

## ***The American Labor Movement: Its Makeup, Achievements and Aspirations, by Samuel Gompers (1914)***

*Samuel Gompers co-founded the American Federation of Labor (AFL, or A.F. of L. below) in 1886, and he served as its president for most of the period until 1924. He composed this document at a time when the AFL was prospering, claiming almost 2 million members. World War I would soon begin in Europe, although the United States would not formally declare war until 1917.*

The Federation covers practically the whole field of industry. There are no limitations as to membership. The only requirement, so far as the A. F. of L. is concerned, is that the organization desiring affiliation shall be composed of wage-earners. . . .

The affiliated organizations are held together by moral obligation, a spirit of camaraderie, a spirit of group patriotism, a spirit of mutual assistance.

There are no coercive methods used by the A. F. of L. to prevent the withdrawal or secession of any affiliated organization. . . .

Similarly, no coercion is used in regard to national organizations which are not affiliated to the A. F. of L. We feel that it is the duty of every wage-worker to belong to the union of his trade or calling; that it is the duty of the local union of a trade or calling to belong to the national or international union of that trade or calling; and that it is equally the moral duty of every national or international organization of bona fide workingmen to belong to the A. F. of L. But coercive methods are never employed. . . .

Recognizing the fact that associated effort is of greater influence and power to secure a given object than is individual effort the first purpose toward which the A. F. of L. directs its efforts is the encouragement of trade and labor unions and the closer federation of such unions. . . . They aim at the protection of the rights and the interests of the members and of all working people, the promotion and the advancement of their economic, political, and social rights. They aim to make life better worth living in our day. . . . In a word, the organizations leave no effort untried by which the working people may find betterment in any field of human activity. . . .

The A. F. of L. is in favor of a shorter workday, and a progressive decrease of working hours in keeping with the development of machinery and the use of productive forces. The Federation has recognized the need for greater opportunities and more time for rest, leisure and cultivation among the workers. . . . We insist upon one entire day of rest in each week. . . .

The Federation favors securing more effective inspection of workshops, factories, and mines, and has worked for the accomplishment of that purpose.

The Federation does not favor the employment of children under 16 years of age and has endeavored to forbid such employment.

It favors forbidding interstate transportation of the products of convict labor and the products of all uninspected factories and mines. . . .

There is now a current movement to increase wages by a proposal to determine a minimum wage by political authorities. It is a maxim in law that once a court is given jurisdiction over an individual it has the power, the field, and authority to exercise that jurisdiction. . . . An attempt to entrap the American workmen into a species of slavery, under guise of an offer of this character is resented by the men and women of the American trade union movement.

When the question of fixing, by legal enactment, minimum wages for women was before the Executive Council of the A. F. of L. for investigation and discussion, and subsequently before the convention of the A. F. of L., there was

a great diversion of views. . . . In my judgment the proposal to establish by law a minimum wage for women, though well meant, is a curb upon the rights, the natural development, and the opportunity for development of the women employed in the industries of our country. . . .

The A. F. of L. encourages the practice of its various affiliated organizations in endeavoring to secure a shorter workday by means of collective agreements with employers in the various industries, but it opposes reaching the same result by means of a law binding upon all employers in a given state, or throughout the union. If there were a movement and a possibility of establishing an eight-hour workday and a minimum wage by legal enactment throughout the land, the Federation would oppose such policies, because it has in a large measure accomplished the same purposes and will accomplish them by the initiative of the associations or the organizations and by the grit and courage of the manhood and womanhood of the men and women of the A. F. of L. That these results have been accomplished through the initiative and voluntary association of the workers precludes the question of having legal enactment for the same purpose. In addition, the giving of jurisdiction to government and to governmental agencies is always dangerous when it comes to governing the working people. . . .

The A. F. of L. encourages and stimulates the workmen in their efforts to secure a constantly increasing share in the products of labor, an increasing share in the consumption and use of things produced, thereby giving employment to the unemployed, the only effective way by which that can be done. . . .

In improving conditions from day to day the organized labor movement has no "fixed program" for human progress. If you start out with a program everything must conform to it. With theorists, if facts do not conform to their theories, then so much the worse for the facts. Their declarations of theories and actions refuse to be hampered by facts. We do not set any particular standard, but work for the best possible conditions immediately obtainable for the workers. When they are obtained then we strive for better.

It does not require any elaborate social philosophy or great discernment to know that a wage of \$3 a day and a workday of eight hours in sanitary workshops are better than \$2.50 a day and a workday of twelve hours under perilous conditions. The working people will not stop when any particular point is reached; they will never stop in their efforts to obtain a better life for themselves, for their wives, for their children, and for all humanity. The object is to attain complete social justice.

The Socialist party has for its purpose the abolition of the present system of wages. Many employers agree with that purpose--the abolition of wages. But the A. F. of L. goes beyond the system which those dreamers have conceived.

The movement of the working people, whether under the A. F. of L. or not, will simply follow the human impulse for improvement in conditions wherever that may lead, and wherever that may lead they will go without aiming at any theoretical goal. Human impulse for self-betterment will lead constantly to the material, physical, social, and moral betterment of the people. We decline to commit our labor movement to any species of speculative philosophy. . . .

## **Document Analysis**

1. Though Gompers lists the positive "achievements and aspirations" of the AFL, he also describes what the Federation will not do. Whom might he be criticizing in these oblique references?
2. What is the position of the AFL on the minimum wage?
3. What goals does Gompers specifically list? From this short document, can you find enough information to outline the general AFL program? If so, then what would you include?