“What Does the Working Man Want?” (1890)
Samuel L. Gompers

While small groups of workers were organizing as early as the 1790s, the first union to attract national membership was the Knights of Labor, founded in 1869. It included both skilled and unskilled workers. When the union organized a successful strike against a railroad company in 1885, its membership grew rapidly. The following year, however, brought disaster. A meeting was held in Haymarket Square in Chicago to protest the death of several workers during the strike. It is believed (but has not been proven) that a group of political agitators, whose actions had not been authorized by the Knights of Labor, joined the crowd and threw a bomb at the police. In the resulting violence, four strikers and seven police officers were killed. This 1886 event, called the Haymarket Riot, destroyed the reputation and effectiveness of the union. Many of its members left to join a new organization called the American Federation of Labor (A.F. of L.).

The A.F. of L. was founded in 1886. It organized only skilled workers in craft unions. Federation leaders felt that, since employers could easily replace unskilled workers during a strike, these workers would not have enough bargaining power to make them valuable union members. The union also excluded African Americans, women, and recent immigrants. Samuel L. Gompers, a cigar-maker by trade, was the A.F. of L.’s president from 1886 to 1924. He was against militant unionism as a way to gain labor’s goals. During World War I, he directed the War Committee on Labor and did much to make unionism acceptable to the American public. In the following excerpt from a speech delivered in 1890, Gompers explains the goals of the A.F. of L.
... Why, when you reduce the hours of labor, say an hour a day, just think what it means. Suppose men who work ten hours a day had the time lessened to nine, or men who work nine hours a day have it reduced to eight hours; what does it mean? It means millions of golden hours and opportunities for thought. Some men might say you will go to sleep. Well, some men might sleep sixteen hours a day; the ordinary man might try that, but he would soon find he could not do it long. He would have to do something. He would probably go to the theater one night, to a concert another night, but he could not do that every night. He would probably become interested in some studies and the hours that have been taken from manual labor are devoted to mental labor, and the mental labor of one hour will produce for him more wealth than the physical labor of a dozen hours. [Applause]

What we want to consider is, first, to make our employment more secure, and, secondly, to make wages more permanent, and, thirdly, to give these poor people a chance to work.

We want eight hours and nothing less. We have been accused of being selfish, and it has been said that we will want more; that last year we got an advance of ten cents and now we want more. We do want more. You will find that a man generally wants more. Go and ask a tramp what he wants, and if he doesn’t want a drink he will want a good, square meal. You ask a workingman, who is getting two dollars a day, and he will say that he wants ten cents more. Ask a man who earns five dollars a day and he will want fifty cents more. The man who receives five thousand dollars a year wants six thousand dollars a year, and the man who owns eight or nine hundred thousand dollars will want a hundred thousand dollars more to make it a million, while the man who has his millions will want every thing he can lay his hands on and then raise his voice against the poor devil who wants ten cents more a day. We live in the latter part of the Nineteenth century. In the age of electricity and steam that has produced wealth a hundred fold, we insist that it has been brought about by the intelligence and energy of the workingmen, and while we find that it is now easier to produce it is harder to live. We do want more, and when it becomes more, we shall still want more. [Applause] And we shall never cease to demand more until we have received the results of our labor.
Review Questions

1. Which workers were accepted into the A.F. of L.?
2. How was Samuel Gompers able to make unionism more acceptable to the American public?
3. Why do you think Gompers claimed that the A.F. of L.'s first consideration was "to make employment more secure"?
4. In what way did Gompers suggest that shorter workdays would benefit workers?
5. Why did Gompers suggest that laborers are always entitled to more money?

*Was Gompers being undemocratic or just realistic in accepting only skilled workers into the A.F. of L.? Explain your answer.*

*How could members of a labor union today use the ideas expressed by Gompers to negotiate a new contract?*