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See also **American Federation of Labor; Gompers, Samuel**

GOMPERS, SAMUEL (1850–1924)
Founder, American Federation of Labor

Labor leader a voter—Samuel Gompers, president of the American Federation of Labor, casting his ballot in his home district. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division [LC-USZ62-117862].

Samuel Gompers, founder and president of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) for 37 years, was both extraordinary and exemplary of many skilled workers during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Born into a family of Dutch Jewish immigrants in London in 1850, Gompers attended four years of school before leaving formal education to join his father on the benches of a cigar shop at the age of 10. In 1863, the entire Gompers family used the Cigar Makers' Society of England's emigration fund to immigrate to New York City. Arriving at the New York City docks in the midst of the Draft Riot of July 1863, the Gompers family settled into a typical immigrant existence in New York. The Gompers men, including young Sam, soon found employment as cigar makers and joined the U.S. cigar makers' union. At the age of 17, Gompers married Sophia Julian, who proceeded to give birth to at least nine children.

Like many other young immigrants, the teenaged Sam Gompers quickly became immersed in New York City's immigrant, intellectual, and fraternal life. From 1863–1880, Gompers belonged to, and participated in, the early Cigar Makers' International Union (CMIU), the Ancient Order of Foresters, the Independent Order of Odd Fellows, the Knights of Labor, the International Workingmen's Association, Felix Adler's Ethical Culture Society, the debating club at Cooper Union, and many others. Though Gompers generally eschewed organized religion, his Jewish background gave him another level on which to identify with the Jewish immigrants pouring into Manhattan's industries at the time. From this mix of influences, Gompers began to develop his ideas about the best form and function possible for unions.

The young Gompers quickly became active in the CMIU, both locally and nationally. During the 1870s, he managed the union's aggressive campaign to abolish tenement house cigar making in New York City, ultimately achieved through the passage of state legislation making such production illegal. Gompers carried the insights and skills he had gained in the anti-tenement-house fight in the CMIU into the new attempt at a national organization of unions, the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions (FOTLU), in 1881 becoming the head of FOTLU's legislative branch.

In 1886, Gompers attended the Ohio meeting that transformed FOTLU into the AFL. Based in large part on his reputation as head of FOTLU's only effective branch, the assembled union delegates elected Gompers to the presidency of the new organization.

He would be re-elected to that position every year except one up until his death in 1924.

Gompers often spoke of the lessons he learned from one of his early coworkers and mentors, Ferdinand Laurrell. In his autobiography, Gompers wrote, "Time and again, under the lure of new ideas, I went to Laurrell with glowing enthusiasm. Laurrell would gently say, 'Study your union card, Sam, and if the idea doesn't square with that, it isn't true.' My trade union card came to be my standard in all new problems" (*Seventy Years of Life and Labor: An Autobiography,* 1925). Throughout his life, Gompers used this concept to make decisions about both his own actions and those of other unions and their leaders.

Gompers brought his experiences in the CMIU into the AFL and based many of his early actions and decisions in that organization on his old mentor's advice. Throughout his years in leadership of the AFL, he would stress the importance of the autonomy of individual national unions and their need to focus on economic goals and fiscal stability. From his own union experiences, Gompers truly believed in the efficacy of craft unionism, the organization of workers along occupational lines, the establishment of a system of dues and corresponding benefits, and the necessity for union leaders to maintain control over the actions of their members and therefore over the payment of such things as strike benefits. Along with these principles came Gompers's defense of the autonomy and jurisdictions of the individual national unions. In this view the AFL itself was supposed to be a helpful support for national unions and those workers hoping to establish such unions. In return Gompers expected those unions and their members to demonstrate the kind of careful self-discipline he himself had learned in the CMIU.

In the early years of the AFL, Gompers and his fellow AFL officers succeeded in large part in carrying out this vision of American unionism. Faced with an economy still dependent on the skills of a minority of workers within the working class, the ideals of craft unionism worked to protect and maintain unions for these workers who could afford craft union dues. Gompers also believed in the early years that this basic structure of unionism could simply be extended to workers in other less-skilled occupations. Unskilled laborers, semiskilled factory workers, women, African-Americans, and immigrants could all achieve successful organization if they just followed the pattern set by the skilled-craft unions. This required first and foremost that these workers be prepared to keep up the payment of regular dues to their union and that they then accept the control of the union over fiscal disbursements. While Gompers could at times express sympathy with those workers who could not afford to pay dues at the level paid by skilled workers, his sympathy often ended with the belief that they simply could not be "good union members of good unions." Without financial stability and tight fiscal discipline, the craft unions of Gompers's vision would not survive.

Gompers's early years in New York also set the roots of his attitudes about strike mediation and negotiations. Tied closely to his conception of union self-discipline, Gompers believed that the most constructive resolutions of strikes came out of a bilateral discussion of the workers' interests. The presentation and debate of strike issues would create greater understanding by both sides. The resulting compromises and agreements provided what Gompers believed to be the most lasting conclusions to strikes, contributing to an increasingly solid base for future union demands and negotiations. Accordingly Gompers spent considerable amounts of time presenting himself as a mediator for unions in strike situations. Whether he was dealing with garment workers in New York or workers elsewhere, Gompers would attempt to set forward strikers' demands to employers in as rational a manner as possible. Once Gompers or some other union leader successfully worked out a compromise, Gompers expected union members to understand the importance of union stability and ratify the agreement accordingly. Later in the AFL's history, Gompers would carry this concept over into his dealings with the National Civic Federation when he became one of the first union leaders to join this national organization, which sought to mediate labor disputes before they erupted into open conflict.

At the fourteenth annual convention of the AFL in 1894, the always-simmering debates over socialism within the organization boiled over into open and often rancorous disputation. In the heated political atmosphere of the preceding year, the 1893 convention had asked member unions to vote on a detailed "political programme" for the national organization, the platform of which included Plank 10, calling for "the collective ownership by the people of all means of production and distribution." Gompers led the charge against the programme and particularly Plank 10 at the 1894 convention, contributing to the ultimate defeat of both. The other planks of the programme were ratified, leaving the organization with a range of issues to address but without an official political stance. In the aftermath of the two-day-long debate, the convention voted to replace Gompers with John McBride of the United Mine Workers as president of the AFL.

Gompers's one-year hiatus from the presidency ultimately led to several important changes in the AFL itself. Gompers would spend the year traveling

both internationally to meet with various European trade union leaders and nationally to continue to support U.S. workers' organizing efforts. His meetings with British and other European unionists provided Gompers with additional examples of the benefits of constructive craft unionism and the drawbacks of irresponsible socialism. Travel throughout the United States and in particular, a long southern swing on behalf of the United Garment Workers, reinforced Gompers's basic beliefs about union organization: Organization along craft or trade lines coupled with the financial responsibility and organizational self-discipline of both workers and their unions. Throughout his life Gompers would not waver from these concepts. Neither would he countenance vacillations on the part of the AFL itself. In many ways this marks the beginning of his growing conservatism over questions of union structure and form.

During Gompers's sabbatical year, as he called it, McBride moved the AFL's headquarters to Indianapolis, Indiana, far from Gompers's original base in New York. When the AFL re-elected Gompers to its presidency at the convention of 1895, Gompers temporarily moved to Indianapolis to take back the office. He did not move his family from New York City at this time, believing that this first year back with the AFL would prove the organization's fate. On re-election again in 1896, Gompers, firm now in his conviction that the AFL had chosen to follow his vision of trade unionism, moved the headquarters to Washington, D.C., in 1897. In so doing Gompers affirmed his belief in the endurance of the AFL as an actor, both economically and politically, on the national stage.

Biographer Bernard Mandel suggested that "Gompers's trade union policy for the twentieth century marked the end of the A.F. of L.'s youthful militancy and the beginning of its conservative middle age" (B. Mandel, *Samuel Gompers, A Biography*, 1963). When Gompers moved the AFL headquarters (and his family) to Washington in 1897, he himself was 47 years old, the father of six, and the leader of the most powerful organization of workers in the country. Gompers had more than 30 years' experience in the union movement by this time. His future efforts on behalf of the AFL and its members would continue to be based on these early experiences. Fewer and fewer men would be able to shake him in his beliefs.

The years immediately preceding the AFL's move to Washington had seen a growing number of judicial moves against the union movement. In Gompers's first years in Washington, legal decisions became increasingly important in his work. Gompers had been wary of employers' use of injunctions dating from the early 1890s. In fact this wariness had led him to oppose the passage of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act in 1890. Despite many unionists' support for the act, Gompers insisted that it was written in such a way that it would be used against unions. He had then had to grapple with the invocation of the act against unions time and time again. In Gompers's eyes, the entire legal system became suspect. In the early twentieth century, Gompers would become entangled in two key court cases: That of the Danbury Hatters and that of Buck's Stove and Range Co. In both cases national business organizations provoked and supported the lawsuits. Both cases also would ultimately land in the Supreme Court. These cases as well as his own legal liabilities in each helped convince Gompers that the AFL had to enter politics in order to obtain relief from the power of injunctions.

On March 21, 1906, Gompers and other AFL representatives presented an eight-point Bill of Grievances to President Theodore Roosevelt, the speaker of the house, and the president *pro tem* of the Senate. All three politicians immediately rejected its consideration. Prepared for this reaction, the AFL threw itself into political activity. While they did not desert completely their previous nonpartisan stance, Gompers and other union leaders began to take a much stronger political stand than they had previously. Gompers had already stated his opinion that the unions should "Reward [their] friends and punish [their] enemies." This basic belief would now be carried out with much more vigor. In the summer of 1908, Gompers would appear before the platform committees of both the Republican and Democratic national conventions, failing to influence the Republican party but succeeding in gaining some support from the Democrats.

Unlike the political programme of 12 years earlier, the 1906 Bill of Grievances contained no overtly socialist points. Gompers assured friends and colleagues that economic activities remained the prime purpose of the labor movement and that these political demands would never detract from the efforts of constructive trade unionism. The AFL's entrance into the political arena in 1906 provided a model for union voluntarism, or careful nonpartisan political participation. Rather than highlighting the AFL's long and tortured relationship with socialists, the 1906 Bill of Grievances represented more its newfound points of complicity with the Progressive movement of the time. Ultimately this political move would lead Gompers to endorse Woodrow Wilson for president in 1914 and thereby ensure Gompers's ultimate involvement in World War I planning and execution.

At the same time that Gompers and the AFL were becoming increasingly involved in politics, a new labor organization was creating new problems for

the craft union movement. The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), established in 1905, contained many of the ideas (and individuals) from the Left that Gompers had come to hate most heatedly. On top of calling for an end to capitalism and advocating sabotage and violence if necessary, the IWW also threatened to organize less-skilled workers into unions, embodying the antithesis of Gompers's constructive craft unions. Garnering considerable publicity through their innovative tactics, the IWW quickly became widely known and discussed. Gompers probably felt personally threatened by the IWW's new tactics and publicity. The IWW's penchant for violence in language if nothing else as well as its pacifist stance toward World War I would soon place the organization even more at odds with Gompers and the AFL. Newly linked with a sitting U.S. president, Gompers would support the U.S. efforts in the war and encourage AFL unions and their members to cooperate with war efforts both military and industrial. Mirroring President Wilson's path into the world war, Gompers moved through neutrality to preparedness and finally endorsed the United States becoming a belligerent in the war. Through cooperation with the war efforts, Gompers expected the AFL to gain respect from all sides: The public, government, and businesses. He would advise the White House on labor conflicts in the United States during the war, oppose the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, and travel through the war zone in Europe.

Did Gompers feel that his cooperation with the war effort had been worth the effort? While he would continue to defend his wartime work, the events of the immediate postwar years belie his generally rosy view. The War Labor Board was discontinued after the war ended, and the new Communist Party U.S.A. would soon become a hotbed of dual unionism. In 1924, Gompers supported Robert La Follette's independent campaign for president as a protest against the established parties' continued spurning of the AFL's support. By the end of the war in 1919, Gompers was 69 years old. His vision was failing and his hearing weakening. His wife suffered a stroke that year, dying in May of 1920. Gompers then married a divorcee some 30 years his junior in 1921. By all accounts, she made his life miserable for his remaining years.

Gompers would continue to run the AFL, refusing to let any but his closest friends and employees know of his weakening health. In November 1924, Gompers presided over every session of the Forty-Fourth Annual Convention of the AFL in El Paso, Texas, his last. For months he had been declining from kidney problems and a weakening heart. He knew this would be his final convention. William Green read Gompers's prepared statement for him at the convention's opening. In this statement, Gompers reminded delegates that he had been with the AFL since its beginnings in 1881 and urged them to remain committed to his vision of craft unionism. On adjournment the entire convention went to Mexico City for the inauguration of the first labor President in North America and the ensuing Pan American Federation of Labor meeting. On December 8, Gompers took to his bed. He was then rushed back to San Antonio, Texas, where he died on December 13. He was buried in Tarrytown, New York, on December 18, 1924.

ILEEN A. DEVAULT

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See also **American Federation of Labor; American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations; Craft Unionism; Industrial Workers of the World**

GRADUATE TEACHING ASSISTANTS

Graduate teaching assistants (TAs), along with other forms of contingent academic labor, such as adjunct or part-time instructors, have become increasingly important in the modern university. According to the American Association of University Professors, the number of graduate students who also serve as classroom instructors rose by 35% from 1975 to 2000. As the number of graduate students employed as teaching assistants and instructors has grown, a movement in favor of organizing TAs into unions has arisen. While the earliest TA union was founded in the late sixties at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (UWM), this phenomenon did not become common until the 1990s. Today academia is one of the few areas of union growth, and the movement to organize graduate students has led to jurisdictional disputes, especially between the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the United Auto Workers (UAW).