

# Gompers Tells His Own Story

A Review by Charles R. Walker

*SEVENTY YEARS OF LIFE AND LABOR. An Autobiography. By Samuel Gompers. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co. Two volumes. \$10.00.*

**A** GREAT labor leader, like a great statesman, must find and fuse in himself opposite and contradictory powers. And Nature permits only a few for a generation. The man who would pour the restless powers of labor into permanent achievement must combine something of the heart and gifts of an agitator — to use an unhappily degraded word — with the conservatism of a banker, and the patient diplomacy of an Oriental statesman. Samuel Gompers had these qualities, and became the major builder of the American labor movement, president of the American Federation of Labor forty-two times, patriarch of American labor. By the end of 1923, he completed his autobiography, which is at the same time a story of American social movements, and a history of American labor for the past fifty years. One year later he died.

Although the book is jammed with facts, names, economics, and history, all of it is strongly colored by a dramatic personality. Policies, theories of law and labor seem to become character data, and one gets at once an impression of richness, of drama, and of philosophic unity. Here is cloth out of which it is easy to cut a story, not of the growth of American labor, but of the growth of Gompers with his mixture of shrewdness, fire, energy, and love of men, his hatred of socialism and prohibition, his passion for justice.

**S**AMUEL GOMPERS came from a Jewish family — Gomperz. Elias Gomperz founded one of the largest banks in the Prussian state. Of another branch, the labor leader remarks, "Various members became renowned statesmen, rabbis, merchants, brokers, publishers, dramatic critics." It was into an impoverished branch of this family in the slums of London that Samuel Gompers was born. A few years later the family moved to New York. By fourteen he had joined the Cigar Makers' Union and was working regularly at his trade; at seventeen, by way of celebrating his birthday, he married; by eighteen he became a father. The picture that stands out of these pages of autobiography is of an East Side youngster jammed with animal spirits. The young Gompers organized athletic clubs, and lodges of fraternal orders.

The great strikes of '77 which started among the railway workers and spread to other trades had the profoundest influence upon Gompers' development. The union,

and he along with it, made terrific sacrifices in the strike. He records an expenditure of \$1,200 a day by the national union — an unprecedented sum in those days. The strike was lost, but the technique of organization and the lesson of loyalty stayed with him for life.

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unions of the miners and the textile workers. No great strike, no law, political program, social movement that touched labor, but his influence was somehow felt. As the power of the A. F. of L. grew, he found himself consulted by men of wealth and position, his advice sought by Presidents of the United States. It is characteristic of him that he guarded himself from any action that might be interpreted as disloyalty to his class, or the movement he represented. When he conferred with Vincent Astor or Charles R. Flint or other alleged enemies of labor, he always took another labor man with him, and made it a practice not to eat at their homes. This prohibition, he slyly adds, did not extend to cigars if they were good ones.

The war years saw a tremendous expansion in the trade-union movement, and vast responsibilities with large official honors for the president of the A. F. of L. Gompers unquestionably was a sincere pro-Ally, and pro-war American.

**H**E writes of after-war years with a hint of disillusionment. The veteran leader is hammered now from two camps. The open-shop drive to cripple unionism is taken up by the employers, and progressives in the unions themselves fight the veteran president as a reactionary. New forces within the labor movement attack with increasing vigor his favorite "fundamentals": craft unionism, anti-socialism, a "nonpartisan" political program. But he maintains his grip to the end. In 1924, he is reelected president of the A. F. of L. a few days before his death.

Through all these pages that record the details of organization work, the growth of principle and policy, it is easy to see the lusty body and spirit of a man living fully. Gompers was an inveterate preacher of organization and a passionate prophet of individualism at the same time. He believed that organizations should be voluntary and their growth unrestrained, having in mind the trusts of big business as well as the organization of the trade-union. In his personal life he hated restraint, permitting himself freedom for his natural impulses, and spending himself in his work recklessly and without stint. The principles of his life and philosophy were rooted in emotional conviction, though in carrying them out he was capable of a high order of intellectual effort, of craft, and subtlety, of immense industry and patience. The autobiography is not only a chronicle and commentary upon the American labor movement, but the life story of a rugged and subtle spirit, one of the major builders of social structure.



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"Patriarch of American labor"

part in initiating the series of congresses that resulted ultimately in the formation of the A. F. of L. In '86 the Federation voted that the president should devote all his time to his office. Gompers was elected. It was a doubtful and precarious position. The first office of the Federation, he tells us with clearly a prideful consciousness of the contrast with Labor Temple, Washington, was about ten feet by eight. He paid \$2.00 for a second-hand desk; the files were empty tomato cans.

**T**HROUGH the long years that follow, as president of the A. F. of L., he became associated with every important labor development in America. He investigated tenement conditions in New York, and fought for a pioneer tenement house law to prevent the manufacture of cigars in tenements. He assisted in the organization of the great international