

ON THE GOALS OF TRADE UNIONS

1883

----- *Samuel Gompers* -----

Samuel Gompers (1850–1924) was born in London and immigrated to the United States as a boy. Gompers believed that workers could most effectively organize by joining with other workers of the same craft, or occupation, and that unions should seek reforms through negotiation with owners rather than through politics. Three years after he gave this testimony to a Senate committee investigating the relations between labor (workers) and capital (owners), he founded the American Federation of Labor.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Analyzing Issues

What kind of relationship between government and organized labor did Gompers hope to achieve?

...The reduction of the hours of labor reaches the very root of society. It gives the workingman better conditions and better opportunities, and makes of him what has been too long neglected—a consumer instead of a mere producer....

The general reduction of the hours of labor to eight per day would reach further than any other reformatory measure; it would be of more lasting benefit; it would create a greater spirit in the working man; it would make him a better citizen, a better father, a better husband, a better man in general....

...Strikes ought to be, and in well-organized trade unions they are, the last means which workingmen resort to to protect themselves against the almost never satisfied greed of the employers. Besides this, the strike is, in many instances, the only remedy within our reach as long as legislation is entirely indifferent to the interests of labor....

...[T]he organizations of labor are the conservators of the public peace; for when strikes occur among men who are unorganized, often acting upon illy-considered plans, hastily adopted, acting upon passion, and sometimes not knowing what they have gone on strike for, except possibly some fancied grievance, and hardly knowing by what means they can or may remedy their grievances, each acts upon his own account without the restraint of organization, and feels that he serves the cause of the strike best when he does something that just occurs to him; while the man who belongs to a trades union that is of some years' standing is, by the very fact of his membership of the organization and his experience there, taught to abide by the decision of the

majority.... 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[s] 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 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....

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.

Source: Testimony before U.S. Senate Committee on Education and Labor by Samuel Gompers, August 16, 1883, in *Relations Between Labor and Capital, Report and Testimony*, 48th Congress. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1885), pp. 1, 293–295, 299, 367–368, 373–375.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY : ANSWER

Students may answer that Gompers advocated a friendly relationship between government and organized labor. Students may argue that Gompers urged the government to recognize and support labor unions as “the conservators of the public peace” and a force for social good. Students may also note that Gompers’s using the term “civilized” in reference to other countries where unions work (such as Great Britain, France, and Germany) suggests that he envisioned a stabilizing role for unions in a democracy like the United States. Gompers implies that it was in the government’s best interest to support unions, since their existence restrained “the more radical elements in society” calling for change.