Samuel Gompers: The New Face of Labor

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In the late Nineteenth Century, an industrial revolution swept across America which brought about enormous changes in the manufacturing process. New techniques made goods cheaper for consumers; however, laborers soon lost control of their working conditions. Early attempts were made to improve the conditions of workers, but they were largely unsuccessful because early unions had little bargaining power, due in part to their inclusion of unskilled laborers. Nonetheless, workers strove to create a safer workplace and keep their wages up. Samuel Gompers learned how to organize workers effectively and work with the management of companies from his early experience as a labor organizer in New York City in the Cigar Makers Union. He used this experience to help found the American Federation of Labor (AFL) later in his career. Samuel Gompers changed the face of American labor by challenging the idealistic attitudes of early labor unions and establishing a precedent that labor unions should strive to use their power to achieve realistic goals for workers.

Following the American Civil War, there was an explosion of new manufacturing techniques in America. Machines were created to speed up processes and some other techniques included manufacturing goods with interchangeable parts and using an assembly line for manufacturing goods. These new techniques all had one thing in common; they increasingly made individual craftsmen obsolete figures in the industry. These new techniques could make complex machines such as automobiles, sewing machines, and guns at a much higher rate of efficiency than ever before.

Gompers saw these changes while he grew up in both London and New York City neighborhoods where local craftsmen were frequently put out of work by new machinery in factories. He was born to a Dutch-Jewish family in England on January 27, 1850. His father, a cigar-maker by trade, decided to emigrate to New York City to find new opportunities of
employment in the cigar-making industry, “a trade which paid sparing wages” (The New Netherland Institute). Before the Industrial Revolution, cigars were handmade; however, new and more efficient machinery was introduced during the Industrial Revolution which cut significant numbers of the cigar-making workforce. As a boy, Gompers saw firsthand the hardships that many people faced in his neighborhood when they were put out of work by new machinery. Gompers recalled that “misery and suspense filled the neighborhood with a depressing air of dread. The narrow street echoed with the tramp of men walking the street in groups with no work to do” (“Seventy Years” 5).

Because of new innovations, many members of the labor force soon became expendable. Unskilled laborers could be hired and taught simple, repetitive tasks to do in the manufacturing process. This new situation gave the managers of companies leverage to lower the wages of workers fairly easily so that they could lower prices of goods and sell more products to consumers. Gompers noted that “no thought was given to those men whose trade was gone” (“Seventy Years” 5). The large influx of immigrants who were willing to work for lower wages also contributed to decreased wages. Laborers had no choice but to tolerate these new wage cuts.

In response to these worsening conditions, early attempts were made to improve the status of laborers. One of the most prominent early labor unions was the Knights of Labor, founded in 1869. Gompers was a member of the Knights of Labor when he was a cigar maker. The Knights of Labor was open to everyone, both skilled and unskilled laborers. However, this method of acceptance was the organization’s Achilles Heel. The Knights of Labor had little bargaining power with the management of companies because they admitted unskilled laborers. The management of companies saw these unskilled workers as expendable beings that could be easily fired when they caused any problems or threatened to strike. Employers could easily hire
new workers who could be quickly trained in the work. The Knights of Labor was also loosely organized. Because of its loose organization, the Knights of Labor was unable to get their members to work together to achieve goals as a national organization. Gompers commented that there was “no conception of constructive business tactics beginning with presentation of demands and negotiations to reach an agreement” (“Seventy Years” 43).

Samuel Gompers began his career as a labor leader by becoming the president of the cigar makers union in New York City in 1875. He gained valuable experience in this position by learning how to strike effectively and how to organize workers. “He was one of the boys,” and liked to go out and meet workers to see what their feelings were (Taylor 63). He realized that strikes were mostly wasteful and ineffective if all of the strikers were not striving to achieve the same goal. He also realized that in a capitalist system, companies were always going to try to make the largest profit that they possibly could by cutting the wages of their workers. He saw labor unions as an instrument used to balance the profits of companies and the wages of workers.

After gaining recognition as being a competent labor leader with the Cigar Makers, Gompers began to work on a national scale in the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions of the United States and Canada (FOTLU). This organization was formed in 1881, with Gompers as its first president. Gompers used his experience from the Cigar Makers Union in New York City to help shape this organization. One of his changes was to organize unions based on their members’ trade. Gompers felt that workers of the same trade would understand each other’s problems better and work better with each other to improve their working conditions. The objectives of FOTLU were “to influence legislation on behalf of labor, prepare labor legislation, and to lobby Congress” (The New Netherland Institute).
Gompers’ system of organization did not go along with the tactics of other labor unions of the time. Gompers’ tactics were criticized by French labor leaders who said that “Here we respect individual opinion, while in America a select committee decides behind closed doors the organization’s action without giving individuals the opportunity to express their ideas” (“Gompers Displeases”).

FOTLU was reorganized, and in 1886, it became the American Federation of Labor (AFL), with Gompers as its first president to set changes in motion. Gompers realized that by admitting unskilled laborers, his organization would lose their bargaining power with the management of companies. By creating a more exclusive organization of skilled laborers, the AFL had more leverage to work with business managers. Skilled workers were still necessary in many industries, and companies had no choice but to work with these skilled craft unions’ demands.

Although Gompers mainly represented skilled workers in the AFL, he still remained in contact with unskilled workers. The Knights of Labor and other organizations allowed women to have representation in their union. During World War I, Gompers said, “The principle upon which the American Federation of Labor proposes to act is to prevent unnecessary substitution of women for men, and to conserve standards of work so that women doing equal work with men shall receive equal wages” (“Letter to Charles”). Although Gompers did not support the idea of having women in the workplace, he was still willing to help them when they took jobs during the war effort of World War I. Gompers saw that when women entered the workplace, the wages of everyone declined. That is why he did not widely support women laborers in his union.

After observing other philosophies such as socialism, Gompers realized that short term goals were the best option for the American Federation of Labor. Gompers advocated goals such
as shorter working hours and increased wages. He observed the philosophies of socialism, but found that they were highly impractical for his organization. He “followed Marx at least as far as his interpretation of history as an economic struggle between unalterably opposed classes” (Thompson). He found that the goals of total economic reform in socialism were too broad to try to accomplish. The principle “of developing economic power and ignoring political methods” was a central theme in Gompers’ ideology (Thompson).

Gompers also went against typical labor union style of the time by not pledging allegiance to a political party. He believed that using strategies such as collective bargaining with management was more effective than political action. He had a “life-long distrust of politics and of government in general” (Thompson). Gompers said that the best policy for labor unions in politics was for them to vote for the political candidate who best supported the needs of labor, regardless of which party the person represented. In the past, labor unions became loyal to a particular party and faced problems. Gompers thought that it would be better if political candidates had to work to gain the support of the AFL in elections. He believed that this would further the cause of labor even more.

Although Gompers’ new tactics were beneficial to skilled workers, unskilled workers did not share in the new successes. Emma Goldman, a prominent anarchist of the time, said that Gompers “was content to create an aristocracy of labor, a trade union trust, as it were, indifferent to the needs of the rest of the workers outside of the organization” (Goldman). Skilled laborers did not make up the majority of the labor force, so in reality, Gompers was only solving the problems of a small portion of the overall American workforce. Unskilled laborers still had very little bargaining power, and Gompers did almost nothing to help the unskilled workers of America.
While working with the AFL, Gompers faced opposition from radical unionists such as socialists and anarchists. These extremist groups did not agree with Gompers’ philosophy of admitting only skilled laborers to the AFL. In response to the AFL, socialists and anarchists formed the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in 1905. The IWW admitted any kind of laborer who desired to join their union. The IWW adopted a system called “One Big Union” which was “commitment to industrial unionism, direct action, and building a union controlled by its members” (“History”). Gompers called the IWW “an organization that does not organize [with] a leadership that leads nowhere” and “enemies of our movement” (Watson 57, 191). Gompers was “confident that the trade union movement is founded upon a basis of philosophy so strong, that it will overcome all of its enemies either individually or combined” (“Letter to Lew”). Gompers fought to rid the AFL of socialists and anarchists who plagued his work.

Radicals caused a major setback in Gompers’ mission at the Haymarket Square Bombing on May 4, 1886. Gompers and the AFL were rallying up support to try to get eight hours to be the maximum standard workday. Rallies were being held all across the country. In Chicago, however, anarchists threw a bomb into a crowd at a rally and killed numerous workers and police officers. This event tainted the face of the American labor movement at the time. Although several anarchists were convicted of the crime, public opinion shifted against the labor movement. This event caused a stir and labor unions picked up a reputation for being radical, violent organizations. The Haymarket Bombing led to the collapse of the Knights of Labor.

After the disaster in Haymarket Square, Gompers saved the face of the AFL during the Pullman Strike in 1894. Workers in the Pullman Palace Car Company, led by Eugene Debs, went on strike. Gompers was friends with Debs, but as the strike escalated and the federal government got involved, Gompers shunned Debs. Debs was a socialist and Gompers did not
want to further associate himself and the AFL with any socialists or radicals that might get the AFL the label of being a radical organization. This move by Gompers improved the public’s perception of the AFL.

In 1890, Gompers faced yet another obstacle when Congress passed the Sherman Antitrust Act. It was created to stop monopolies, but it also could prevent labor unions from operating effectively. When the bill was passed, Gompers said, “I did not believe it would be effective in curbing trusts” (“Seventy Years” 133). Labor unions could be prosecuted under the grounds that they were performing “conspiracy in restraint of trade” (Weir 202). This was a setback for Gompers and the AFL. In 1914, the Clayton Antitrust Act was created as a modified version of the Sherman Antitrust Act. The Clayton Act protected labor from prosecution that they had faced under the Sherman Antitrust Act. The passage of the Clayton Act gave the AFL and all other labor unions more freedom to operate in the United States.

During the World War I, Gompers was appointed to the National War Labor Board (NWLB) by President Woodrow Wilson. This was because “The number of reported strikes doubled between 1915 and 1916” (Dubofsky 62). Gompers was appointed in 1916 to serve as a leader on this board and to help reduce the number of strikes that could hamper the war effort at home during World War I. The unemployment rate was going down at this time and the prices of goods were shooting up. Laborers continued to demand higher salaries. During his time on the Council, Gompers signed a document saying, “employers and employees in private industries should not attempt to take advantage of the existing abnormal conditions to change standards that they were unable to change during normal conditions” (Dubofsky 64). Labor unions were not supposed to strike during this time, but strikes still continued during World War I. Gompers did help to reduce the number of strikes, and this helped the United States wartime production during
World War I. The war also helped Gompers to get the membership of the AFL from "2.7 million workers" in 1917 up to "four million by war's end" (Weir 62).

Gompers died in December 1924 and is now honored with a statue in San Antonio and the US Navy named the battleship the USS Samuel Gompers in his honor.

The changes that Gompers introduced to labor union organization were important to the labor movement of America. While he failed to address the needs of unskilled laborers in America, Gompers’ organization of the AFL did help many skilled laborers to survive industrialization in the workplace during the Industrial Revolution. Gompers also provided a model for future labor unions in his work with the AFL. He established the precedent of not being committed to one political party. He also fought the radicals of the labor movement and created a more positive public perception of the labor movement. Samuel Gompers created a model organization in the AFL that has served as a model for all labor unions that have come after his. Gompers’ vision of how an effective labor union should be run was revolutionary, and his techniques have stayed with many unions that are operating successfully to this day, including the AFL-CIO.
Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources


This is an essay written by Emma Goldman criticizing Gompers’ methods of organized labor. She wrote this essay the year after Gompers died and lived through the time that Gompers was a labor leader. She was an anarchist during her lifetime. This is significant because anarchists were some of the main opponents that Gompers faced during his work with the AFL. This essay provided a critical view of Gompers from an opposing side. I used this source to show how Gompers was viewed negatively by his Anarchist opponents.


This is a newspaper article from the New York Times. It tells that Gompers visited France and spoke to French labor union leaders. Gompers criticized the French labor movement for being too inclusive to laborers. Gompers preferred a more exclusive group of skilled laborers and the French criticized Gompers for being too dictatorial in his organization of labor. I used this source to show the contrasting methods of organization that Gompers had compared with other labor union methods of the time.


This is a letter to Charles Lewis from Gompers during World War I. Gompers said that while women are filling in for men who go off to war, they should be protected by unions so that they are not exploited by employers. Gompers also said that the AFL will try to stop women from completely replacing men in the workplace while they are out in the war. I used this source to show that while Gompers was willing to protect women in the workplace, he also was not advocating for women to take up many jobs.

This is a letter from Gompers to Lew Morton, a secretary of Actors' Protective Union 1 of New York City. Gompers is talking about the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) labor union. The IWW was opposed to the policies of the AFL because it was composed of Socialists, Anarchists, and other radical labor unionists. I used this source to show how Gompers and the AFL were challenged by the socialist groups such as the IWW.


This is an autobiography written by Samuel Gompers. This section of the book covered Gompers’ experiences as the AFL began to form and become a powerful union organization in America. This source is unique because it is Gompers’ own account of how the AFL formed. This source also provides direct experiences that Gompers had when he worked with unions. I used this source to show how Gompers himself viewed the development of the American labor movement. This source was valuable in showing the beginnings of Gompers’ involvement in the large scale labor movement.


This is a book which is one of a multivolume series of books with primary source documents all related to Samuel Gompers and the AFL. This article on pg. 363 and 364 is an article which talks about FOTLU’s campaign for an eight hour workday. This crusade for an eight hour workday was one of Gompers’ big goals. I used this article to gain a sense that the proponents of an 8 hour work day such as Gompers were using industrialization as a reason for shortening working hours. They said that since production is higher than before, working hours should be shorter.


This a letter from Eugene Jones, a black man requesting Gompers’ intercession so that black musicians could be represented fairly in a New York City union. Apparently, the Musical Mutual Protective Union was not treating blacks well or equally, so Jones is trying to get Gompers to use his influence to get fair treatment for black musicians. This letter was sent in 1914, which is also the first year of World War I, in which Gompers’ was involved. This source is interesting because it shows how Gompers did not distinguish between races when he was doing union work. I used this source to show that Gompers had a diverse audience of union members under him.

This is a letter from William Platt to Samuel Gompers. It was written in 1902. William Platt was a cigar maker from Tampa, Florida who was looking for Gompers' help to support their strike. I looked at this source to see that Gompers' help was requested all over the nation to help struggling unions with his tremendous influence.

Secondary Sources


The thesis of the book is that labor unions are corrupt and they are using the Democratic Party to control politics. Linda Chavez focuses on modern politics; however, she also makes references back to labor union history, including references to Samuel Gompers. Linda Chavez was George W. Bush's original choice for Secretary of Labor and is as FOX News political analyst. This book was written in 2004. There were a few quotes about Gompers being nonpartisan that helped me to explain that Gompers did not advocate party loyalty for the AFL.


The thesis of this book is that labor unions and the federal government have had a very complex relationship which has influenced both the American Government and Labor Unions. The section of the book from pg 61-72 discusses how Gompers was involved in World War I. This book was written in 1994. Melvyn Dubofsky is the author and a distinguished professor of history and sociology at the State University of New York at Binghamton. I used this source to see the causes for Gompers being drawn into the government during World War I. He was an admired leader, so he would prevent unrest among laborers during the war.


This is just a general overview of the Industrial Workers of the World union. It was made in 2005 at a conference at UMKC. I used this source to gain a general sense of what the IWW did and what its ideology was. I also put in a quote about their 'One Big Union' ideology.

This book is like a dictionary of items related to the American labor movement. It has a biographical sketch of Samuel Gompers in it. The author is Robert Emmett Murray, a newspaper editor. This book was written in 1998. The basic biography of Gompers was helpful for me to get a nice overview of his life. I just used this to gain a sense of the sequence of events in Gompers' life.


This is a biography of Samuel Gompers. This was created by the New Netherland Institute. I just used this source to get a general overview of Gompers' life. I also used a quote about FOTLU from this source.


This is a biography of Samuel Gompers. This was created by Paul Taylor. It was written in 1993 in a labor encyclopedia. I used this to get a general overview of Samuel Gompers’ life.


This is a biography of Samuel Gompers with many quotes in it. It discusses Gompers' life and added in quotes that further illustrate Gompers' life. The author of the article was Caroll Thompson. I liked this source because I thought that it was interesting that it went through Gompers' life and did analysis of his life and added quotes from him along with it.


This book mainly focuses on strikes that occurred throughout American history. The thesis of the book is that strikes were hugely important to the development of fairer labor practices in America. The author is Bruce Watson, an award winning journalist who has had articles published in publications such as *Smithsonian*, *the Los Angeles Times*, and *The Boston Globe*. This book was published in 2005. There are details in this book that I used to illustrate how Gompers changed how national labor unions operated by changing
practices such as admitting only skilled laborers rather than unskilled laborers. I used this to show that Gompers revolutionized American unions into a very powerful force.


This is a biographical sketch of Samuel Gompers. This was created by Robert Weir and James Hanlan. This was created in 2004. This is a biography that goes into slightly more detail than the other biographies that I came across. I used this source to gain a sense of chronology in Gompers’ life because it put in some pivotal moments in Gompers’ life.