in support of literacy tests for incoming immigrants, Secretary Morrison testified as a representative of the AFL. After stating that he was the son of Irish immigrants, he stated that the AFL, and he personally, supported the passage of the bill in question to “avoid reproducing in the United States the very conditions that existed in Ireland 60 years ago.”³⁶ In articles, the AFL asked readers and union-supporters to write petitions to Congress supporting various restriction bills and explaining labor’s needs.³⁷ Gompers also had correspondence with House Representative Albert Johnson (of the Johnson-Reed Act), and managed to get his demands for labor clauses into many immigration restriction bills proposed by Representative Johnson.³⁸ Johnson, the biggest proponent of restriction in Congress, also had extensive correspondence regarding restriction bills with the Ku Klux Klan. AFL members even authored their own proposals for restriction bills, with pro-labor clauses, that were sent to Congress as suggestions.³⁹

Gompers and Morrison, among other high ranking AFL leaders, testified in several hearings throughout the period between 1917 and 1924. They represented not just the American Federation of Labor, but it can be surmised from the extent of their participation in hearings and the way they are addressed by Congressmen, they functionally represented labor in the eyes of the federal government and political candidates. In hearings where AFL representatives speak, their statements are taken to represent the feelings of all unions and workers in the United States,

³⁵ “Report of the Legislative Committee,” *American Federationist* 29 (1922): 596; Gompers, “To Santiago Iglesias,” *Samuel Gompers Papers* 11, 503n.

³⁶ Hearings before the Committee on Immigration and Naturalization on H.R. 558, House of Representatives, 64th Cong., 1st sess., 1916, 7.

³⁷ “Report of the Legislative Committee,” *American Federationist* 31 (1924): “Let Congress Know!” *American Federationist* 31 (1924): 291.

³⁸ “Report of the Legislative Committee,” *American Federationist* 30 (1923): 98.

³⁹ Higham, *Strangers in the Land*, 305.

and the speakers do not shy away from this generalization. Though the AFL at this point was not at the level of strength it would be in the coming years, it had an extremely prominent role in immigration restriction hearings in Congress.⁴⁰

The level of concern held by the AFL about immigration was undeniable. Its fervor in making demands, both privately to Congressman and publicly in newspapers, shows the extent of its desire for heavy immigration restriction. Comparing the Federation's attitude to other organizations shows an extreme contrast, which is difficult to pair with the fact that the AFL was much less likely to feel the sting of unemployment than more industrial unions like the IWW.

Gompers denounced the Ku Klux Klan, yet maintained a relationship with Congressman Johnson, who mingled enthusiastically with Klan members, in order to keep tabs on the Committee on Immigration and Naturalization. This relationship demonstrates the lengths Gompers was willing to go to pass restriction legislation. The inconsistencies in AFL leaders' arguments are glaring, and even their most convincing arguments, the ones that focus on the dangers of high unemployment and wage losses contain language that reveals a nativist, or at least a nativist-sympathetic attitude.

Conservatism and Exclusion in the AFL

It is worth noting that the American Federation of Labor was not just exclusionary towards immigrants in the 1920s. It also made efforts to keep women, African Americans, and

⁴⁰ Hearings before the Committee on Immigration and Naturalization on H.R. 558, House of Representatives, 64th Cong., 1st sess., 1916, 7.

industrial workers out of the Federation.⁴¹ It is widely accepted among scholars that the AFL was a conservative union, both in terms of its stance on social issues and its being more capitalist than other unions. One of the best examples of this is the AFL's tension with the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU), a union within the AFL, who were made up of both women and primarily Jewish immigrants. The ILGWU represented a union group that did not agree with the AFL's strict stance on immigration, probably because many members were first-generation Americans and still had family members in the old country. In fact, the ILGWU fought back somewhat against the AFL's anti-immigration statements, arguing that restriction would be especially harmful to Jews, who faced extreme discrimination in Europe and often sought refuge in the United States; Gompers replied that quotas actually benefited Jews, because they were "citizens of every nation," and so would be able to come under all countries' quotas.⁴² This statement both shows how Gompers was unwilling to face (or at least publicly admit) the harm that the Act he was promoting would do to populations he empathized with, but also highlights how amorphous ethnic understandings were at this time. Though Gompers was Jewish, he did not necessarily identify himself with the Eastern European Jews coming to America as Yiddish-speaking garment workers, and most likely viewed them as less civilized than Northern Europeans, like their non-Jewish immigrant counterparts.

The American Federation of Labor typically took the same public stance on women workers that they did on immigrants. They charged that employers wanted to bring in lower paid workers to weaken unions. But again, as with the argument about immigrants, the AFL's argument was undermined by their actions. The AFL demonstrated its lack of solidarity with women workers in 1919 during a case heard by the National War Labor Board, when women

⁴¹ Dumenil, *The Modern Temper*, 64.

⁴² Gompers, "To Abraham Baroff," *Samuel Gompers Papers* 12, 415.

streetcar workers fought to keep the jobs they had gained during World War I.⁴³ These women explicitly voiced their desire to join the Amalgamated Association of Street and Railway Workers (AASRW), an AFL affiliated union. The AASRW rejected the women's request, and thus the dispute went before the National War Labor Board. The AFL, including Samuel Gompers personally, fought hard to keep the women out of the AASRW, and to keep railway workers completely segregated by gender. The Women's Trade Union League, an organization which fought for the labor rights for women's trades, was desperate to work with the AFL so that the women streetcar workers could keep their jobs. But, the AFL refused, and the women's case was dismissed.⁴⁴

The AFL, in its exclusion of women, showed what its ideal image of America really entailed. Its insistence that it wanted to exclude immigrants to keep native American workers employed does not make as much sense when it likewise excluded white American women. It seems that it wanted to preserve not only the hardworking values of America and the language of America, but also the gender roles and family power dynamics which make up the image of the American family. Many ads in *American Federationist* take advantage of this image of the traditional family, promoting different dish soaps and cleaning products for wives of workers; very few actual editorials or articles in the *American Federationist* actually pertained to women. Nativists latched onto anything they could think of that immigration might threaten: language, the American dream, traditional family and gender roles, any aspects of American life that could be weaponized.⁴⁵

⁴³ Goldberg, *Discontented America*, 84.

⁴⁴ Goldberg, *Discontented America*, 85.

⁴⁵ Dr. Raymond V. Phelan, "Our Family of Five," *American Federationist* 30 (1923): 141.

The AFL also failed to take a strong stance on the inclusion of African American workers. It took a very weak stand on the rise of the Ku Klux Klan, despite the Klan's anti-labor fervor. The AFL denounced the Klan, but when compared to the amount of resources that went towards lobbying for immigration restriction, the denunciation was a weak statement. The Klan purposely targeted diverse workplaces to stymie cooperation across racial lines, especially with regards to Catholic and Jewish workers, but also with African American workers. In stark contrast to the AFL's relative complacency, the IWW denounced the Klan and all Klan prejudices, including its anti-Black and anti-immigrant stances.⁴⁶ Many African American workers chose to join "company unions," organizations created by employers that purported to help workers with bargaining but rarely did.⁴⁷ They chose to join company unions because they accepted all workers, rather than join AFL unions, which either explicitly or effectively excluded African Americans from its unions.

One prominent African American author, Kelly Miller, asked in the 1925 article "The Negro as a Workingman": "to which side shall [African Americans] turn, to that of labor or that of capital?"⁴⁸ Miller's question highlights the question that his community faced in the post-slavery era. Though black Americans were expected to join arms with the labor movement to fight further exploitation, in reality they faced extreme and often violent racism from the white working class. Though they also faced violence from the owning class, it felt like exploitation that treated all workers equally, whereas the violence from the white working class unions was explicitly race-based. Miller's conclusion about labor's treatment of African Americans may not be solely referencing the American Federation of Labor, but he certainly was not excluding it. In

⁴⁶ *The Portland Press Herald*, February 5, 1924, <https://libcom.org/history/1924-klk-iww-wage-drawn-battle-greenville>.

⁴⁷ Dumenil, *The Modern Temper*, 65.

⁴⁸ Miller, Kelly. "The Negro as a Workingman," *The American Mercury* (May 1925): 310.

the 1920s, African Americans made up at least 20% of steel industry workers, yet no steel unions associated with the AFL made any efforts to gain African American members.⁴⁹ This reluctance to engage with African American workers is representative of both the membership and leadership of the unions: white workers did not want to work alongside black workers, and most union leaders did not respect the black community enough to put effort into organizing them.

Miller restates his argument by explaining that “capital stands for the open shop, which gives the unhindered right to work, according to his ability and skill... capital is impersonal.”⁵⁰ Miller does not deny that capitalists exploit workers, including black workers. He also does not paint capitalists or unrestricted capitalism in a positive light; but he appeals to the sense of indignation of black workers who face the intersecting oppression of both race and class. The American Federation of Labor’s lack of motivation to organize a group which was acutely aware of their disadvantaged place in society, many of whose parents fought for their freedom from slave labor, shows a lack of respect for the black working community, and no desire to include such a large workforce in their organization.

The lack of solidarity African American workers felt from AFL unions further demonstrates the AFL’s discriminatory attitude towards non-white and non-male groups. The fact that African American workers were not unorganized because of lack of desire to be in unions, but because of lack of access, shows that the AFL was not only concerned with organizing American workers, it was also heavily concerned with American identity, and more specifically the white American identity. The exclusion of African American workers shows that AFL leadership consisted not only of nativists but also of white supremacists, and that the AFL as an organization did not believe in equal opportunity for all American workers.

⁴⁹ Goldberg, *Discontented America*, 109.

⁵⁰ Kelly, “The Negro as a Workingman,” 312.

Conclusion

The Immigration Act of 1924 was passed with a landslide majority in both the House and the Senate, as well as the support of the American public. It put into permanent law what many, including the AFL, had been calling for explicitly: the quantifying of desirable ethnicities and exclusion of “undesirables.” However, the Immigration Act did not accomplish everything the AFL wanted: immigrants from the Americas were exempt from the Immigration Act, a group who the AFL predicted would become a more significant threat to Americanization and workers’ jobs in the future. Though AFL president Samuel Gompers died in December of 1924, only 7 months after the passage of the Immigration Act, most of his requests were granted. The complete exclusion of Asian immigrants and almost total exclusion of Eastern and Southern European immigrants, using quotas based on the 1890 census, which was under representative of said European immigrants.⁵¹ The quotas allowed mostly Western European immigrants, ironically the ones most likely to take skilled AFL jobs.

AFL leaders, including Gompers and Morrison, claimed until the end that although they believed in equal opportunity for all ethnicities (excluding Asian immigrants), immigration was a disaster for American workers. Yet by examining the language they use in their own literature, both internally and published for American readers, I have demonstrated that this was not the case. They repeatedly expressed nativist and prejudiced sentiments, ranging from exclusionary attitudes towards certain European groups, to violent racism towards Asian immigrants and

⁵¹ Ngai, “Architecture of Immigration Restriction,” 48.

especially Chinese people. They also broke from contemporary union groups such as the IWW in the extent of their push for immigration restriction, by both disseminating pro-restriction propaganda for the public, and communicating with powerful members of Congress like Representative Johnson to lobby for restriction. The AFL also generally worked to maintain conservative, white supremacist, and sexist values by denying many women and African Americans opportunities to join AFL unions, a further indication of its conviction in maintaining a certain image of America as full of freedom and opportunity, but with traditional family values and homogeneous racial and ethnic makeup.

The American Federation of Labor was not a uniquely prejudiced or nativist organization compared to the general population in the 1920s, despite its aggressive efforts to pass immigration restriction. Almost the entire nation was swept up into the nativist trend, whether they pushed for Americanization through innocuous acts such as teaching English to immigrants, or they demonstrated violent racial hatred by burning crosses to honor the Nordic, Protestant origins of American culture. Dr. Robert Asher, a labor history professor from the University of Connecticut, has said that reducing the AFL to a group of racists or nativists is a vast oversimplification, and misunderstands the complexities of nativism in the early 20th century.⁵² The purpose of this essay is not to argue that the AFL was particularly racist or that it deserves more criticism, but to suggest that—contrary to many labor scholars’ conclusions—its motives for restricting immigration were not merely economic. Had AFL leaders been merely concerned about unemployment, there would not be so much overlap between the language of staunch nativists and the language of the AFL. It is worthwhile to examine the motivations of groups who supported trends that we now condemn, in order to better understand what causes these

⁵² Asher, “Union Nativism,” 331.

trends and to examine our world now. The Immigration Act of 1924 is now almost universally criticized as a discriminatory piece of legislation that both stains our country's recent history and highlights the trends which pervaded American society at that time. If we want to understand how nativism and anti-immigrant prejudice were able to dictate our immigration law for decades, we must examine the way that nativism affected individual people and institutions that we do not commonly think of as nativist.

Prejudice within labor unions, working class conservatism, and immigration restriction are all topics that are related to this research project, and all are subjects which are quickly coming back into popular discussion due to current political events. Immigration restriction has become an even more significant issue since the time I started this project. The concepts of illegal immigrants and the border wall were created by and immediately after the Immigration Act of 1924, and the concepts of birthright citizenship and anti-immigration immigrants "pulling up the ladder" are ones with striking relevance in this project. It is also important to consider how nativism in general changed over the course of the decade after the first World War, as it became much more militant and widespread throughout the 1920s, a time of economic expansion. By examining these social phenomena and developments, I hope that we can better understand the current rise of nativism and anti-immigrant discrimination in our country.

As one of the largest union federations in the history of the United States, and the most restrictive immigration act in history up to the time of this paper's writing, the AFL's relationship with the Immigration Act of 1924 is of high significance to Americans today. In addition, the recent uptick in anti-immigration sentiment in the past few years is, if nothing else, a reason to go back and examine the roots of our racial hierarchies and understandings of American identity and the history of our immigration law. As such a significant part of the labor

movement in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the AFL is one of the best organizations to study for its reactions to and participation in social and political trends. The decline of union membership in the last several decades raises the question of which institutions will be the biggest players in discussions of immigration law and ethnic discrimination in the years to come.

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