

# Gompers and the Millions of Organized Labor

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WASHINGTON, Jan. 15.—(Special Correspondence of The Bee.)—“Do you know anything about work yourself?”

“Did you ever work for wages?”

I asked these questions of Samuel Gompers as we chatted together in his office yesterday afternoon. Mr. Gompers is uncrowned king of organized labor in the United States. He is president of the American Federation of Labor, which embraces more than 24,000 different labor unions and has a membership of 2,000,000 workmen, representing the brawn and muscle of the country.

“Work! I have never known much else but work,” was the reply. “I have been working all my life and most of it at my trade. My father was a cigar maker. I went into the shop at 19 years of age and in time became a journeyman and I continued to work at making cigars for twenty-six years.”

“What kind of a workman were you, Mr. Gompers?”

“I think I may say I was a fairly good one. I was never out of a job except at my own volition and I received as high wages as any of my fellows.”

“Could you make a cigar today?”

“I made some at Boston a few weeks ago while attending our last annual convention there. At the noon recess I went to the largest union cigar factory in the world, which was not far from the convention hall. One of the men asked me the same question you have asked. In reply I took off my coat, sat down at the bench and made three cigars. I have a son who has a cigar factory near here, and if you wish I will go there and make you one now.”

I did wish, and Mr. Gompers went with me to the factory, sat down at one of the benches and rapidly rolled out a choice Havana. It took him less than two minutes by my watch to put the tobacco into shape, and the cigar, which lies before me as I write this, is as good looking an article as any cigar sold anywhere in the United States. It is a big, fat cigar and contains a good honest smoke. After this Mr. Gompers rolled a cigar for himself and smoked this while we talked. He told me that he still retained his membership in the Cigar Makers' union and showed me his union book, with the stamps of his dues paid to date. He has been a member of that union for thirty-nine years and pays his regular dues of 30 cents a week to keep up his membership.

“When did you first become interested in the labor movement?” I asked.

“When I was 14 years old,” was the reply. “My father had been a member of the union, and at that age I joined. I have been a union man ever since.”

“Have you ever been in a strike?”

“Many times. Sometimes when I approved of the strike, and again when I did not. Some of the strikes were hard ones, and I have actually suffered from hunger during such times, but I never regretted them. When I went on a strike I considered the shop door closed, as far as I was concerned, until that strike was settled, and for that reason I did not want to strike without due cause.”

“Do you think strikes pay the workingman?”

“They most certainly do, although they should be avoided if possible. Still I hope the time will never come when we shall so lose our manhood as to refuse to strike. Strikes are an element of civilization. In barbarous times and barbarous countries the people do not strike. There are no strikes in China. The wages there are 10 cents a day and the workmen live in mud huts and feed upon rice and an occasional rodent.”

“When has the laboring man the right to strike?”

“He has the right to do so at any time and for any reason or for no reason at all. Strikes are an evidence of liberty and freedom, and we laboring men claim the right to strike at any time. I am not discussing the policy. We have the right.”

“What is the present outlook as to labor, Mr. Gompers? Times have been good. There have been many strikes and wages have gone up. It is now said that times are becoming bad; will they not go down?”

“As to the times,” said the president of the American Federation, “my information shows me that there is a change for the worse. We have a number of unions, which pay benefits to their unemployed and therefore keep track of those out of work. These unions embrace different branches of trade in many parts of the country and their reports form an excellent barometer of industrial conditions. From them I can see clouds in the industrial sky, and I look for a period of depression during the next few years. It will not be as bad as in 1857, in 1873 or in 1894, but it will be felt more or less all over the country.”

“Now, as to the second part of your question,” Mr. Gompers went on, “I don't think wages ought to be reduced in consequence and I have advised our unions to resist all attempts at such reductions. I advise them to strike against any cut in wages and I think the employers should



SAMUEL GOMPERS—FROM A PHOTO MADE FOR THIS ARTICLE.

see that such cuts will increase the bad times rather than lessen them.

“Prosperity depends upon the markets,” continued Mr. Gompers, “and they depend upon the consuming power of the people. If you cut wages you lessen the consuming power. The men will have less to spend. The factories must make still less, resulting in more discharges and more cuts and making the times worse than ever. I believe it is better to strike in such cases even if we are defeated. Every strike in a time of decreased prosperity prevents further attempts to reduce wages. If we do not object to reductions they will be followed by further reductions. It is only by fighting that we can hope to hold our own. I would like to see our workmen have such a system of dues as would create a fund sufficient to enable them to engage in a strike at any time without fear. The employer who knows his workmen can successfully fight will not impose unfair exactions upon them.”

“But, Mr. Gompers, are not wages too high in many branches of industry?”

“No,” was the reply. “The higher they are the better for the country and the people. If you will look over the world you will see that the most prosperous nations and those who do most in the manufacturing and commerce of the world are those in which the highest wages are paid. Take the United States first, then England and after that Germany. All are lands of high wages and short hours, and all are more prosperous than their brother nations.”

“But what should govern in fixing wages—the cost of an article?”

“Not at all. The wages necessary to make the article under comfortable conditions should be that which fixes the price of the article and not the price the wages.”

The conversation here turned to the number of working hours and I asked Mr. Gompers whether the workmen would be satisfied if the whole United States were run on an eight-hour basis, or whether they would not demand still shorter days. He replied:

“I think the time will come when the working day will be less than eight hours. My idea is that the working day will continually grow shorter, while wages will continually go up. I want tomorrow to be always better than today. Labor conditions are far better now than they were three or four decades ago, and in the future they will be just as much better in proportion. By combinations of capital, by new inventions and a better organization of material forces, we shall, age by age, and year by year, reduce the amount of manual labor required to the minimum, and at the same time advance the reward therefor to the maximum. That is what we want, the least work and the most pay, a minimum of work and a maximum of wages, giving us the leisure to develop and cultivate our better natures.”

“How about the unions as helping the ambitious workingman, Mr. Gompers? Has the young man of today a chance to succeed as he had in the past?”

“I don't think he has as good a chance,”

replied Mr. Gompers. “But that is not the fault of the union. New inventions and great combinations of capital have destroyed the opportunities of the individual man. A generation or so ago one man, or at the best two or three, could make a completed product. It did not require much capital or many men to start a factory. Now work is so divided by improved machinery that the single workman is but one of the cogs of a very large wheel, and if he slips out another can be very easily fitted in. A half century ago one man made a whole shoe; today sixty-eight men have their part in making a shoe, and each of them does but one thing all the day long. One man cuts the sole, another the upper, another finishes one part and another another, and so on, the whole sixty-eight making the shoe. In the past each one of these sixty-eight workmen could have started a shop of his own. Now they are only pieces of machines, and as such can be replaced by others.”

“It is modern invention which has destroyed individuality, and it is only by combination in the union that the individual can act as a whole and protect himself. Under the old method one man amounted to something; now it is only by combination that he is able to accomplish results. If the sixty-eight men stop, the shoemaking cannot go on. It is the union that makes this possible, and thus enables each of the sixty-eight to get his rights.”

“Are trades unions increasing in the United States?”

“Yes,” replied Mr. Gompers. “Very rapidly. I don't know of any time in our history when they have grown faster than they are growing now. The American Federation of Labor is, you know, composed of nearly all the international, national, state, central and local unions of the country. These unions are independent organizations, but they work in connection with and as a part of the American Federation of Labor. We are continually adding new members. During the past year we have issued new charters for twenty international unions, three state federations, 171 central labor unions and more than 1,000 local and federal unions. We have now all told more than 24,000 unions of various kinds in the federation, and our membership is very near 2,000,000. We increase our members by missionary work on the part of organizers, whom we send to all sections of the United States, and in addition a vast amount of volunteer work is going on on the part of the unions and individuals.”

“You say you have 2,000,000 workmen in your combination, Mr. Gompers. I suppose they will average \$3 a day, or in the aggregate, \$6,000,000 a day, or more than \$2,000,000,000 a year. Is not organized labor a trust, and where will you find a trust with such power and such dividends?”

“You may call it a trust,” replied Mr. Gompers with a smile, “but it is a trust for the good of the many, and not for the individual few. The combinations of capital try to eliminate every one but them-

selves. They try to freeze out as many of their own members as they can, and the big fish eat the little ones. Our trust, if you call it so, is open to all. We welcome every one, and our only aim is the good of the country and of all the members of our organization.”

“Will the day come when all labor in this country will be organized?”

“I think so,” replied Mr. Gompers. “It is coming fast.”

“But will not a combination such as you have be a menace to the government? You have 2,000,000 now, embracing, I should say, one-seventh of the voters of the United States. At the present rate of increase your organization might soon be so wielded as to dictate candidates, inaugurate policies and rule or ruin the country.”

“Organized labor will certainly increase as an economic force,” said Mr. Gompers, “although, as at present organized, labor is not affiliated with any political party. It would be far worse for the United States, however, if there were no such thing as a labor organization. Suppose we had no concerted effort to protect our workmen from the exactions of the capitalists. Let greed grind the worker down to the utmost, and millionaires increase even faster than they are now, by the development of our material resources. Let the rich grow richer and the poor poorer until at last the poor man turns. What would be the result? I tremble to think of the possibilities. We might have a second revolution more terrible than that of France. It is the labor organization that keeps the peace, that forms the corner stone of our republic. The unions are among the greatest of our educating forces and they stand for almost everything that is good in our government and institutions.”

“It makes some difference, therefore, Mr. Gompers,” said I, “what kind of men the labor leaders are?”

“Indeed, it does,” was the reply, “and I can say from a personal knowledge of most of them that they are on the average equal in honesty and integrity to the members of any profession or business. I mean the very best men of the legal, medical or even the clerical professions.”

“The most of the labor leaders are not in the business for money,” Mr. Gompers continued. “Take our salaries! The highest of them, outside of the heads of the railroad unions, is not more than \$3,000 a year, and many men receive only \$1,000 or \$2,000 and some less. Nearly every one of them could make more outside of the labor organizations, and if they were corrupt they could enrich themselves where they are. John Mitchell, for instance, the head of the United Mine Workers, is paid \$3,000 a year. Don't you suppose he could have made \$1,000,000 during the anthracite coal strike had he been willing to sell his men out to the capitalists. He fought for them and was true to them. The same I believe to be the case with ninety-nine hundredths of the leaders of the unions. There are bad men in all ranks of life. Sam Parks was notoriously such, but Sam Parks is not typical of the labor movement in any respect.”

“How about yourself, Mr. Gompers. No one has ever questioned your fidelity to organized labor?”

“If so, I do not know it. I have been president of the American Federation of Labor for more than twenty years. For the first five years I received no salary and worked at my trade to support myself doing my union work at nights and on holidays. At the end of that time I gave up cigarmaking and devoted my energies to the American Federation, receiving \$1,000 a year. As time went on my salary was gradually increased until it reached \$2,100, and it is only within the past year that it has been \$3,000. I think I may say honestly that I am not in the work for the money. I do it because I love it. I have no amusements or anything outside of it, and my happiest hours are when I work the hardest.” FRANK G. CARPENTER.

## Glimpses Into Mythology

Jason was about to embark on his cruise after the Golden Fleece.

“Are you in good training?” asked the reporter, who had been sent to the dock for an interview.

“Finer than silk,” answered Jason. “I never felt better in my life.”

“And about the Fleece. What if you don't bring it back?”

“Well,” answered Jason, as he lit a cheroot and stepped aboard, “I won't be any worse off than Iapton, anyhow.”

So saying he gave the signal to start.

Pluto was having an argument with his watch dog, Cerberus.

“I say you should not have let them pass,” said he.

“And I maintain that I should,” growled Cerberus.

“What right,” demanded Pluto, “have you to contradict me?”

“You ought to know,” said Cerberus, “that three heads are better than one.”

Finding that he had lost the argument Pluto satisfied himself with roasting a Chicago university professor who had just arrived.—Milwaukee Sentinel.