Geoists in History

Samuel Gompers
(1850-1924)

"I believe in Land Value Taxation. I count it a great privilege to have been a friend of Henry George."

Few great social movements have been so influenced by one man as was the American labour movement by Samuel Gompers. He firmly stamped his personality and viewpoint on the American Federation of Labor (AFL) which he founded and directed for almost 40 years, and led from the front in the monumental battles on behalf of the organised skilled workers of the country. His is a unique success story, of an utterly penniless immigrant who became the confidant of presidents and industrialists.

If, dear reader, you're exasperated at having to deal with Generation Y kids with their huge sense of entitlement and bugger-all resilience, chances are they haven't been raised as Samuel Gompers was. Born in 1850 in London in a dirt-poor family of Dutch-Jewish origin, the seven family members lived in a tiny one-room apartment. His father's meagre wages as a cigar maker barely put bread on the table, and Samuel would have lived out his life as an anonymous battler had not, at the age of 6, he got the chance to go to a Jewish free school, where he received the rudiments of an education virtually unknown to his humble class.

The kid only had 4 years of regular education but he made the most of it, graduating at the top of his class. The school of hard knocks was where he had to return because, at the age of 10, he had to join the workforce to supplement his family's income. But when his day shift was over, Samuel was soon able to continue his studies in night school, and he was shortly to enroll in a rich post-graduate degree in the University of Life in the cause of the working class.

His first apprenticeship was as a shoemaker but before long he was able to get an apprenticeship in the cigar making trade, a trade he followed for the next 25 years. Barely living hand to mouth in London, his family took a big punt and emigrated to the tenement slums of the Lower East Side of New York City when Samuel was 13. The family soon numbered 11 members, and Samuel again had to head off to work as a cigar-maker.

But none of this knocked the stuffing out of Samuel – far from it. Naturally gregarious and energetic, he joined numerous organizations in the bustling immigrant world of New York. He's already experienced so much of the Dickensian working conditions that he knew that he'd dedicate his life to overhauling the whole rotten system where the bosses held all the trumps cards and the workers looked down and saw they'd been dealt at birth a two, a four and a five.

From the start nothing was so important to him as the small Cigar Makers' Local Union No. 15, which he joined with his father in 1864. Nor should we be surprised to learn that Samuel immediately rose to leadership of the group. At the age of 16 he regularly represented his fellow workers in altercations with their employers, and he discussed politics and economics with articulate workingmen many years his senior. He knew where he wanted to go and pretty much how he'd have to get there, so in his free time he formed a debating club with his friends, an activity which provided practical experience in public speaking and parliamentary procedure. The club drew Samuel into contact with other upwardly

mobile young men of the city who would later play a large role in the AFL.

Gratitude or bitterness. They're the two basic responses which two people can have when dealt the same cards in life, and those attitudes in turn attract their own set of circumstances. Fortune favours him with the rosy disposition, and ill fortune oft befalls the other. In the final analysis, it boils down to this – gratitude or bitterness.

Despite being born into circumstances which one could be forgiven for assuming would crush and embitter anyone, Samuel could never be ground down. Far from it – his outlook would never allow it. So let us savor the stupendous gratitude in young Samuel when he recounts his Oliver Twist-like years working in a cigar sweatshop, "These things a good cigarmaker learned to do more or less mechanically, which left us free to think, talk, listen, or sing. I loved the freedom of that work, for I had earned the mind-freedom that accompanied skill as a craftsman. I was eager to learn from discussion and reading or to pour out my feelings in song."

In 1873, Gompers moved to the cigarmaker David Hirsch & Company, a "high-class shop where only the most skilled workmen were employed." Gompers later called this change of employers "one of the most important changes in my life", for at Hirsch's – a union shop operated by an émigré German socialist – Gompers came into contact with an array of German-speaking cigarmakers — "men of keener mentality and wider thought than any I had met before," he recalled. His likeability led the wise old souls there to take a special interest in him, and he even learnt German to better absorb many of the ideas of his shopmates, developing a particular admiration for the ideas of the former secretary of the International Workingmen's Association, Karl Laurrell. Of all those who took Gompers under their wings, it was Laurrell was embraced him most warmly, challenging his more simplistic ideas and urging Gompers to put his faith in the organized economic movement of trade unionism rather than the socialist political movement. When do you ever learn this sort of stuff in books or university lectures?

Gompers was rapidly developing a highly useful set of skills, first making his reputation as an orator, rising to great heights of eloquence when occasion demanded. Thanks to an agile mind and sharp tongue he was rarely bested in debate. His confidence and broadening experiences soon enabled him to mix with equal ease among awkward workmen and in the highest circles of polished society. This prevented him from being inflicted with that bane of the union activists, inverse snobbery. He saw that many of the sins of the rich and powerful were not committed because of evil but due to ignorance. That, at least, he knew he could cure.

He had been a militant anticlerical in his youth and never attended a church or synagogue except to speak on labour's behalf. Although of Jewish heritage and education, he did not think of himself as a Jew nor, for that matter, as a member of any religion.

Let's not romanticize the lot of the working man back then. At that time, most people worked many hours each day for little money and in dirty and often dangerous sweatshop conditions. While English factories seemed to have the demonic reputation, it was actually little better in America where whole families, including young children, worked fourteen hours a day in sweatshops for barely enough money to stay alive.

Gompers became an organizational dynamo from an early age, cutting his teeth in 1875 when he set up the cigar makers' union which has been said to be the beginning of the American labour movement.

Gompers believed that one day all working men and women could belong to organized trade unions. He believed workers should not be forced to sell their labor at too low a price and that each person must have the power to improve his or her own life. A person can get this power by joining with others in a democratic union which should speak and act for all its workers.

In 1881 Gompers was sent as the delegate of the cigar makers union to a conference of unions. The delegates agreed to organize an alliance which held yearly meetings of national unions and local labor councils designed to educate the public on worker issues, prepare labor-related legislation, and pressure Congress to approve such bills. Gompers was an officer in the alliance for five years.

During that time, he worked for several measures to improve the lives of workers and children. These included proposals to reduce the work day to eight hours, limit child labor and require children to attend school. He soon learned, however, that the alliance of unions had neither the money nor the power to do much more than talk about these issues. So in 1886 Sam Gompers helped organize a new union for all labor unions called the American Federation of Labor (AFL) with himself as president which post he held, except for a brief socialist takeover in 1895, until his death.

In 1890, the AFL represented two hundred fifty thousand workers. Two years later, the number had grown to more than one million workers. Under his leadership, the A.F.L. grew from a few struggling labor unions to become the major organization within the labour movement in the United States.

He was as devoted to the cause of unionism as any other American labour leader before or since. He was the first national union leader to recognize and encourage the strike as labor's most effective weapon. Further, when issued an injunction in 1906 not to boycott the antilabour Buck Stove and Range Company, he defied the courts and was sentenced to a year in prison for contempt (a conviction later reversed on appeal). No-one could deny that his devotion to unionism and the rhetoric with which he denounced avaricious industrialists matched anything of his time.

With Gompers wholly immersed in improving the daily working conditions of the working man, perhaps it was this preoccupation which prevented him seeing fully how the whole rotten economic system could be overhauled root and

branch. The following quote speaks volumes of the esteem in which he held Henry George, but had Gompers read and thoroughly absorbed George? "I have a great regard for Henry George, and cannot speak too highly of his work as a public educator. Had he done nothing more than to awaken thought and compel discussion, I would still consider his achievements as unparalleled in the history of the Labor movement."

Gompers' philosophy of labor unions centered on economic ends for workers, such as higher wages, shorter hours, and safe working conditions so that they could enjoy an "American" standard of living—a decent home, decent food and clothing, and money enough to educate their children. He thought economic organization was the most direct way to achieve these improvements, but he did encourage union members to participate in politics and to vote with their economic interests in mind.

Gompers lived through those amazing years when Henry George decided to go political, and Gompers backed him to the hilt. Working with the New York City Central Labor Union (CLU), a coalition of trade unionists, socialists, Knights of Labor (KoL) and reformers, he helped launch a campaign in 1886 to elect Henry George as mayor of the city which at the time was the second most powerful political office in the USA. The coalition behind the campaign was unusual because many of the groups involved were often locked in bitter controversy – trade unions regularly vied with KoL assemblies; socialists and land reformers were often at odds; and the various immigrant groups in the city usually kept to their own kind.

However it was amazing how these very disparate groups managed to work together in the campaign to support George. They published The Leader, a newspaper that was produced by local journalists (who donated their time) and financed by local trade unions. They hosted mass meetings and established campaign organizations in every precinct and trade.

"Thus began the most stirring campaign in the city's history," according to historian Allan Nevins, "for never before or since have men of such ability contended for the prize." Gompers said in his autobiography that "the campaign was notable in that it united people of unusual abilities from all walks of life." With labor trying to seize control of America's largest city and with amateurs warring on the nation's most powerful political machine - Tammany (the Democratic political machine)- the eyes of all Americans turned toward the New York battleground. Also gathering their forces against George were the most powerful industrialists of the land and, to their eternal disgrace, the Catholic Church. The Church had too much to lose in terms of their massive privileges and real estate interests, and Pope Leo XIII had already issued a papal encyclical ("Rerum Novarum") directed against George. Let's hope Hell's thermostat was cranked up a bit higher when Leo was hauled down.

Who really knows if George was dudded in the election by the Democrat Abram Hewitt? Every loser likes to moan that they were swindled, so let's leave it there. Because George did nevertheless poll strongly to finish second (beating the Republican candidate, a guy named Theodore Roosevelt, into third place), this gave encouragement to the CLU, the Socialist Labor Party, and members of the KoL to organize the United Labor Party in January 1887.

Henry George supported labour unions and was proud of his membership in the Printers' Union. But although he supported labour's immediate demands, he sought mainly to use his candidacy to build a constituency for his comprehensive economic reform. While Gompers initially worked for George's election, he later came to the belief that the unions alone should direct and control their political efforts. This didn't prevent the two men remaining lifelong friends. Even mainstream observers have since questioned whether Gompers' "band aid" policy really served labour's best interests. Geoists, of course, assert that Gompers' short term thinking was a fatal mistake.

Gompers was busy on many other fronts. In 1903 he helped establish the Women's Trade Union League, the main objective of which was to educate women about the advantages of trade union membership. It also supported women's demands for better working conditions and helped to raise awareness about the exploitation of women workers.

We should realise that, even within the labour and socialist movements, deep racial prejudices were widespread at the time. Many trade unions barred blacks from membership. Let's have Gompers' own bold and refreshing words on this subject, "There are about 8,000,000 negroes in the United States and, my friends, I not only have not the power to put the negro out of the labor movement, but I would not, even if I did have the power. Why should I do such a thing? I would have nothing to gain, but the movement would have much to lose. Under our policies and principles we seek to build up the labour movement, instead of injuring it, and we want all the negroes we can possibly get who will join hands with organized labour."

Gompers remained a political animal all his life, and George undoubtedly influenced Gompers in this respect. It seems incredible today that a union leader like Gompers was so avowedly opposed to socialism. While Gompers began his labour career familiar with, and sympathetic to, the precepts of socialism, he gradually adopted a more conservative approach to labour relations. Labour Historian Melvyn Dubofsky has written, "By 1896 Gompers and the AFL were moving to make their peace with capitalism and the American system. Although the AFL had once preached the inevitability of class conflict and the need to abolish 'wage slavery', it slowly and almost imperceptibly began to proclaim the virtues of class harmony and the possibilities of a more benevolent Capitalism."

Gompers was fearless in his open hostility to socialism: "The conspicuous Socialists have uniformly been men whose

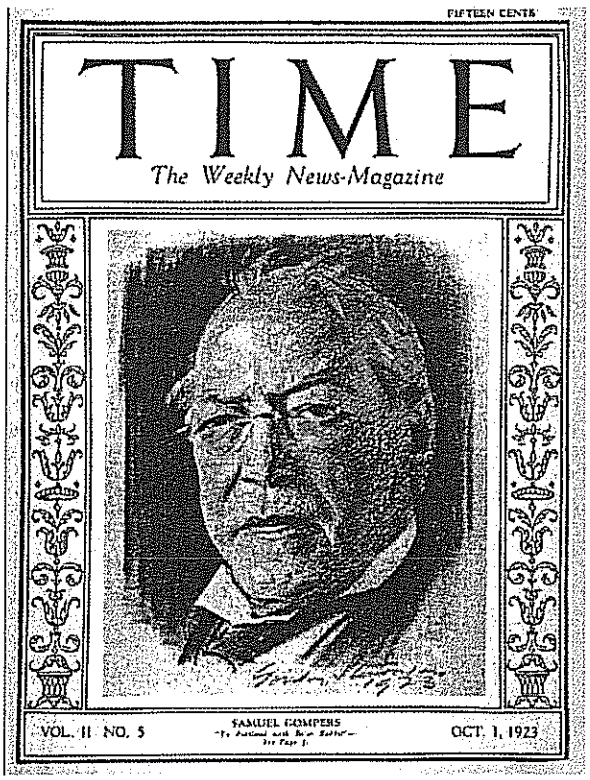
minds have been warped by a great failure or who found it absolutely impossible to understand fundamentals necessary to developing practical plans for industrial betterment."

Here's another cracker of a quote in which the influence of George is apparent, "I want to tell you, socialists, that I have studied your philosophy; read your works upon economics, and not the meanest of them; studied your standard works, both in English and German -- have not only read, but studied them. I have heard your orators and watched the work of your movement the world over. I have kept close watch upon your doctrines for thirty years; have been closely associated with many of you, and know how you think and what you propose. I know, too, what you have up your sleeve. And I want to say that I am entirely at variance with your philosophy. I declare to you, I am not only at variance with your doctrines, but with your philosophy. Economically you are unsound; socially, you are wrong; industrially, you are an impossibility".

When radical socialists failed to take over Gompers' AFL they instead formed their own organisation, the Industrial Workers of the World. However, their numbers remained small compared to AFL.

No union leader had ever been so trusted in high circles as Gompers, who had enjoyed good relations with several US presidents. The high point of the AFL's new, more political strategy came during the administration of President Woodrow Wilson (1912–1920), when Gompers and the federation enacted much of their program and enjoyed their greatest influence. During World War I, Wilson appointed Gompers to the Council of National Defense, where he chaired the Labor Advisory Board and helped mobilize labour support for the war. Gompers also was crucial in convincing Wilson to craft a wartime labour policy that for the first time in U.S. history explicitly articulated government support for independent trade unions and collective bargaining. Labour union membership soared by the end of the war, reaching into the millions. At the war's end, Wilson appointed Gompers to the Commission on International Labor Legislation at the Versailles Peace Conference, where Gompers helped create what would become the International Labor Organization. Although labour suffered considerable reverses in the 1920s, with the war crisis over and Wilson's administration at an end, the labor policies forged in this period laid the basis for the New Deal endorsements of labour rights in the 1930s.

During the 1920s, though his health was almost spent, Gompers forged on though, in the end, it literally cost his life (another parallel with Henry George). Gompers served as a spokesman for the Mexican revolutionary government in Washington and considered himself instrumental in securing American recognition of the new regime. He was received with high honours by Mexican President Calles in 1924 but he knew then that he'd run his race and so asked to return to die on American soil. In a life so well lived, it was fitting that his last act was full of drama as he was placed aboard a special train that sped toward the border. Death stayed its hand until he'd reached his homeland, when the curtain closed in characteristic fashion as he uttered his last words, "Nurse, this is the end. God bless our American institutions. May they grow better day by day."



"We want more school houses and less jails; more books and less arsenals; more learning and less vice; more constant work and less crime; more leisure and less greed; more justice and less revenge; in fact, more of the opportunities to cultivate our better natures, to make manhood more noble, womanhood more beautiful and childhood more happy and bright. These in brief are the primary demands made by the Trade Unions in the name of labour. These are the demands made by labour upon modern society and in their consideration is involved the fate of civilization."

Next issue: the prime minister of Britain a hundred years ago, Herbert Asquith