

## *Chapter Thirteen*

### LABOR UNDER FIRE

#### 1. MACHINES, WORK, AND WAGES

IN THE 1870's, GOMPERS HAD SUPPORTED THE CIGAR-makers' opposition to the mold. Although he favored the organization of the mold workers, he still hoped to protect the position of the skilled hand workers by resisting the introduction of machinery. In 1887 he supported Strasser's recommendation that the union deny the use of the union label to manufacturers using machines. However, some time during the next decade he became converted to the view that labor could not prevent the introduction of machines and should devote its efforts to securing union wages for those employed on them.

The question was first presented to him as president of the A.F. of L. in 1899. The coopers' union went on strike and levied a boycott against the Pabst Brewing Company in Milwaukee when the latter introduced barrel-making machinery. The company bought none but union-made barrels but could not get enough for its needs, and in making its own barrels it offered to employ only union men at the union scale of wages and hours. The union refused its permission, stating that it would prefer the company to buy nonunion barrels rather than to make its own by machine. The company threatened to lock out all the coopers and cancel all contracts with labor organizations unless the boycott was withdrawn. Gompers agreed that the company was blameless and that its efforts to adjust the difficulty had failed because of the irrational attitude of the union. In the face of this opposition, the union submitted and withdrew its boycott. Gompers then went to Milwaukee to help effect a permanent settlement of the dispute. He secured an agreement by the union to recognize the machine, and in return the brewers' association granted recognition to the union,

the eight-hour day, the regulation of apprentices, and a substantial increase in wages. Gompers was convinced that this action, although violating the letter of the coopers' union constitution, was justified because the alternative would have been the loss of the strike and the eventual destruction of the union.<sup>1</sup>

Gompers maintained that it was futile for organized labor to attempt to prevent the use of machinery which proved itself successful. The intelligent course for labor to follow was to accept industrial progress but insist that the machine work be given to union members at union standards and that the machine workers be brought into the union so as to protect those standards against unfair competition. Besides, the introduction of improved machinery and the greater division of labor resulting from it made for greater production of wealth, lowered the cost of production and the price of goods, and tended to raise the standard of living of all the people, providing it was accompanied by shorter hours of labor to prevent permanent displacement of workers.<sup>2</sup>

Gompers was instrumental in securing the adoption of this policy by the capmakers and printers as well as the coopers. His greatest difficulty was in convincing his own organization of its wisdom. For nearly fifty years he urged the International to abolish its membership restrictions against machine workers. The folly of its long and futile fight against machinery was finally recognized, and the union removed all obstacles in the constitution and regulations which interfered with the thorough organization of every worker in the industry.<sup>3</sup>

Gompers' slogan was, "Let the unions control the machines, rather than the machines controlling the workers." He had to combat the economic theory of the business classes which tried to tie the laborer and his wages to the machine and its output. Among the academic economists this was known as the productivity theory of wages. In the popular press it took the form of an attack on the unions for their alleged efforts to limit output. Gompers always denied that the unions deliberately attempted to restrict production and he energetically defended the capacities of American workers: "Work hard! Work harder, my Heavens! . . . [it seems] some men believed they were put on earth not only to work but to be worked, and inasmuch as they were but a very short time on earth, for Heaven's sake work them harder; you

don't know when they are going to drop off. The idea of suggesting that American men work harder!"<sup>4</sup>

Gompers devoted considerable attention to the productivity theory of wages, which was as old as classical economics but refurbished in modern, "scientific" form by a number of contemporary economists, whom Gompers preferred to call special pleaders of the capitalist class. Professor J. Lawrence Laughlin wrote an indictment of labor unions in the *Journal of Political Economy* and suggested that the alternative to unionism was greater productivity by the workers, which would bring them higher wages. Gompers pointed out that this was based on the assumption that the workers were already getting fair wages for what they produced. But since this was rarely the case, it was more logical for the workers to demand an increase which was already their due for their work and to quit if they did not obtain it. Unionism had secured wage raises in that way, proving that increased output was not always necessary to enable employers to pay higher wages. Besides, increased productivity did not automatically bring about higher wages. It would still be necessary to form unions and to strike or be ready to strike. He noted the piece-work system and the common employers' practice of reducing the rate when their employees "worked too much." In those cases, increased productivity resulted in less rather than more pay. Unions did not generally limit output, he concluded, but they tried to check practices to which greedy employers resorted to get an unconscionable amount of work out of their employees. They objected to the "pace that kills," driving labor at a rate that resulted in mental and physical collapse at the age of forty or forty-five.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, Gompers argued, the productivity theory was false because it was practically impossible to fix wages rationally to the actual production of each individual worker. Nor were wages determined by such "natural laws" as the law of supply and demand. Employers offered as little as they could induce workers to accept, and the latter demanded as much as they could persuade the former to grant. Wage rates resulted from collective bargaining and were determined by the relative bargaining strength of the opposing parties. In the course of years, labor's productivity had increased faster than real wages; the goal of



collective bargaining was to bring wages up to a fair level. The problem of the labor movement was not primarily one of production, but of more equitable distribution. For the wage theories of the professors, Gompers would substitute the claim of organized labor to a return "commensurate with the standard of life demanded by the progress and degree of civilization of the community in which [the worker] lives."<sup>6</sup>

It was not only a theory that Gompers had to contend with in securing union control over machines. "Scientific management" was introduced in industry in the early twentieth century. Frederick W. Taylor, in an address to the American Society of Mechanical Engineers in 1895, had proposed a scientific determination of work standards by time studies and rate fixing, and a differential rate system of piecework to reconcile the apparently irreconcilable wage and production aims of capital and labor. He later elaborated on this with a complex and rigid set of rules to govern the tasks, procedures, conditions, time, and payment for each job. This was done by selecting a first-class workman, fixing his maximum production as the standard, and then paying bonuses for work above that standard and applying penalties for failure to meet it. The system was based on the theory that the interests of employers and employees were mutual, that they depended on high production, that the workers should be dealt with as individuals rather than collectively, that they should have no voice in fixing standards, and that slow or recalcitrant workers should be replaced by "co-operative and loyal" workers who would act as pacemakers. It not only left no room for unionism and collective bargaining, but regarded them as a handicap if not a downright evil. For organization and co-operation it would substitute an appeal to the self-interest of each worker, playing them off against each other in the scramble for higher production and greater rewards. As for the labor leaders, Taylor regarded them all as misleaders, and of course Gompers was the greatest misleader of the lot, a "blatant demagog."<sup>7</sup>

Gompers set his face against Taylorism as a hoax with the single purpose of speeding up the workers to fantastic lengths. Until then, he wrote, it was thought that the workman's reputation as a man, his pride in his work, his necessity to make good, his fear of losing his job, even the pangs of hunger, were sufficient

incentive for him to "get a move on." But now these were deemed inadequate goads. "He must further be taken in hand and taught the most economical lifts, pushes, jumps, steps, stoops and bends, the quickest looks and thinks, the most dexterous fingering, the most supple wrist-play, the finest elbow work, and the most powerful full-arm swings, throws, blows and jerks. Withal, dangling before him are to be rewards, hanging over him are to be penalties. Then let him go it! He'll do his twentieth century best."<sup>8</sup>

Taylor set a goal of forty-seven tons a day in the handling of pig iron, but admitted that only one man in eight was physically capable of that load. Gompers denounced the effort to have men turn themselves into high-speed automatic machines and increase their output 400 per cent in order to get an increase in wages of forty per cent. The experiment to ascertain the breaking point of seven out of eight laborers, he said, "presents novelty only in its cold bloodedness and its endeavor to transfer material observations of the strength of metals to those of the strength of men's muscles and spirit."<sup>9</sup>

In 1911 Gompers testified before a congressional committee considering a bill to prohibit the Taylor system in government work. He emphasized the folly and the wrong of sacrificing men to the single-minded goal of more and more production. "I wish to say this for the men of labor . . . that there are some limits beyond which we will not allow you to go with your domination as captains of industry. You are our employers, but you are 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. We are not bent serfs nor docile workers. . . . We propose to have our voices heard in any discussion of the conditions under which we shall labor. Nor are we going to permit, without a protest, the introduction of a system that places a premium upon a man's mere vitality, to be exhausted to the fullest, to the neglect of his own well-being in all respects."<sup>10</sup>

There was another reason for Gompers' hostility to scientific management. He recognized that the fight against Taylorism was a struggle for the preservation of unionism. "There is not one of the advocates of this scheme except Mr. Brandeis," he wrote, incorrectly, "who does not predicate it upon the destruction, the elimi-

nation, the abandonment of organized labor."<sup>11</sup> There were, in fact, reformers who were enthusiasts of efficiency, and believed it would minimize the differences between capital and labor. Thus, Morris L. Cooke, reformer, in that era, of municipal services, was an admirer of Taylor. Also meriting notice is the fact that the principles of Taylorization eventually triumphed; the need for efficiency became a recognized principle of industry, accepted by labor and capitalist alike. Nevertheless, it was true that this condition did not come about automatically. Such labor leaders as Gompers were required to fight to prevent the use of Taylor's program from becoming an anti-labor weapon.

## 2. THE OPEN SHOP CAMPAIGN

AS THE LONG DEPRESSION OF THE 1890's CAME TO A close, the A.F. of L. counted a quarter of a million members. It then entered a period of rapid growth, passing the half million mark in 1900, reaching one million in 1902, and shooting to over one and a half million in 1904. At the same time, the trust movement was blossoming to maturity, following the rigid pattern of antiunionism set by the United States Steel Corporation. The conjunction of these two developments led (in the midst of a great reform period) to a mass crusade of the employers to crush the trade union movement throughout the United States. The first attempt to form a general antiunion association was made in Dayton, Ohio, in 1900, when thirty-eight firms combined propaganda, pressure on manufacturers and bankers to co-operate, and mutual assistance in strikes and lockouts to establish the open shop throughout the city in two years. Similar movements were organized in other cities, and at the same time national trade associations were founded for similar purposes. They boycotted union goods and concerns, gave financial aid to employers contending for the open shop, furnished strikebreakers, boycotted unfriendly newspapers, bribed union officials, black-listed union workers, employed labor spies, used the police, militia, and courts to break strikes and cripple unions, and organized powerful lobbies against labor legislation.<sup>12</sup>

National leadership and organization in the campaign were supplied in 1903 by the National Association of Manufacturers