

Anti-Imperialism in the United States, 1898-1935

Edited by Jim Zwick
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Imperialism -- Its Dangers and Wrongs

By Samuel Gompers, President of the American Federation of Labor

Extract from a speech delivered at the Chicago Peace Jubilee, Oct. 18, 1898.

It is worse than folly, aye, it is a crime, to lull ourselves into the fancy that we shall escape the duties which we owe to our people by becoming a nation of conquerors, disregarding the lessons of nearly a century and a quarter of our national existence as an independent, progressive, humane and peace-loving nation. We cannot with safety to ourselves, or justice to others keep the workers and the lovers of reform and simple justice divided, or divert their attention, and thus render them powerless to expose abuses and remedy existing injustice.

A "foreign war as a cure for domestic discontent" has been the device of tyrants and false counselors from time immemorial, but it has always lead to a Waterloo, a Sedan, to certain decadence and often utter ruin. In our country we are perhaps too powerful to incur outside disaster; but we shall certainly court worse evils at home if we try to benumb the nation's sense of justice and love of right, and prevent it from striving earnestly to correct all proved errors.

If the Philippines are annexed what is to prevent the Chinese, the Negritos and the Malays coming to our country? How can we prevent the Chinese coolies from going to the Philippines and from there swarm into the United States and engulf our people and our civilization? If these new islands are to become ours, it will be either under the form of Territories or States. Can we hope to close the flood-gates of immigration from the hordes of Chinese and the semi-savage races coming from what will then be part of our own country? Certainly, if we are to retain the principles of law enunciated from the foundation of our Government, no legislation of such a character can be expected.

In a country such as ours the conditions and opportunities of the wage-earners are profoundly affected by the view of the worth or dignity of men who earn their bread by the work of their hands. The progress and improvement in the condition of the wage-earners in the former slave States have been seriously obstructed for decades in which manual labor and slave labor were identical. The South now, with difficulty, respects labor, because labor is the condition of those who were formerly slaves, and this fact operates potentially against any effort to secure social justice by legislative action or organized movement of the workers. If these facts have operated so effectually to prevent necessary changes in the condition of our own people, how difficult will it be to quicken our conscience so as to secure social and legislative relief for the semi-savage slave or contract laborers of the conquered islands?

If we attempt to force upon the natives of the Philippines our rule, and compel them to conform to our more or less rigid mold of government, how many lives shall we take? Of course, they will seem cheap, because they are poor laborers. They will be members of the majority in the Philippines, but they will be ruled and killed at the convenience of the very

small minority there, backed up by our armed land and sea forces. The dominant class in the islands will ease its conscience because the victims will be poor, ignorant and weak. When innocent men can be shot down on the public highway as they were in Lattimer, Pa., and Virden, Ill., men of our own flesh and blood, men who help to make this homogenous nation great, because they dare ask for humane conditions at the hands of the moneyed class of our country, how much more difficult will it be to arouse any sympathy, and secure relief for the poor semi-savages in the Philippines, much less indignation at any crime against their inherent and natural rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness?

Samuel Gompers (1850-1924) was a vice president of various anti-imperialist organizations from 1898-1921. During the campaign against ratification of the Treaty of Paris, the Cigar Makers Union that he helped to create was the most active participant among labor organizations.

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