

# Samuel Gompers Defends Labor Unions

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*Samuel Gompers rose to fame as the president of the American Federation of Labor. These lines are condensed from a famous letter he wrote in 1894. A judge had spoken against the strategy of collective action (such as strikes) by workers and labor unions. This is part of Samuel Gompers's response to the judge:*

You know, or ought to know, that the introduction of machinery is turning into idleness [unemployment] thousands, faster than new industries are founded. The laborer is a man, he is made warm by the same sun and made cold – yes, colder – by the same winter as you. He has a heart and brain, and feels and knows the human and paternal [father] instinct for those depending on him as keenly as you.

What shall the workers do? Sit idly by and see the vast resources of nature and the human mind be utilized and monopolized for the benefit of the comparative few?

No. The laborers must learn to think and act, and soon, too, that only by the power of organization and common action can their manhood be maintained, their rights to work be recognized, and liberty and rights secured.

I am not one of those who regards the entire past as a failure. I recognize the progress made and the improved conditions of which nearly the entire civilized world are the beneficiaries.

I ask you to explain, however, how it is that thousands of able-bodied, willing, earnest men and women are suffering the pangs of hunger? We may boast of our wealth and civilization, but to the hungry man and woman and child our progress is a hollow mockery, our civilization a sham, and our “national wealth” a chimera [fantasy].

You recognize that the industrial forces set in motion by steam and electricity have changed the structure of our civilization. You evidently have observed the growth of corporate wealth and influence.

You recognize that wealth, in order to become more highly productive, is concentrated into fewer hands, and yet you sing the old song that the workingman should depend entirely upon his own “individual effort.”

If, as you say, the success of society depends on the full play of competition, why do you not turn your attention and your attacks against the trusts [monopolies] and corporations?



Investigate the sweating dens of the large cities. Go to the mills, factories, through the country. Visit the tenement houses or hovels in which thousands of

workers are compelled to eke out an existence.

Are you aware that all the legislation ever secured for the ventilation or safety of mines, factory or workshop is the result of the efforts of organized labor?

In conclusion, let me assure you that labor will organize, and achieve for humanity a nobler manhood, a more beautiful womanhood, and a happier childhood.

- Questions:**
1. In the first paragraph, how does Gompers describe laborers?
  2. Gompers admits business has created progress. What, then, is his concern?
  3. What does Gompers say workers must do to improve their situation?

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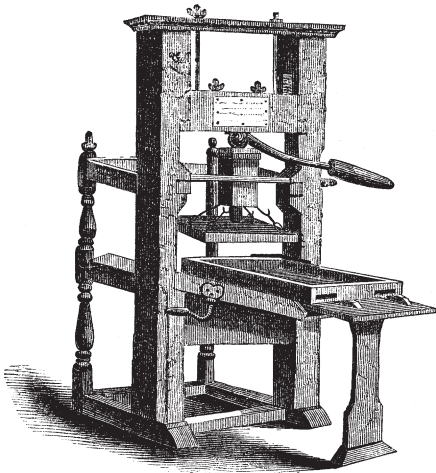
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