

# INTRODUCTION

---

WHEN SAMUEL GOMPERS arrived in the United States from England in July 1863, he was not a newcomer to urban industrial society. Born and raised in a working class district of London, Gompers had served by age thirteen an apprenticeship to both a shoemaker and a cigarmaker. In contrast to the majority of nineteenth-century immigrants to New York, Gompers already had experience with patterns of industrial work that a rural immigrant would yet have to acquire. Most important, through his father's membership in the British Cigarmakers' Society, the young Gompers was familiar with trade unionism and with a variety of critics of British industrial capitalism, ranging from the reform-minded Chartists to the followers of Karl Marx. The intense activity and apparent chaos of New York's streets might very well at first have intimidated Gompers. But as he mastered New York's initial foreignness, he found he possessed certain advantages over other immigrants: he knew the English language, had at least the rudiments of his craft, and was familiar with the expectations of industrial employers.

The Gompers family arrived in New York during the Civil War. Both Samuel and his father were familiar with the issues in that conflict and strongly believed in the emancipation of the slave population. In this, they reflected the attitudes of many British workers who, throughout the war years, held public meetings in Britain's industrial centers to demand that their government support the Union effort and that President Lincoln free the slaves. But other aspects of that Civil War experience, which would play a critical role in his future, were less evident to the young Gompers, as they then were to most Americans.

Despite an official *laissez-faire* philosophy that many Americans of all classes affirmed, relations among state and federal government and the business community had actually been quite close in the era before the Civil War. The transportation revolution in turnpikes, canals, and finally railroads, which provided the essential structure for the emergence of a national market economy, relied heavily on positive government action; manufacturing expanded to fill a market protected by federal tariffs on imports; and manipulation of the money supply helped create a proper investment atmosphere for business. Yet the Civil War years marked a deepening of these relationships. The scope of government involvement in the daily lives of citizens expanded greatly during the war years and never quite retracted in the peace that ensued. In the postwar years, Congressional committees, with an eye to potential legislation, regularly examined aspects of social relations among American citizens, a process that would have been unthinkable a generation or two earlier. The attitudes of both labor and capital, the conditions of black workers in migration from the rural South to the urban industrial North, women's work and child labor, the problems of immigrant workers and the proper federal policy toward immigration for sustained economic growth—on these and many other topics witnesses were called and the problems discussed. This massive federal inquiry found an echo on the state level as well. Try as they might to adhere to an official ideology that held to a separation between government and the business community, few businessmen of even middling size firms or labor leaders with more than a handful of members could ignore the presence of the state in the period after the Civil War.

As Samuel Gompers entered New York's world of work in 1863, awareness of these and other issues still lay before him. For the first eighteen months in America, Gompers and his father worked side by

side in their tenement apartment making cigars. As Gompers recalled, he was not then very interested in the labor movement. Rather, after the day's work, he joined with other immigrant working class youths in debate societies and fraternal orders. But the realities of working class life slowly forced him to widen his perspective. On leaving the tenement for the cigar factory, he improved his work conditions and entered into a new world of ideas and visions. Cigarmakers regularly "hired" one of their co-workers to read while the others worked; in return the reader was "paid" in cigars at the day's end so that no one lost wages. The readings varied, of course, but from all accounts there was usually an emphasis on articles from the labor press and from the writings of such political economists as Karl Marx, Ferdinand Lassalle, Edward Kellogg and Ira Steward. Debate and discussion followed, and at times tempers flared. It was with little exaggeration that one historian suggested that Gompers "went to school at Hirsch's shop." Working class self-education was widespread, and Gompers was but one of many workers who discovered the world of ideas through that process.

This shop floor education reflected the intense nature of the still relatively weak labor movement in New York and other urban centers. Newspapers such as *Fincher's Trades Review*, *The Workingmen's Advocate*, *The Irish World*, and the *Labor Standard* were avidly read and handed on to other workers. The issues examined in the labor press were of fundamental importance, as they addressed both specific difficulties labor faced and broader strategies for a more thorough alteration of capitalist society. The tactics of the National Labor Union (NLU), for example, which under the leadership of William Sylvis of the Iron Molders Union sought to create an amalgamated national labor organization of both craft workers and political reformers, were repeatedly debated. The program of the International Workingmen's Association (IWA) also came under close scrutiny. To follow one branch of that movement, the one most closely associated with Karl Marx, was to emphasize the economic organization of workers into unions and to downplay, until the proper class identity emerged through those unions, independent political activity by working people. Another approach, identified with those in the IWA who followed Ferdinand Lassalle, suggested that political activity was of foremost importance and should be engaged in immediately. Each position had its adherents, and the coming of the long depression in the mid-1870s heightened the urgency of

the debate. Gompers and other workers found themselves drawn by the vitality of these discussions as they occurred on the job, in saloons and cafes, and in public lectures. They discovered that they too possessed the ability to contrast current reality with a more just and humane potential.

For Samuel Gompers, a smaller discussion group of workingmen that met regularly in New York proved to be of even greater importance. Composed primarily of immigrants or, as in the case of P. J. McGuire, of sons of immigrants, this group of skilled workers in various trades was predominantly of German heritage and closely associated with the Marxist wing of the IWA. While the meetings were informal, the topics discussed were far ranging. It was at these meetings and in discussions with his shopmate and mentor, Ferdinand Laurrell, that the young Gompers first systematically weighed the alternative paths of socialist politics and trade unionism. As these men were of roughly similar age, background, and experience, the personal and political bonds deepened, and they christened themselves *Die Zehn Philosophen*, or "the ten philosophers." While individual members' ideas changed on certain issues over the decade of the 1870s, they all shared a deep commitment to building a trade union movement and together vowed that they would maintain that loyalty despite future offers of more financially rewarding careers outside the labor movement. In 1878 the twenty-eight-year-old Gompers did just that in refusing a well-paid position with the Treasury Department in Washington—a striking commitment to an ideal from a young, poorly paid, overworked man with family responsibilities.

By the mid-1870s, then, Samuel Gompers was no longer the uninvolved lad who had arrived in New York a decade earlier. Prodded by his friends, his shopmates, and deteriorating economic conditions, he was deeply involved in the affairs of his union and in political activities. Older, more experienced, and far more conscious of basic issues affecting workers, Gompers began an association with the union movement that would last the rest of his life.

Gompers's active involvement with the Cigarmakers International Union (CMIU) coincided with an important change in cigar production. In 1868 a mold was invented that performed mechanically the skilled tasks that had been the core of the cigarmaker's craft. This allowed employers to utilize unskilled workers, especially recent immi-

grants and woman workers. Responding to this serious threat to their position, some socialists within the CMIU argued that since these unskilled workers formed a reserve labor supply for capital and would undercut the potential transformation of society that skilled workers might lead, the union should not organize them. But as early as the mid-1870s, Gompers, who with Adolph Strasser led the opposition to this exclusionary policy, thought that economic concentration and technological innovation assured a more efficient means of production, were potentially beneficial for workers, and in any case were inevitable. He also forcefully rejected the utopian theme he perceived in his socialist opponents' position: until capitalism ran its course, Gompers argued, any promise that workers might escape their class position was a fantasy.

As he focused on the state of the union, the young Gompers early gave evidence of singular initiative and insight into its problems and structure. In a letter to the president of the CMIU in January 1876, he outlined three critical issues facing working people. Paramount was the necessity to include all workers, regardless of skill, in the union movement. The lessons learned in the debate over the mold workers in the CMIU he now applied to the whole of the labor movement. Second, he stressed the need for a reduction in the hours of work (without a reduction in pay) for all workers so that they might better develop their capabilities as family members, unionists, and citizens. He also emphasized the importance to labor of working to raise the lowest wages in an industry to the level of the highest, thereby largely eliminating capital's reserve labor supply. Finally, in a cryptic reference to a possible broader transformation of society, Gompers noted that "the fourth [issue] will be given at some future time by others if not by me."

With Adolph Strasser, Gompers was instrumental in building CMIU Local 144 in New York, and in large part due to these efforts, Strasser, with Gompers as a trusted adviser, became president of the national union in 1877. They immediately proposed three basic reforms in the CMIU's structure, which, while not approved at once, ultimately were adopted. To justify the relatively high union dues, the new administration introduced traveling benefits (for members "on the tramp" in search of work), sick benefits, and unemployment compensation—all to be paid from the union treasury. Second, they borrowed from the British experience a system of equalization of funds through which the national officers might transfer money from financially stronger locals to

weaker ones in crisis. Finally, they insisted on a well-financed and centralized strike fund under the control of the national officers to prevent precipitous strikes that could destroy the union but assure authorized strikers firm financial support.

Critics in Gompers's time and since have pointed to these proposals and others like them as proof that even in the 1870s Gompers was a conservative business unionist fully committed to a narrow program of unionism that encouraged the growth of a bureaucratic union structure. But the evidence from that era suggests a quite different interpretation. The overriding concern of workers in that period was to create stable union structures that could survive the severe cyclical business depressions. A frustrating pattern had already become clear by the time Gompers involved himself in the CMIU. The organizing activity of the late 1820s and early 1830s, with its dual emphasis on both political and economic action, floundered during the long depression of 1837-42; the early national unions of the trades met with similar results in the 1850s, as most were unable to withstand the depression just before the Civil War. Indeed, even as Gompers and Strasser were rebuilding the CMIU in the 1870s, the serious business downturn between 1873 and 1879, with its drastic wage cuts and widespread unemployment, leveled the organized labor movement. Gompers's search for institutional stability in the 1870s was not in any ideological sense business unionism. Rather, he sought such stability so that workers might better defend themselves against the inevitable attacks on wages, conditions, and their unions.

Gompers's resistance to independent working class political action has also generated a persistent criticism. In the 1870s and early 1880s Gompers, following Marxist thought, placed primary emphasis on the economic organization of workers. He certainly agreed with Jonathan Fincher who had argued in 1863 that, when political involvement precedes working class self-awareness, "the rights of labor are made subordinate to the claims of this or that candidate. [The worker] has not the courage to demand his rights in the shop, because he is a companion of his boss 'in the cause.'" Gompers also understood that contending political allegiances could pit worker against worker and thus detract from the effort needed to build the union. Finally, when he examined the actual political programs proposed by New York's early socialist movement, he found them highly unrealistic. The utopian theme that stressed as the ultimate goal a society of small-scale producers he thought irrelevant to

the problems of industrialization; and he felt that the socialist emphasis on assuming state power, in alliance with other classes in society, was actually dangerous to workers' self interest. It would detract from their consciousness of themselves as a class and reinforce the social belief that they might escape their status. As J. P. McDonnell, an IWA member, former private secretary to Karl Marx, and a fellow member of *Die Zehn Philosophen*, commented in the 1870s on American conditions, "Our capitalist enemy resides in the breast of almost everyone."

But Gompers was by no means apolitical during this era. He was intensely interested in both political theory and electoral campaigns. Further, as the cryptic reference to broader solutions to social problems in his 1876 letter indicated, neither of the major political parties captured his imagination during these years. He publicly supported Henry George's third-party campaign in the New York City mayoralty race in 1886 and did not cast a ballot for a major party presidential candidate until 1896. Clearly, during the first two decades of his public career Samuel Gompers had a strong faith in the importance of independent political activity. What separated him from socialists at this time, however, was a question of strategy. Building the trade union was the critical task for Gompers; that accomplished, political engagement on a mass level would follow naturally. But to embroil working people in politics before the proper foundation had set was folly.

It is difficult to understand Gompers during these early years without appreciating that he was, as his friendships and associations suggest, first and foremost a skilled immigrant worker. His commitment to the working class was profound and formed a central aspect of his own self-identity. Even years later a socialist opponent could claim, in exasperation, that Gompers was "the most class conscious man I met." His immigrant background provided a critical definition of that consciousness. As Europeans knew, class identity was neither lightly borne nor easily discarded. Yet in America their pride in that class identity and Europe's rich intellectual traditions led them to be seen, even by many native-born workers, as cosmopolitan strangers who were twice-cursed, as immigrants and as class-conscious labor intellectuals, for the news they delivered to the people of the land of opportunity. It is a testament to the collective determination and intelligence of *Die Zehn Philosophen* that, as the result of their struggle to integrate their European perceptions with the complex realities of industrializing America, so many of

them played such prominent roles in the American labor movement. In later years other aspects of that immigrant experience would become important to Gompers as he, like so many other immigrants, sought to distance himself from his immigrant origins in order to find acceptance and respectability. Finally, Gompers's position as a skilled craftsman was central to his development. He formed his basic concept of the trade union at a time when the mass production industries were yet in their infancy and skilled workers remained essential to employers. As his activities in the CMIU indicate, he understood the need to incorporate the unskilled into the union movement. But even then, the base of that movement was for Gompers the skilled worker.

The locale also influenced Gompers's development. He lived in a complex and still developing urban industrial society that he took to be the prototype, if not the actual reality, of the American experience. As he notes repeatedly in the autobiography, New York was for him the center of the union movement. Chicago, Pittsburgh, and Cincinnati, to say nothing of the smaller industrializing communities that dotted the American landscape, needed but to look to New York for direction and leadership. But in important ways New York was atypical of the rest of America in the years immediately following the Civil War. In other industrial communities, the immigrant population was less concentrated, the influence of Marx less evident, and industrial development more centralized than in New York's diverse and decentralized economy. Equally important, the growing national industrial work force differed substantively from that in New York. Outside that city, and one or two other urban centers, native-born Americans with rural or small town backgrounds comprised a larger percentage of the new industrial working class. Many experienced this transition from farm to city with their earlier values intact, values that pointed to the concept of citizenship, with its demand for active political engagement as part of one's duty to self and to community, as of primary importance. These men and women would in turn create organizations and leaders that reflected a different approach to such central issues as working class political activity than that developed by Gompers and his co-workers.

These and other differences would in the years ahead create severe tensions between Gompers and other labor leaders such as Terence V. Powderly, Joseph Buchanan, and Eugene V. Debs. But these tensions should not obscure the very substantial contributions Gompers made to the labor movement even in his early career. His role in re-

vamping the trade union structure and his insistence on developing a firm class identity among workers marked an important turning point in the history of the American working class and its labor organizations.

In 1880, the organized labor movement began to recover from the effects of the long depression of 1873. The surviving unions experienced a revival, and new ones appeared, such as the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners under the leadership of P. J. McGuire. The one labor organization that claimed a national jurisdiction across craft lines, the Knights of Labor (K of L), also experienced renewed growth.

Uriah Stephens, a tailor and former student in a Baptist seminary, founded the K of L in Philadelphia in 1869. During the 1870s the K of L grew slowly, in large part because it adopted a secret ritual in order to protect the organization from employer reaction. Predominantly native-born and Protestant in its early years, the K of L nonetheless advocated the organization of all workers regardless of level of skill, sex, or racial and ethnic identity. Under the leadership of Terence V. Powderly, who became grand master workman in 1879, the K of L dropped its secret ritual and engaged in more aggressive public organizing. While the Knights opened their ranks to small businessmen and manufacturers, their primary focus was on working people who could affiliate on the local level in two ways. The trade assembly gathered together workers in the same craft. Its local organization was generally similar to the local organizations of the national craft unions, in that membership required work in the trade, but it was not necessary to also hold a card in the local craft union. The second form of local organization was the mixed assembly. As the term suggests, workers from different skilled crafts, unskilled workers ineligible for a craft union, and occasional non-working class sympathizers met together. Increasingly during the 1880s, as enough workers in the same local craft joined a mixed assembly, they broke off to form a trade assembly.

Although Samuel Compers was a member of the Knights, the K of L's organizing efforts caused him great concern. He neither approved of the mixed assembly as a major organizing tool nor did he welcome the presence of middle class reformers in the ranks of the Knights. Even more disturbing to him was the competition the Knights presented to the development of the national craft unions. From Compers's perspective many years later, the K of L represented a dual union as it

directly vied for the allegiance of workers already eligible for membership in the national craft unions. But as K of L organizers pointed out during the labor struggles of the 1880s, in many of the crafts it was the Knights, and not the national unions, who first established an institutional presence. Equally problematic for Gompers was the Knights' attraction to independent political action.

At the national level, Terence Powderly symbolized that involvement for Gompers. A skilled machinist and labor politician, the son of Irish immigrants, Powderly served several terms as mayor of Scranton, Pennsylvania, during his long tenure (1878-93) as master workman of the K of L. He supported the reformist Greenback party in national elections during much of the 1880s, spoke frequently about monetary reform, and was a strong temperance advocate. What bothered Gompers was not primarily Powderly's political ideas, some of which Gompers shared, but rather the framework through which Powderly sought their public acceptance. The K of L leader actively pursued cross-class alliances, emphasized arbitration and legislation as the solutions to labor's problems, and in frequent public speeches rejected strikes as a proper weapon against even the most obstinate of employers. This approach, Gompers understood, was diametric to his own emphasis on building the trade union as an independent source of working class power. Moreover, Gompers believed, not completely inaccurately, that the Knights' peculiar mix of loose organization, political reformist tendencies, and lack of strict membership requirements often resulted in the K of L's sharp attacks on the craft unions. Their primary identity was not as workers, Gompers argued from within his immigrant Marxist-influenced conception, and he pointed to the vicious struggle in New York between his CMIU and the K of L's socialist-dominated District Assembly 49 to prove his argument.

But for all the force of Gompers's criticism, his account is highly misleading on certain central issues. Although of unquestioned importance in New York, the socialist influence was not a commanding presence nationwide in the K of L. His perception of the relationship between Powderly and the K of L is also erroneous. Gompers claims in his memoirs that the K of L was a "highly centralized" organization directed by Powderly, a perspective that then permitted him to criticize one man and dismiss an organization. But as Gompers himself should have known, had he but reflected on the persistent rank-and-file opposition

to his own leadership in the CMIU, on any given issue there is often a wide gulf between leaders and members. This was specifically evident concerning Powderly's antistrike position. While Powderly did think strikes harmful to labor's broader interests, relatively few members across the country agreed with him. In the middle of a major strike against the Gould railroads in 1886, for example, Powderly found himself in the quite awkward position of issuing a circular against the strike *after* local assemblies of the Knights throughout the Southwest had already walked off their jobs.

Similarly, Gompers's insistence on presenting the K of L in politics as a reflection of Powderly's concerns misrepresents that experience. Throughout the nation, K of L members were active in local politics primarily because their trade union activity had led these men and women to a new understanding of the interrelationship between political and economic power. It made an enormous difference, they discovered, if during a strike the local police authorities were responsive to their demands for fair treatment and justice or, conversely, if the police aligned themselves with the local employer. Despite Gompers's criticism, the Knights were rooted mainly in the nation's shops and factories. These men and women saw themselves as workers, but they also saw themselves as citizens of both the local community and the larger nation with the rights and duties of political engagement inherent in that tradition. Neither directed by Powderly nor responsive to some "unnatural" impulse, as Gompers would have it, this dual identity propelled many Knights to both political and economic activity.

Whatever the shortcomings of Gompers's retrospective arguments or the contradictions between them and his own actions at the time, it remains true that Gompers fought the influence of the K of L. This led him and other trade union leaders to create a national labor association to promote the common interests of the national craft unions. At the first meeting in Pittsburgh in 1881, which resulted in the establishment of the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions (FOTLU), the Knights were present in force and active in the debates. By the time of the second meeting at Cleveland a year later, however, the K of L was all but formally excluded from participation, and the FOTLU represented only those workers who held membership in the national union of their craft. The FOTLU remained weak and underfinanced during its brief life, and its major activity focused on lobbying ef-

forts on behalf of laws important to working people. It also served as the organizational base for the creation of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) in 1886.

The structure and guiding principles of the AFL reflected in numerous ways the often bitter struggles between the national craft union leaders and the K of L in the preceding years. From its inception, the AFL severely limited the influence of local unions unaffiliated with a national craft union, a sharp contrast with the K of L's haphazard national organization. It rejected overt institutional involvement in politics and limited its activities to support of specific legislation or individual pro-labor candidates. The AFL might support organizing drives among unorganized workers, but such efforts would respect the jurisdictional prerogatives and independent existence of the national craft unions. In an important way, the AFL founders conceived of the institution as a nationwide umbrella over organized labor, created to provide broader protection through united effort and to serve the interests of the craft unions. But the AFL was not to be strong enough on its own to withstand the opposition of those unions and their leaders.

The two guiding principles of the AFL reflected this intent. As Gompers proudly states throughout his autobiography, the AFL adhered to the philosophy of voluntarism. Applied to the institutional structure of the AFL, the concept meant that the national unions freely chose to affiliate and could, therefore, disaffiliate at any time. There existed in the AFL constitution no central force to compel or retain association. But voluntarism also contained a broader social meaning, one that addressed the nature of labor-capital relations in American society. Gompers and other AFL leaders rejected any role for the state in establishing either the general boundaries or the specific conditions of industrial relations. Employers and workers, through their unions, were the only legitimate actors, Gompers insisted, and the inevitable struggle between them would be fought directly in the economic arena without regard for political concerns. As Gompers explained to a Senate committee in 1883, the United States Constitution "does not give our National Government the right to adopt a law which would be applicable to private employments." Despite the growing regulatory power of the state and the growing presence of businessmen on the regulatory boards, these early AFL leaders concentrated on building institutions strong enough to fight employers when necessary and attractive enough to command the loyalty of their skilled members.

The second principle reinforced aspects of the first. The concept of trade union autonomy asserted the independence of the national unions within their craft jurisdictions and affirmed their right to order their internal affairs without interference from other national unions or the AFL. Agreement on this idea ensured the absence of centralized direction and a constitutionally weak office of the president for the new organization.

As the leading public advocate of these ideas within the AFL, Samuel Gompers exhibited a certain consistency with his earlier ideas and experiences. As evident in his battles with both socialists and the Knights before 1886, as well as in the long discussions among *Die Zehn Philosophen*, Gompers elected trade unionism over labor politics as the basic strategy for working people. This insight originally stemmed from his profound appreciation of the fact that even favorable labor legislation required for effective enforcement the concerted power of workers to withhold their labor. To rely on the state and not the union's ability to protect workers' interests was at best foolhardy to Gompers. But something critical changed in Gompers's formulation of this idea in the late 1880s. Although Gompers was never a Marxist in any sustained or ideological sense, he was clearly influenced by the immigrant Marxist milieu that permeated the early New York labor movement. In line with that subculture's influence, the young Gompers did indeed emphasize trade union organizing, but in a broader context that looked toward a fundamental transformation of the society. Trade union work was an essential starting point, but originally it was not an end in itself. The careers of two other of the Philosophers, P. J. McGuire and J. P. McDonnell, both of whom remained socialists and committed trade unionists after the founding of the AFL, suggest an alternative path. But for Gompers, the dialectical process that structured his earlier vision narrowed after 1886 and in time the vision would become almost a caricature of itself.

Contemporary critics were quick to point to this altered message. Daniel DeLeon's Socialist Labor Party was brutal and frequently erroneous in its criticism of Gompers, while the Socialist Party of America, led by Eugene V. Debs, was at times equally sharp in evaluating Gompers even as it sought to work with the local AFL unions. A persistent criticism also came from organized workers in AFL-affiliated unions, especially among the miners, machinists, brewery workers, and cigarmakers. These critics pointed to the Interstate Commerce Act (1887) and the Sherman Anti-Trust Act (1890) as proof of the state's increased involve-

defined

ment in industrial relations; and the dominance of the business community on the new regulatory boards underscored their point. Many could personally testify as well to the intimate collusion between the state and the corporate community, as they had experienced the results of it in strikes at Homestead, Coeur d'Alene, and Pullman and throughout America's coal fields. Reality, these varied critics could agree, demanded an aggressive organizing strategy and, at a minimum, the encouragement of a broad political debate to analyze these complex problems. Gompers's refusal to encourage such a program in part fostered a coalition of dissident delegates at the 1894 AFL convention that rejected Gompers and elected John McBride president.

From one perspective, Gompers himself was a captive of the organization he led. Without central power, Gompers of necessity had to rely on an ability to influence and suggest. Moreover, maintaining his position often required discovering the most common, and least controversial, denominator to resolve internal disputes, even when that result went contrary to his own understanding. His early position on the necessity of biracial organizing was a case in point. After the founding of the AFL, Gompers actively sought to enroll unaffiliated craft unions. He wooed the railway brotherhoods for many years without much success and also pressed the International Association of Machinists (IAM) to join. Founded in 1888, the IAM, like most other unions at the time, excluded black workers. In correspondence over five years, Gompers refused to grant the IAM a charter and tried to convince its leaders that the union's policy would actually hurt white machinists. But the IAM refused to budge. Finally, a compromise of sorts emerged: the IAM removed the racist clause from its national constitution and allowed for local union option on whether or not to include black workers. In exchange, the IAM received its charter, despite the widespread understanding that the local option clause was a subterfuge to maintain an all-white union. Ultimately, it was Gompers who had no option, despite his quite pragmatic commitment to biracial organizing.

In other ways, however, Samuel Gompers's own attitudes helped to foster the institutional atmosphere he at times found confining. The evolution in the meaning he gave to the concept of voluntarism suggests one aspect of this contradiction. To deny the state a role in industrial relations (and thus to deemphasize political action) did not originally require a denial of the very intimate connection between the state and the

business community. Rather, the idea reflected a choice made concerning critical first steps in organizing workers. Gompers's attitude toward socialists in the early years of the AFL indicates this. He neither dismissed them as irrelevant nor thought them harmful to either the union movement or America's democratic tradition. But he did insist on the primacy of economic organizing before political involvement. During the 1890s, however, the meaning of voluntarism altered. Gompers now praised the individualistic core of that idea in ways that, if taken literally, actually threatened the philosophic justification of any group or organization. A belief in individualism, the absence of governmental interference, and the strength of a free market economy became for Gompers the criteria of both the good trade unionist and the patriotic American citizen. His earlier formulations, which reflected an appreciation of the complex political economy of industrializing America, were now rarely mentioned.

This intellectual evolution affected Gompers's ability to function as AFL president in very pragmatic ways. As he scornfully and at times viciously attacked socialists, usually without recognition of important differences among them, he found himself depending more and more on the rather conservative national officers of the craft unions. Each needed the other in their common struggle against trade union socialists, who were strong in a number of AFL unions. But Gompers could not very well then reject his allies when faced with their reticence to support organizing drives among the unskilled or among skilled workers of different racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Gompers changed in more subtle ways as well. The innovative unionist who had creatively adapted British lessons to American reality became less evident, as Gompers concentrated his energy on nurturing the AFL to stability. But there were certain consequences of this change that, while perhaps unintended, were nonetheless serious. In the same year that Samuel Gompers helped found the FOTLU, Frederick Winslow Taylor began his time-motion studies of workers and the process of work at the Midvale Steel plant. The early experiments of this industrial engineer would, within a generation, become a more systematic program of scientific management that sought to reorder the workplace along lines more attractive to management. In part, Taylor called for the reorganization of management practices to create greater efficiency. But the major focus of the movement to which Taylor lent his name looked

to change the work force. Through the introduction of physiological principles to govern the worker's actual movements, new work rules to enforce the new discipline, and continued technological innovation, Taylorism promised to eliminate the employer's dependence on skilled workers. Work would be routinized, a particular skill broken down into its smallest and least demanding components—and the skilled worker replaced by a semiskilled and unskilled work force. Management, in turn, could replace these workers at its discretion since the work skills now required demanded neither extensive knowledge nor a long apprenticeship. In steel as in other emerging mass production industries, corporate executives quickly learned the lessons of scientific management and reorganized their factories accordingly.

This development presented a fundamental threat to the AFL's organizational stability. Yet Gompers and his associates were slow to respond. In his autobiography, Gompers repeatedly insists that to oppose technological change would be both wrong and suicidal for the labor movement. But that was not the fundamental question raised by Taylor's methods. As many unionists argued at the time, under Taylorism work became demeaning, the individual worker's sense of dignity and self-esteem was undercut, and there was little evidence that the obvious benefits that accrued to management and to stockholders would be shared with the workers themselves. In some industries unionists responded to this challenge by rejecting the exclusionary craft union already in place and building, often in face of opposition from Gompers, industrial unions of their own. The founding of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America occurred in this fashion. Others sought a broad public debate over the meaning of citizenship and democracy in a society increasingly autocratic in its economic relations. Beyond certain generalized comments about the ultimate benefit of more efficient production, however, Samuel Gompers offered little of substance.

Despite the serious problems facing the AFL, Gompers justifiably took pride in his achievements as he looked toward the twentieth century. He presided over a national organization that survived the depression of the 1890s and emerged from it with enough financial security to hire its first full-time paid organizers. Membership continued to grow, and by 1904 the AFL could claim 10 percent of the nation's wage earners. A few years earlier, the AFL moved its headquarters to the nation's capital and intensified its lobbying efforts on Capitol Hill. Gom-

pers was more confident than ever that organized labor had secured a permanent recognition as a legitimate institution in American society. Gompers had personal reasons to be pleased as well. Reelected as AFL president after his year's "sabbatical," Gompers never again faced defeat in an election for that office. To a large extent, he had also mastered the difficult task of presiding over a group of opinionated and contentious union presidents. As his reputation grew in the larger society, his actual organizational power within the AFL also expanded. As long as it remained within certain boundaries, that power now far exceeded its constitutional limitations. But even his pride over these very real accomplishments would not efface the fundamental problems that still confronted the AFL.

The basic issue confronting American workers during the first decades of the twentieth century was quite simple. Despite the organizing gains made since the Civil War, the overwhelming majority of American employers refused to recognize the legality of the trade union. There was no legislation holding that they must. The body of case law that did exist held the opposite: the individual worker, when he or she accepted employment, entered into a voluntary contractual relation with the employer that superceded other constitutional rights the worker might possess. In *Hitchman Coal and Coke Co. v. Mitchell* (1917), the United States Supreme Court reaffirmed a 1908 West Virginia federal district court's judgment that the United Mine Workers of America was an illegal combination under the Sherman Anti-Trust Act. The Court argued that the union violated the company's property rights in its work force when it attempted to organize miners. The employment contract between Hitchman and its workers, which forbade workers to join unions (referred to as a "yellow dog" contract by labor), was held supreme; and, for good measure, the Court approved the use of injunctions to enforce its decree.

*Hitchman v. Mitchell* was but one of a series of disastrous court decisions for organized labor in the decade prior to America's involvement in World War I. Furthermore, the employer offensive was not limited solely to the legal arena. Individual employers and organized groups such as the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) conducted antiunion drives nationwide on behalf of the open shop. To com-

plicate matters further, NAM couched its argument against unions in a rhetorical defense of the individual rights and contractual freedoms of working people. By definition, NAM insisted, unions abridged these freedoms in their call for a union shop, which would compel workers to join. The philosophical justification of voluntarism now confronted Gompers and the AFL with a vengeance.

Broad alterations in American society also created difficulties for the AFL. In the years between Gompers's first term as AFL president and World War I, America received the greatest number of foreign immigrants ever in its history. In 1907 alone, nearly 1.3 million new immigrants arrived. By 1910 approximately 40 percent of New York City's population was foreign-born; the proportion for Chicago was 36 percent, for Milwaukee, 30 percent, and for the textile city of Lawrence, Massachusetts, almost 50 percent. These immigrants were mainly working class and collectively possessed little knowledge of American language and customs. Many had no prior experience with factory work, industrial discipline, or trade unions. It was precisely their lack of familiarity with the major experiences of industrial capitalist society that led many employers to welcome them. The newness of the immigrants, many presumed, would foster a malleableness that would in turn create a cheap and docile reserve labor pool of unskilled workers. Samuel Gompers and the nation's employers shared this assumption. Moreover, this change in the American work force occurred simultaneously with tremendous technological innovations in basic industry. As these developments threatened the security of the skilled worker, the semiskilled and unskilled workers needed in the restructured workplace arrived daily from Europe.

The experience in the steel industry suggests the dimensions of the problem. In the decades following the Civil War, the Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel and Tin Workers grew into one of the strongest unions in the country, with a membership of approximately twenty-five thousand skilled workers in the industry. Composed primarily of native-born white workers, with some concentration of British, German, and other northern European immigrants, the Amalgamated ignored the increasing numbers of semiskilled and unskilled workers then pouring into American steel plants from villages in Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia. Excluded from the union, these new immigrants nonetheless surprised both Amalgamated officials and steel industry executives during

the bitter lockout against the union by the Carnegie Steel Company in 1892 at Homestead, Pennsylvania. (Although the skilled Amalgamated members represented but 20 percent of the work force, all thirty-eight hundred Carnegie workers supported the union's demands, resisted the attack by the Pinkerton detectives, and ignored company appeals to break worker unity. This combined resistance finally collapsed in the face of the company's power to induce the governor to send in the state militia, but the solidarity expressed across ethnic and skill lines might have taught the Amalgamated officials an important lesson.) Unfortunately for the union, however, it did not. The Amalgamated maintained its traditional emphasis on the skilled, despite the diminishing position of those workers in the industry, and did not change its bylaws to allow for the inclusion of the unskilled until 1910. But by that time the Amalgamated had but a shadow existence in the industry.

The problems facing Samuel Gompers and the federation were quite severe during the first decades of the twentieth century. In the economic arena, organized labor had to find a way to involve the new, largely immigrant, industrial work force at the same time it maintained the allegiance of the unions of skilled workers. Politically, the problems were even more severe. Somehow the practice of voluntarism in the political arena had to be adapted to allow organized labor to counteract the powerful corporate influence on American government and courts. To totally fail in either area could structurally weaken the AFL and possibly even lead to the organization's demise.

Gompers's position on organizing the unskilled had been constant since the 1880s. In this new crisis, symbolized by the lack of growth in AFL membership after 1904, Gompers repeated his admonitions, used his considerable influence on national union presidents, and intensified his use of the one direct organizing tactic available to him as AFL president. The original AFL constitution had allowed for the creation of "federal local unions" chartered directly by the AFL president. Similar to the K of L's mixed assemblies, these federal locals enrolled unorganized workers in various trades in a geographic area. When enough workers in a given occupation joined, the group was then attached to the appropriate national craft union. If the national union rejected the new local (because of the presence of unskilled workers, for example), the local could remain directly affiliated with the AFL. After the Homestead lockout in 1892, Gompers pressed this tactic in the steel

industry beyond his formal constitutional authority. When the Amalgamated rejected as new affiliates federal local unions among wire drawers, blast furnace workers, and tube workers, the AFL grouped them together by occupation into new national unions. As important as this tactic was in providing at least some protection to the previously unorganized, it reveals again the institutional limits of Gompers's ability to respond to the crisis. Given the power of voluntarism and trade union autonomy in guiding relations within the AFL, Gompers had no choice but to fragment labor's strength in the industry. To have attempted to force the creation of a broader industrial union, against the wishes of the Amalgamated leaders, would have ensured the organizational breakup of the AFL. Despite the Amalgamated's dramatic decline in membership, Gompers of necessity still had to recognize that union's proclaimed jurisdictional prominence.

When he turned his attention to the problems in the broader political culture, Gompers also found his options restricted. His own attitudes toward American socialists had hardened since the early 1880s, and his disagreement with them was no longer tactical. Socialists, he asserted at the 1903 AFL convention, were "impossibilists," fundamentally wrong in both theory and practice and dangerous to the interests of working people. This scornful dismissal of American socialism reflected both institutional constraints (there were few national union presidents favorably disposed toward socialism) and Gompers's continuing anger over the influence trade union socialists still exerted in numerous unions. But it also reflected a more fundamental change in Gompers's thought. As he reacted to the basic political crisis organized labor faced, Gompers dismissed as impractical at best the broad political debate socialists perceived as essential to resolving the increasing tension apparent in an individual's identity as a worker and as a citizen in a democratic society. Rather, in what in retrospect appears as a two-pronged strategy, Gompers sought to enlist some unlikely allies in the dominant corporate and political worlds in defense of organized labor.

As Gompers was well aware, the business community in America was anything but monolithic. Different levels of economic concentration and power, uneven control of the market, and varying rates of technological adaptation created a diverse and at times internally inconsistent business community. A group like NAM, for example, represented businessmen whose firms, while often quite powerful on the local and re-

gional level, commanded little national attention. In contrast, the national and international corporations in basic industry, finance, and commerce formed the National Civic Federation (NCF) to represent their interests. While neither business group welcomed unions, the NCF shied away from quick applications of direct force against workers. These corporate leaders instead pioneered in the creation of welfare capitalism. Through such programs as stock sharing, pension funds, and sponsorship of company sports teams, they sought to eliminate the appeal of the union while they preserved the full range of management rights and prerogatives. As a group, the NCF also placed a high value on mediation of industrial disputes, hoping to largely avoid the economic disruption and political tension associated with strikes.

From the founding of NCF in 1900 until his death, Samuel Gompers served as first vice president of the NCF, proudly sitting on its board with corporate executives from U.S. Steel, International Harvester, and other major businesses. Certainly Gompers was as favorable a labor representative as the businessmen who created the NCF could have discovered. He had long been on record as in favor of industrial concentration and opposed to antitrust legislation, and he had never questioned the value of technological change. Moreover, he supported noncompulsory mediation of industrial disputes and could honestly join with corporate executives to oppose government interference in the private sector of the economy. Yet the marriage was a hard one for labor. The NCF did provide support when Gompers and two associates faced jail terms as a result of a suit brought by James Van Cleave, president of both the Bucks' Stove and Range Company and the NAM, but the direct benefits to organized labor were questionable. The steel industry again serves as an example. The leading executives of U.S. Steel, including Judge Elbert Gary, the corporation's president, were quite involved in the NCF and served on a number of its committees. While they publicly praised industrial harmony and mediation of disputes as NCF members, these same executives fought the union presence in their own plants. Indeed, they conceived of and led U.S. Steel's open shop drive. The same resistance to worker organizations in *their* plants dominated the thinking of other NCF executives.

Affiliation with the NCF did not provide much direct support to organized labor, but Gompers thought it important enough to maintain despite the mounting criticism from others in the labor movement. He

praised the mediation efforts conducted by the NCF in certain strikes and dismissed the strong critical reactions those settlements elicited from his labor critics in both the Pennsylvania coal strike (1902) and the New York City streetcar strike (1905). More important was his reading of the nation's political atmosphere. With reason he feared that the ferocious attacks orchestrated by NAM against organized labor might succeed. He therefore sought in the NCF allies and access to respectability and acceptance from the powerful business community. Girding this relationship was an unspoken *quid pro quo*: respectability and acceptance could be extended only to one who was presentable. In exchange, then, Gompers continued in his task of restraining the labor movement from actions deemed precipitous or radical by himself or his new allies. Fortunately for Gompers, his attitudes on basic questions frequently corresponded with those of colleagues in the NCF. Each, for example, worried over the harmful influences the immigrant community, with its surprising propensity for radical action, might exert on their respective institutions. Business members of the NCF utilized the system of welfare capitalism and the emerging field of personnel management to direct workers along the desired path. Gompers, on the other hand, saw in the organized labor movement the proper institution to police workers. Writing for a labor audience but quite conscious of his NCF associates as well, Gompers warned in 1912, after the successful strike of immigrant workers led by the left-wing Industrial Workers of the World at Lawrence, Massachusetts, that immigrant workers in the steel industry "will protest. Probably not in the same way as American trade unions . . . the Anglo-Saxon plan. But if the great industrial combinations do not deal with us they will have somebody else to deal with who will not have the American idea."

Gompers's joint message to business executive and craft unionist alike underscored the threat to each the immigrant worker represented. This theme also dominates large sections of his memoirs, as he addresses the problems he encountered in dealing with Chinese, Italian, Polish, and other non-Teutonic immigrants. The emphasis he placed on Americanization through the labor movement, "the Anglo-Saxon plan" he referred to in 1912, only hints at the importance of this theme in his personal and public life.

Gompers never felt a strong Jewish identity. A secularist, a humanist, a child of both the Enlightenment and utilitarianism, Gompers

rejected religion as a superstition. But he was profoundly conscious of his immigrant origins. He came to maturity in the immigrant milieu in New York and took great pride in the intellectual abilities and skilled talents of his fellow Philosophers. As he states in his autobiography, there was a time when not only was he comfortable with the city's varied groups of immigrant workers but they were comfortable with him and regularly asked him to intervene in disputes within those organizations. His record in the CMIU, in New York State's Workingmen's Assembly, and in the FOTLU made Gompers an individual of commanding presence and importance among his fellow workers. But this occurred within a specific immigrant experience. Gompers and his co-workers might be seen as aliens, strangers in the biblical sense, but they knew they shared with each other and the dominant culture a common Teutonic background, a wide variety of industrial skills, and at the minimum some exposure to the political and intellectual traditions of Western society. But with the new mass migrations from southern and eastern Europe between the 1880s and World War I, the immigrant milieu changed completely. Largely rural if not peasant in background, without formal education, and steeped more in the traditions of their grandparents than in the varieties of Western thought, these new immigrants appeared unabsorbable to many native-born Americans and western European immigrants alike. Even a common religious tradition failed to bridge the gap. Many Jews of German, Dutch, or English heritage, for example, felt little in common with their eastern European coreligionists. Western European Jews had long felt culturally superior in Europe, and the rawness of the new Jewish immigrants, who filled the streets dressed in their frock coats and beaver hats, did little to ease relations in America. Moreover, in certain decentralized industries such as clothing and garments, the small-scale owners and subcontractors tended to be western Jews while the work force were the new eastern immigrants.

Understanding the importance of this new migration is essential if one is to comprehend a persistent theme in Gompers's *Seventy Years of Life and Labor*. Gompers's repeated insistence that he is not an immigrant and his frequent, almost bizarre, pointing of his finger at "them," the foreign-born, as he asserts his native roots would, if taken literally, seem ridiculous. But Gompers is not denying the very immigrant background that, in another context, he proudly proclaims.

Rather, his denial is a more complicated statement whose ultimate audience is the native-born worker and especially the native-born executive and politician. In distancing himself and those he represents from the new immigrants, Gompers both praises the success of an earlier process of Americanization and offers his services as a member of the indigenous culture in this new context. Businessmen who fought him, then, opposed their own self-interest, while workers who rejected his leadership defined themselves as un-American. Like the cosmopolitan British and French Jews who, sensitive to their own tenuous status in their nations, opposed the migration of Russian Jewish refugees of the czar's programs during the 1880s, Gompers's attitude in part stemmed from a realization of labor's precarious institutional position in America. If he and the AFL might find common ground with the corporate powers, then the AFL might survive even if this was achieved at some cost to the majority of working people.

It is with this perspective in mind that Gompers's involvement with the NCF must be evaluated. Intensely aware of the hostile attitudes toward labor throughout the society, Gompers was certainly not surprised when his NCF colleagues resisted unionization of their plants. But he maintained the connection for the potential contacts and access to the powerful it provided. NCF executives conferred as equals with a succession of presidents and more often than not dominated discussions with state governors and lesser officials. These contacts, augmented by the frequent formal dinners the NCF organized, provided Gompers with that access. In his opinion, he used it well, even if he professed a certain class discomfort over the opulence of those dinners. If the price of this access was to ignore the protests from some in his own rank and file, from socialists, populists, and politically active trade unionists, to say nothing of the far less articulated pain from the mass of unorganized workers, it was a price he was willing to pay. In his opinion, defending the AFL, especially in an era of nongrowth, was the central task at the moment and the key to any future revival.

The second aspect of Gompers's strategy, moving the AFL toward overt political involvement, developed from these similar concerns. A series of court decisions between 1905 and 1909, including the Supreme Court's opinions in *Bucks' Stove and Range Co. v. American Federation of Labor* and *Loewe v. Lawlor* (the Danbury Hatters case), affirmed the prosecution of organized labor under the Sherman Anti-

Trust Act. Collectively these decisions demanded a coherent response from labor to the very real presence of the state in industrial relations. Despite the philosophy of voluntarism, Gompers could no longer ignore the political system. At first, however, he attempted to maintain the AFL's nonpartisan stance. In 1906, Gompers and other leaders presented labor's Bill of Grievances to President Theodore Roosevelt and to the Congress. Two years later, the AFL president addressed the platform committees of the two major parties' national conventions. During these years he also assigned more organizers and appropriated greater resources in an effort to reward labor's friends and punish its enemies in state and congressional elections. But political realities quickly eroded the AFL's voluntarist stance. Pragmatically, the nonpartisan component of that idea proved ineffective. The Republican party, despite the presence in it of the majority of NCF executives, rarely responded to labor's programs, and it was even hard for Gompers to get a serious hearing from Republican committees. The Democrats, on the other hand, responded more favorably, and as Gompers naturally sought to press the advantage, he found himself involved in a highly partisan alliance with the Democratic party. Philosophically as well, Gompers's commitment to voluntarism changed, despite formal pronouncements to the contrary. He recognized the involvement of the state in broad areas of labor's concern, and rather than struggling against the involvement, he searched for allies to influence its direction. While limits did exist (he refused to support government-funded unemployment compensation or social security benefits, for example), after 1910 Gompers himself perceived a broader legitimate role for the state than he had previously allowed.

As Gompers proudly recalls in his memoirs, this new approach paid handsome dividends to organized labor, its leading officials, and at far greater remove, the majority of unorganized American workers. In the last days of William Howard Taft's administration, the Republican president signed a bill establishing the Department of Labor, thus fulfilling a labor goal of many decades. But it was with the inauguration of the conservative, scholarly southern Democrat, Woodrow Wilson, as president in 1913 that Gompers's new policy came to fruition. Originally lukewarm toward Wilson's candidacy, Gompers's evaluation of Wilson soon improved. In 1914, Gompers praised Wilson without reserve for signing the Clayton Anti-Trust Act. Gompers referred to that bill as "Labor's Magna Carta" and thought it would exempt organized labor once

and for all from prosecution under antitrust statutes. A year later, Wilson signed the Seamen's Bill, which provided basic protection for those abused workers; in 1916 the Adamson Act became law and guaranteed the eight-hour day for railroad employees. Overall, Gompers was quite pleased with both his relationship with Wilson and the fruits of his new policy. He now had easy access to the White House and in Wilson found an ally in the highest ranks of politics. Not surprisingly, Gompers supported Wilson with a public fervor unknown in past campaigns during the 1916 election and took great pleasure in the fact that Wilson won reelection with strong labor backing.

This political alliance deepened with the coming of war. After winning reelection on an antiwar platform, Wilson began preparing America to enter that conflict. For his part, Gompers had relinquished his lifelong pacifist sympathies and headed the American Alliance for Labor and Democracy to bring the message of preparedness to the American worker. Gompers's role in fashioning a national prowar consensus was critical, for the opponents of American involvement were vocal and numerous. American socialists, with an influence broader than their membership totals would suggest, were surprisingly firm in their opposition. In the vast regions of the West and Southwest, nonsocialist farmers, workers, and even small businessmen rejected prowar arguments. Organized workers as well, in the rank and file if not among the AFL leadership, strengthened this antiwar sentiment. Cynics suggested that, in leading the administration's counterattack, Gompers more than repaid Wilson for past favors. But that analysis misreads a central component of Gompers's thought. Especially in light of the persistent rumors that America's immigrant population provided a breeding ground for treasonous attitudes and actions, Gompers's presentation of his prowar position as but his patriotic duty indeed makes sense. To do otherwise would simply identify *his* American movement with *those* aliens and dissenters and, in his mind, prove to the public that organized labor was not a responsible partner in modern corporate America. In a manner perhaps unforeseen, Gompers's activities during the war actually did complete his own process of Americanization. The relentless attacks upon socialists in which Gompers asserted, without evidence, that Germany "controlled" that indigenous movement; his ignoring of the ferocious antilabor motivation of the preparedness movement nationwide; the blithe approval he gave to the curtailment of the civil and political

liberties of opponents in the name of defending "democracy"—these actions point to the presence of a nativist mentality in full bloom. In the past, Samuel Gompers had frequently exhibited a deeper and richer understanding of the variety within American culture. In many ways these war years were his least admirable.

Gompers himself understood these years in a different fashion. In the AFL's participation on the National War Labor Board Gompers perceived the culmination of his long search for organizational acceptance and respectability. The board consisted of representatives of management, labor, and the public and was charged with maintaining production through avoidance of work stoppages. To achieve industrial peace, the board formally acknowledged labor's right to organize and forced employers to negotiate with the unions representing workers. Gompers reveled in the presumed recognition of labor's institutional presence in American life and took great personal delight watching the business community squirm when forced to confer with labor as equals. This experience with the board, coupled with his participation in the Versailles Peace Conference after World War I, capped his career. He had achieved a central goal, he thought, by bringing organized labor inside the corridors of power.

As he prepared his memoirs, Samuel Gompers reviewed his career with a justifiable pride. He had presided over the labor movement since its early chaotic days and, through numerous crises, shepherded it to a level of institutional stability and cohesion. This achievement occurred in an environment intensely hostile to the very idea of a union. Gompers's sharp retorts to critics who forgot this fundamental fact were to the point. Although he could not foresee the future, Gompers could nonetheless feel confident that his legacy would continue beyond his lifetime. The principles he expounded—voluntarism, trade union autonomy, business unionism—were far more than merely personal maxims. Over more than fifty years Gompers, with others, had fashioned from these principles a pragmatic labor organization that had successfully held its position against all challenges.

There is more, however, than simply justifiable pride in *Seventy Years of Life and Labor*. An awkward self-congratulatory tone pervades the autobiography. Somewhat under control in discussions of his early

years in the labor movement, where the tone is more authentic with the contemporary record, this tone noticeably increases as he recounts his battles with opponents in the Knights and socialist movement. As he turns to the twentieth century, and especially the years of the Wilson administration, this tone reaches a fever pitch. Opponents become straw figures; his insight is unerringly accurate; and the consequent benefits are obvious to all but the most obdurate. In part, this boastfulness reflects the manner in which the autobiography was written. The early sections clearly seem crafted by Gompers himself, and they remain a highly valuable account of the early movement. But as Gompers wrote his memoirs in the years immediately before his death, he was often sick and even more frequently without energy. Some of the congratulatory tone can be attributed to the work of his private secretary, who drafted and polished many of the later chapters. Gompers certainly reviewed and approved them, but it would be almost inhuman to ask a sick and aging public man to resist such fulsome praise and approval. But there is another, more substantive explanation of this boastfulness.

Had Gompers written his memoirs in late 1919 or early 1920, instead of a few years later, he might have felt less need to congratulate himself. At that earlier point, the victories wrought during the war period still appeared intact. Although his ally Woodrow Wilson was seriously ailing and the National War Labor Board was no longer in existence, Gompers had little cause to doubt labor's vitality. The Democratic party still perceived the AFL as a valued, if subordinate, ally, and Gompers himself retained his extensive corporate contacts. More to the point, AFL membership continued to grow. Between 1916 and 1919, in large part as a result of the wartime government support, the AFL ranks increased by some 57 percent. A year later, although the wartime structure was largely dismantled, membership still rose another 25 percent as the AFL represented more than four million members for the first time in its history. But that would be the federation's highest point until the eve of the next world war. A slight decline began in 1921, and by Gompers's death in 1924, membership had fallen some 30 percent from the 1920 level. Certain unions, especially in mining and the metal trades, feared for their existence.

The reasons for this decline in membership, and an even more dramatic decline in the standard of living for many skilled and non-skilled workers during the 1920s, are complex. Collectively, however,

they call into question certain fundamental aspects of Gompers's principles. That long-sought acceptance from the corporate community now seemed a doubtful strategy. Across the country employers, large and small, prepared to roll back labor's wartime gains, and Gompers himself, as he notes in his memoirs, could not even obtain a reply from his erstwhile NCF colleague, Judge Gary, to a request for a meeting during the great 1919 steel strike. By 1920 this business attitude formalized into a nationwide open shop drive. Presented to the public as the American Plan, it was more than simply another antiunion campaign. At the heart of the American Plan was a political and cultural attack on the very idea of labor unions couched in the argument, alternatively subtle or blunt, that workers' organizations were by definition un-American. Not only were his corporate contacts distinctly unsupportive in this era, but the pride Gompers took in them appeared, at the least, misplaced. To seek an alliance with an opponent who would rather deny your right to exist was a dubious proposition.

The postwar years treated Gompers's political record with a similar harshness. With the end of the war, and Wilson's preoccupation with the peace treaty and his ensuing sickness, the AFL lost its most influential ally. Gompers still received a polite hearing in Democratic party councils, but at the national level at least, candidates after Wilson were anything but strong supporters of labor. Moreover, they did not win election. Recognizing this, in 1924 Gompers publicly committed his prestige and the credibility of organized labor to the independent presidential campaign of Wisconsin senator Robert La Follette. As the returns came in a month before he died, they were depressing. That La Follette did not win was not surprising, but it was disheartening that in working class wards nationwide a clear majority of the votes went to one of the major party candidates. After decades of proclaiming a policy of extreme caution in politics, Gompers found his own membership unprepared for change.

From the perspective of his career in the 1870s and 1880s, Gompers rejected certain understandings in the years after 1900, and that severely limited his ability to educate his membership. He no longer discussed the interrelationship between political and economic activity, and consequently he lost the breadth and vitality that had marked his earlier analyses of labor in America. In the mutual and bitter antagonisms between the AFL leader and the nation's varied populists and socialists,

moreover, an opportunity was squandered to more forcibly present an alternative program for national debate. His earlier insistence on the necessity of developing workers' economic power before entering the political arena had also changed in practice. Elated over the passage of the Clayton Anti-Trust Act in 1914, Gompers could only listen in anger as the 1917 *Hitchman* decision once again exposed labor to antitrust litigation. Even more pointed was the wartime experience. In less than two years the AFL went from a period of high, government-aided growth to the start of a decade-long decline. As Gompers had earlier stated so frequently, it was folly to rely on government if workers themselves were neither fully organized nor self-conscious.

This narrowing of vision was the Achilles' heel in Gompers's often admirable career. In a certain way, Gompers became trapped by the very forces he helped set in motion. His struggles against the self-destructive jurisdictional claims by the national craft unions is a case in point. But Gompers was also a victim of his own insecurities and desires. He exhibited a fatal attraction to the powerful and respectable in society and placed a disproportionate emphasis on the value of their approval. Conscious of his status as an outsider, despite his protestations to the contrary, he sought acceptance even at the expense of the "less respectable" segment of the work force. His attitude toward the newer immigrants suggests the dimensions of this tension. In demanding their Americanization as a precondition to his acceptance of them into the community of American labor, Gompers added his voice to the chorus from the business community that insisted there was but one acceptable definition of American citizenship. It also allowed him to insist, as he does in his autobiography, that the path he took in labor organizing was the "natural" way in contrast with the proposals of his critics. The exciting atmosphere that had marked the meetings of *Die Zehn Philosophen*, where ideas were alive and every proposal scrutinized, had thinned considerably.

Samuel Gompers remains a central figure in American history during the society's most intense capital development. The choices he made from the possibilities he perceived were of great importance at the time and still influence the organization he founded. Despite his many achievements, however, the larger aspects of the qualities of his leadership remained weak. In his search for acceptance, he jettisoned the vision of working class unity that had motivated him in the 1870s and

1880s. The K of L slogan, that "an injury to one is the concern of all," Gompers dismissed, a casualty of the polemics of the 1880s. But he might have listened to the words of a personal hero, Abraham Lincoln, who once commented that "the strongest bond of human sympathy, outside of the family relation, should be one uniting all working people, of all nations, and tongues, and kindreds." Had Samuel Gompers been able to discover the power and vitality of that American tradition, and joined to it his exemplary abilities as an organizer and administrator, his achievements and his legacy to succeeding generations might have been even more impressive.