

Samuel Gompers, Testimony on Labor Unions, 1883

Samuel Gompers was born into a working-class Jewish family in London in 1850. They emigrated to New York City in 1863, where Gompers learned the cigar trade from his father. He became active in New York's labor movement circles during the 1870s and rose to head the Cigar Makers International Union. Gompers was suspicious of political activity, and he came to believe that only strong, centralized trade unions could significantly improve wages and working conditions. In 1886 Gompers helped found the American Federation of Labor, which he led until his death in 1924. As President of the AFL, Gompers focused on organizing skilled craft workers, largely ignoring the less skilled, even as they were becoming a more important part of the labor force.

SOURCE: Report of the Committee of the Senate upon the Relations between Labor and Capital, 48th Congress (1885).

The Witness: What I wish to show is the condition of the cigar-makers at that period when there was no organization. When our organization commenced to emerge and reorganize throughout the country, the first year there were seventeen strikes in our trade, of which twelve or thirteen were successful. The rest were either lost or compromised. In the year following we had forty-six strikes, of which thirty-seven, I think, were successful, three lost, and six compromised. In these last two years, since which we have held no convention (we will hold one next year and we will hear the result), I am so convinced that we have had over one hundred and sixty or one hundred and seventy strikes, and the strikes have been successful except in, perhaps, twenty instances where they may have been lost or compromised. The truck system of which I spoke exists no longer in our trade. We have adopted a course of action which our experience has taught us, and that is, in certain periods of the year, when it is generally dull, not to strike for an advance of wages. Formerly, before the organization, men would probably strike for an advance of wages in the dull season, and be content that they were not reduced in the busy season. Our experience has taught us to adopt a different mode of action.

Sen. George: You strike now when business is active?—A. Yes, sir; and then, when we obtain an increase of wages when times are fair, our object is to endeavor to obtain fair wages during the dull season also, and, while we have made provision not to strike for an increase of wages during those periods, we are always in a position to strike against a reduction of wages or the introduction of the truck system, or other obnoxious rules. We have found that, for the purpose of accomplishing this object, it is entirely valueless to organize a union during a strike, and that it is little better than valueless to organize just immediately before a strike. We have found that if we are desirous of gaining anything in a strike, we must prepare in peace for the turbulent time which may come. And the Cigar-makers' International Union, of which I now speak especially, is an organization that has in its treasury between \$130,000 and \$150,000 ready to be concentrated within five days at any time at any given point. I hold in my hand a copy of the constitution of that organization. Of course I am not desirous of making a propaganda for it, but to illustrate what I have been saying I will read from it this provision: "Any union being directed by the executive board to forward money to another

local union, and failing to comply within five days from date of said notice shall be suspended." That is, in the event of a strike at a given point, the international president of the organization is directed to direct or request the nearest union to immediately send on its whole treasury if that is necessary, and the unions throughout the entire country and Canada to forward their entire treasury if necessary, to be placed at the disposal of the organization that is in trouble....

There is nothing in the labor movement that employers who have had unorganized laborers dread so much as organization; but organization alone will not do much unless the organization provides itself with a good fund, so that the operatives may be in a position, in the event of a struggle with their employers, to hold out....

Modern industry evolves these organizations out of the existing conditions where there are two classes in society, one incessantly striving to obtain the labor of the other class for as little as possible, and to obtain the largest amount or number of hours of labor; and the members of the other class, being as individuals utterly helpless in a contest with their employers, naturally resort to combinations to improve their condition, and, in fact, they are forced by the conditions which surround them to organize for self-protection. Hence trades unions. Trades unions are not barbarous, nor are they the outgrowth of barbarism. On the contrary they are only possible where civilization exists. Trades unions cannot exist in China; they cannot exist in Russia; and in all those semi-barbarous countries they can hardly exist, if indeed they can exist at all. But they have been formed successfully in this country, in Germany, in England, and they are gradually gaining strength in France. In Great Britain they are very strong; they have been forming there for fifty years, and they are still forming, and I think there is a great future for them yet in America. Wherever trades unions have organized and are most firmly organized, there are the right [*sic*] of the people most respected. A people may be educated, but to me it appears that the greatest amount of intelligence exists in that country or that state where the people are best able to defend their rights, and their liberties as against those who are desirous of undermining them. Trades unions are organizations that instill into men a higher motive-power and give them a higher goal to look to. The hope that is too frequently deadened in their breasts when unorganized is awakened by the trades unions as it can be by nothing else. A man is sometimes reached by influences such as the church may bold out to him, but the conditions that will make him a better citizen and a more independent one are those that are evolved out of the trades union movement. That makes him a better citizen and a better man in every particular. There are only a few who can be reached by the church so as to affect their daily walk in life compared with the numbers reached by these organizations.

Sen. Blair: The outside public, I think, very largely confound the conditions out of which the trades union grows or is formed, with the, to the general public mind, somewhat revolutionary ideas that are embraced under the names of socialism and communism. Before you get through, won't you let us understand to what extent the trades union is an outgrowth or an evolution of those ideas, and to what extent it stands apart from them and is based on different principles?—A. The trades unions are by no means an outgrowth of socialistic or communistic ideas or principles, but the socialistic and communistic notions are evolved from some of the trades unions' movements. As to the question of the

principles of communism or socialism prevailing in trades unions, there are a number of men who connect themselves as workingmen with the trades unions who may have socialistic convictions, yet who never gave them currency; who say, "Whatever ideas we may have as to the future state of society, regardless of what the end of the labor movement as a movement between classes may be, they must remain in the background, and we must subordinate our convictions, and our views and our acts to the general good that the trades-union movement brings to the laborer." A large number of them think and act in that way. On the other hand, there are men—not so numerous now as they have been in the past—who are endeavoring to conquer the trades-union movement and subordinate it to those doctrines, and in a measure, in a few such organizations that condition of things exists, but by no means does it exist in the largest, most powerful, and best organized trades unions. There the view of which I spoke just now, the desire to improve the condition of the workingmen by and through the efforts of the trades unions, is fully lived up to. I do not know whether I have covered, the entire ground of the question.

Sen. George: You state, then, that the trades unions generally are not propagandists of socialistic views?—A. They are not. On the contrary, the endeavors of which I have spoken, made by certain persons to conquer the trades unions in certain cases, are resisted by the trades unionists; in the first place for the trades unions' sake, and even persons who have these convictions perhaps equally as strong as the others will yet subordinate them entirely to the good to be received directly through the trades unions. These last help those who have not such convictions to resist those who seek to use the trades unions to propagate their socialistic ideas.

Q. Do you think the trades unions have impeded or advanced the spread of socialistic views?—A. I believe that the existence of the trades-union movement, more especially where the unionists are better organized, has evoked a spirit and a demand for reform, but has held in check the more radical elements in society....