

An Open Letter from Samuel Gompers

President of the American Federation of Labor, to

HON. EDWIN Y. WEBB

Chairman Judiciary Committee of the House of Representatives, on

The Pending National Prohibition Amendment

December 6, 1917.

Hon. Edwin Y. Webb, Chairman,
Committee of the Judiciary,
House of Representatives,
Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. Webb:—

On the 4th inst., Mr. Joseph Dehan, secretary of the Labor's Emergency Liberty League, addressed a letter to you requesting, on behalf of the men and the organizations he represents, that an opportunity be afforded by your Committee for the presentation of matters of vital interest in connection with Senate Joint Resolution No. 17 for national prohibition. The following morning Mr. Dehan received a letter from you, which you promptly addressed to him, in which it is stated that, at a meeting of the Judiciary Committee on the 4th inst., it was decided to vote on the above proposed constitutional amendment at the next meeting of the Judiciary Committee, to be held Tuesday, the 11th inst.

Of course, I assume that it is understood that Mr. Dehan did not write and make the request he did in his own behalf, but upon direction and authority of the organizations which have formed and constitute the Labor's Emergency Liberty League. The names of these organizations are:

United Brotherhood of Carpenters & Joiners of America.
United Brewery Workers Union of America.
Cigar Makers International Union of America.
Glass Bottle Blowers Union of the United States and Canada.
International Coopers Union of America.
International Union of Steam and Operating Engineers of America.
Brotherhood of Stationary Firemen of America.
American Federation of Musicians.
Hotel and Restaurant Employes and Bartenders International Alliance of America.

The membership of these organizations are vitally and primarily interested in, and would be injuriously affected by, the proposed constitutional amendment, should it become effective.

In your letter you say that full hearings have been had on "this subject." From the information which I have I am led to believe that this statement is erroneous, for, as a matter of fact, no hearing upon the question of nation-wide prohibition has been had by the Judiciary Committee either of the Senate or the House in the past three years, and that about that time it was upon what was known as the Hobson Prohibition proposition, and surely conditions and the situations have changed from that time until the present.

May I submit for your consideration the fact that the manufacture of spirituous liquors (whiskey, etc.) is now forbidden by law; that the President is empowered by law to modify, limit and even prohibit the manufacture of beer and light wines; that the President, having availed himself of the power and authority vested in him, has already prescribed a modification in the production of these articles; and that therefore the entire subject of modification, temperance or prohibition, in so far as our nation's interests are concerned, is in safe hands?

Of course, you are aware that the British Government, through its Board of Liquor Control, has made and is making provision for the supply of beer for munition workers, miners, men employed in the shipyards and in other industries engaged in war work, and for the general public; that in fact in no country of all the Allies are even the men at the front entirely deprived of beers, light wines, and in some instances limited portions of spirituous liquors.

From authentic information I am advised that there is in our country just about enough beer and light wines, in the ordinary consumption of these beverages, to last about three months. It is currently and authentically stated that of spirituous liquors (whiskey, etc.) there is a supply now on hand for about two or three years. In other words, if the milder beverages, such as beer and light wines should be prohibited, the people of the United States, if they desire any beverage of any character at all, will be placed upon a whiskey basis. Is it, I submit, wise or practical for our Government now to enact prohibition?

Again, it is estimated that we have about twelve millions of people in the United States who are either of Teutonic birth or extraction, whose general beverages are beer and light wines. Is it a good thing to do, particularly during this war, to deprive them, or to threaten to deprive them, of the light beverages to which they and theirs have been accustomed for generations? Is it likely to win their good will and whole-hearted support when their daily, ordinary, conservative habits are threatened to be interfered with?

A large number of Americans, whether natives or by adoption, drink beer, and in some instances light wines, as a part of their daily meals. Is prohibition or the threat of prohibition calculated to tranquilize and win them to the support of our country and the great cause in which we are engaged—or otherwise? Is it wise to bring so great a controversial question to the foreground during these crucial days when we need the united support in spirit and action of all our people?

In addition to and quite apart from the direct injury which the prohibition amendment to the Constitution would inflict upon the workers primarily involved, I am constrained to say that the turmoil and dissension which are sure to be generated in the minds of our people as the result of this prohibition proposition causes me mental and conscious disturbance.

From the highest authority, from everyone enlisted in the great enterprise in which our country has embarked—the fighting and the winning of the war—has come the word for unity in spirit and action of all liberty-loving Americans. I submit that there could scarcely be designed any great subject affecting so many of our people, about which there is so much division of judgment, conduct and practice as is involved in this subject.

I do not address you and through you the Judiciary Committee as an officer of any organization, but as a man and a citizen, one who aims to serve in this crucial time of our country's life, who has some understanding of the make-up, the character, the feelings and the conduct of men and how their course is influenced. Already there exists a pro-German, anti-American propaganda which seizes every opportunity to create a feeling of distrust with our entrance into and course in the war. What greater weapon could be placed in the hands of the pro-German, anti-American propagandists than to interject, particularly during the war, the subject of denying by law the larger part of the people the right to drink, as most beer and light wine drinkers drink, that mild beverage to which they are accustomed?

Already the States which have elected to have absolute prohibition within their borders are secured their full right and protection thereunder by State and Federal law. The States, however, which elect and prefer not to avail themselves of that course should not, I submit, be coerced into becoming prohibition territory against their will.

It may be said that the proposed constitutional amendment, even if adopted by the House, will not enforce prohibition until ratified within the time specified by the Joint Resolution, but the discussion and dissension caused by that subject would be paramount to the discussion and consideration of the more momentous questions by which our country is now vitally affected, and I respectfully urge, that in view of the law already prohibiting the manufacture of whiskey, and the powers placed in the hands of the President to modify, limit or prohibit the production of beers and light wines, the entire proposition might well lie in abeyance at least until after we have won the war.

It is not difficult to understand how disaffected will a large portion of our people become could, in addition to the passage of the proposed prohibition amendment, it be truthfully stated that this far-reaching question had been passed without the Committee of either the Senate or the House hearing one word in argument or protest before its final passage by Congress and the submission to the States, and I therefore respectfully submit that the Committee should determine upon full hearings on the proposition.

2122 First Street N. W.
Washington, D. C.

Very respectfully yours,
(Signed) SAMUEL GOMPERS.