

# Samuel Gompers

## The founding father of the AFL

**A**t the turn of the last century, workers were flexing their muscles by joining labor unions for various employers or crafts. But it was a patchwork of efforts, without a broader labor organization to support them. So early labor leaders tried to grow labor's power by bringing these new unions together.

A union activist named Samuel Gompers succeeded by founding the first permanent American union alliance, which would later become the AFL-CIO.

Gompers was born in London to a Jewish family from the Dutch city of Amsterdam. They changed their name from Gumpertz when they moved to New York City in 1863. Samuel was 13, and a year later, he joined the Cigar Makers Local Union No. 15, using skills learned from his father to roll cigars.

Young Samuel enjoyed the cigar trade and developed his skills. He found a wife as well—at 17, he married a co-worker, 16-year-old Sophia Julian. They had 12 children, though only six survived to adulthood.

But it was a move to a new cigar shop, a union shop owned by a German immigrant sympathetic to the labor cause, that led him to union activism. There, he met a former secretary of the International Workingmen's Association—an early group of united labor activists—who inspired Gompers to become a union activist.

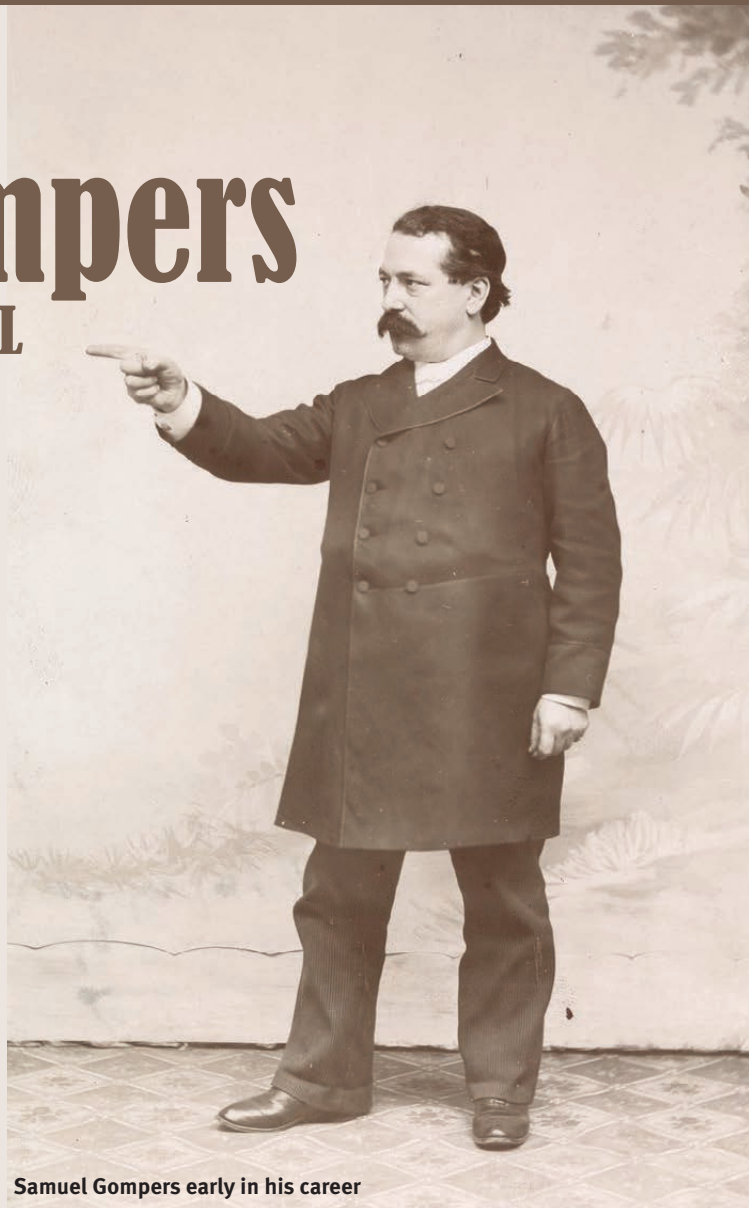
Gompers rose in the ranks to become president of the Cigar Makers' International Union Local 144 in 1875, in his mid-20s. A national financial crisis saw unemployment soar and the threat of workers desperate for even subsistence pay threatened to destroy the union.

Gompers saved it by introducing a high dues structure that helped pay out-of-work benefits, sick benefits and death benefits for union members in good standing.

In 1883, Gompers convinced then-New York Gov. Theodore Roosevelt to support a bill banning cigar-making in tenement housing, by bringing Roosevelt to tenements to witness the horrible conditions of the workers, many of them children. But the New York Supreme Court overturned the law in 1895. Stung by this rebuke, Gompers turned to economic, rather than legislative, strategies. He focused on boosting workers' economic power through collective bargaining instead of relying on political action.

With that idea in mind, he helped to establish the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions. When it reorganized in 1886 as the American Federation of Labor (AFL), Gompers was elected its first president.

The new federation, which would soon take the place of the International Workingmen's Association and Knights of Labor, embraced the model of different unions for different trades,



Samuel Gompers early in his career

a system that labor mostly follows today. This model helped unions grow, but it also tended to divide workers by class and race.

Gompers called for workers to make a livable wage, have shorter hours and have safe working conditions, which would raise the standard of living for all. During a period of unrest during the early-1890s recession, he told 25,000 unemployed workers in Chicago:

Why should the wealth of the country be stored in banks and elevators while the idle workman wanders homeless about the streets and the idle loafers who hoard the gold only to spend it on

riotous living are rolling about in fine carriages from which they look out on peaceful meetings and call them riots?

“When workers’ wages are reduced, they necessarily use less, consume less, because of their reduced purchasing power,” he later wrote. “Only those who ignorantly or grabblingly believe in their avarice that business can prosper with wage reductions have yet to learn the lesson of industrial life and progress.”

Beginning in 1890, Congress passed antitrust laws to check the power of corporations, but some employers turned the laws against unions. When employers began using antitrust laws to sue labor unions and individual union members for striking, the AFL helped convince Congress to pass the Clayton Antitrust Act in 1914, which declared strikes and boycotts legal.

Gompers wasn’t finished with politics. During World War I, President Woodrow Wilson appointed Gompers to the Council of National Defense, where he helped mobilize labor support for the war. Gompers convinced the Wilson administration, for the first time in U.S. history, to declare explicit government support for independent trade unions and collective bargaining. Labor union membership nearly doubled by the end of the war.

After the war, at the Versailles Peace Conference, Wilson appointed Gompers to the Commission on International Labor Legislation. Through this appointment, Gompers helped create what would become the International Labor Organization, which later became a United Nations agency devoted to protecting labor rights worldwide.

While Gompers was a skilled organizer and strategist, he never lost the sense of basic justice that unions represented. He proclaimed to corpora-

tions at a congressional committee in 1911:

You are our employers, not our masters. Under the system of government we have in the United States, we are your equals, and we contribute as much, if not more, to the success of industry than do the employers.

While Gompers is remembered as a pivotal leader who brought labor into the modern world, he also sometimes embraced the racist attitudes of the day instead of fighting against them. His targets included Black and Chinese workers, both immigrants and American citizens, and excluded or segregated union members based on race.

Gompers’s work set the stage for the strengthening of labor rights as part of President Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal programs during the Great Depression, and then for the 1955 merger of the AFL with the Congress of Industrial Organizations, a labor coalition founded in 1935, to form the AFL-CIO. Labor unions also went on to shed the racist policies Gompers encouraged, and to fight for civil rights.

But Gompers would not live to see these important events, as he died in 1924 at age 74. At his death, he had led the AFL for four decades.

Gompers circa 1910



Gompers wrote in 1912 the following about the goal of unions:

And what have our unions done? What do they aim to do? To improve the standard of life, to uproot ignorance and foster education, to instill character, manhood and independent spirit among our people; to bring about a recognition of the interdependence of man upon his fellow man. We aim to establish a normal work-day, to take the children from the factory and workshop and give them the opportunity of the school and the playground. In a word, our unions strive to lighten toil, educate their members, make their homes more cheerful, and in every way contribute an earnest effort toward making life the better worth living. **PR**