

DISPATCH FROM THE ARCHIVE

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UNCOVERING THE CONTRADICTIONS IN SAMUEL GOMPERS'S "MORE": READING "WHAT DOES LABOR WANT?"

Samuel Gompers's address at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago is typically remembered for its invocation, "we want 'more.'" This essay views Gompers's address in its broader context as a window into the Gilded Age labor movement and America's crisis of the 1890s. Gompers's thinking can be understood in terms of two sets of contradictory discourses or antinomies: labor republicanism as distinguished from socialism and apocalyptic change as distinguished from evolutionary development. Rather than someone who rationalized the interests of a narrow stratum of craft workers, Gompers emerges from this analysis as a serious and complex thinker who sought to bridge and contain divergent discourses and political tendencies within the broader labor movement for which he was the spokesperson.

On August 28, 1893, Samuel Gompers strode to the stage to address the Labor Congress of the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Forty-three years old, Gompers stood about five feet tall, and was of dark complexion with deep black eyes and a full dark mustache. He had been president of the American Federation of Labor since its founding in 1886. While he spoke, a smile never left his face.¹

Gompers spoke only three months after the financial crash of May and the start of the 1893–98 depression. As a result of the jobs created by the Fair and the consumer purchasing power provided by fairgoers, Chicago experienced a delayed onset of the suffering that had already beset other industrial centers. But, as the Fair, also known as the White City, opened, thousands of men who had been employed building it were thrust out of work. Local police reported that employment in twenty-two of the city's largest firms had declined 40 percent. Ten days before Gompers spoke, the *Chicago Tribune* reported that ten thousand unemployed men begged for work at the packinghouses. As the Labor Congress convened, turbulent marches of unemployed immigrants invaded downtown and the lakefront demanding that municipal authorities authorize public works employment. Gompers addressed these lakefront workers as well as the Labor Congress.²

Gompers's address "What Does Labor Want?" is far from obscure among American historians, but it has been understood mainly in terms of its last few paragraphs. Constructed around the repeated phrase "we want *more*," the address has been taken to suggest either an

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Samuel Gompers circa 1893, credit AFL-CIO

unwillingness of “bread and butter” business unionists to challenge the dominant relations of capitalism or alternatively and more persuasively as a shift from a producer to a consumer orientation and as labor’s solution to the question of democracy.³ The speech, however, needs to be read and understood in its entirety. Viewed from this wider perspective, it can serve as a window into the Gilded Age, the period from the 1870s through the 1890s. During these years, competitive proprietary capitalism became nationally dominant and at the same time entered into an extended crisis, giving way by the start of World War I to corporate administered capitalism.⁴

Historians widely accept that during the late nineteenth century, a settler colonial-small producers’ society of independent farmers, artisans, and shopkeepers with its attendant vision of a decentralized republic with minimal concentration of wealth, was being eclipsed by the growth of large-scale industry and finance often concentrated in trusts and holding companies and worked by a permanent wage-labor class. The question whether capitalism was firmly entrenched, however, has divided historians.

Most historians have assumed that capitalism defined this way was not in any fundamental way inconsistent with the old producers’ society and that its social relations were pervasive and well-nigh impregnable. After all, both producerism and capitalism were predicated on the use of private property to produce goods on the market for gain.

Other historians have questioned the consensus that what we now call capitalism was firmly entrenched in the late nineteenth century. From this standpoint, capitalism was hardly the submerged common sense of American life that historians believe was only rarely challenged. These historians have shown that contemporaries widely questioned the inevitability and beneficence of a capitalism defined by wage labor and increasing concentration of ownership and control.⁵ The fragility and embattled nature of the competitive proprietary form of capitalism is strongly suggested by at least three well-known developments.

First, during the quarter century between 1873 and 1898, there were more months of depression than prosperity. This period, then referred to as the "Great Depression," was common to capitalist markets throughout the Western world and led to an extended decline in prices, interest rates, and profits. According to the influential economist Charles A. Conant writing in 1899, the underlying problem was "the existing system of abstinence from consumption for the sake of saving [that has resulted] in a glut of goods which has destroyed profits, bankrupted great corporations, and ruined investors."⁶ The "crisis of the nineties," long recognized by historians as the hinge that linked the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, is a term that could be appropriated to define the entire Gilded Age.

Second, the Gilded Age comprised years of swelling discontent among urban workers and southern and western farmers as they asserted their collective power, at first outside and then increasingly inside the party-electoral system. Among workers, four "great upheavals" shook urban industrial centers: one during Reconstruction, the second with the great railroad strike of 1877, the third centering around the eight-hour day movement in 1886–87, and the fourth in the early 1890s. Strikes became more numerous and larger in size, and by the end of the 1880s a majority of them were organized and planned by unions, but without the institutionalized channels of collective bargaining that would assure they did not threaten the established order.⁷ By the end of the 1880s, workers were joined by disaffected farmers. Using their cooperative system as a base, they formed the Peoples (Populist) Party, whose electoral successes threw the constituencies of both major parties into disarray.

Third, during the late Gilded Age, the American public became familiar with a burst of utopian and dystopian writings. Kenneth Roemer in a study of 160 utopian novels published between 1888 and 1900 concluded that Americans believed their country was "coming apart" and sitting on top of a "volcano." A cataclysm seemed to be visible just over the horizon issuing in either a dystopia—think Ignatius Donnelly's *Caesar's Column* and Jack London's *The Iron Heel*, if warnings were not heeded, or a utopia—think Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* or William Dean Howell's *Traveller from Altruria*, if they were.⁸

Gompers's "What Does Labor Want," while neither utopian nor dystopian, validates the deep consciousness of capitalist crisis and looming cataclysm that characterized much thinking of this period. Gompers began with a reference to the prophecy of the ancient Greek Sybil (priestess). The division of civilization into "hostile camps" with one class owning all the tools and means of labor and "the other, an immense mass begging for the opportunity to labor" was unjust and unsustainable (389).⁹ This division was the root of all present difficulties. Modern civilization found its hope of redemption not in the celebration of capital embodied in Chicago's White City but in

the trade unions: “To-day modern society is beginning to regard the Trade Unions as the only hope of civilization; to regard them as the only power capable of evolving order out of the social-chaos. But will the Sibyl’s demand be re-regarded or heeded before it is too late?” (392).

Gompers’s preferred alternative to the Sybil’s prophecy, however, oscillated between two equally valid but contradictory languages or discourses, each partially compatible and incompatible with the other, but at the same time, closely intertwined—in short: antinomies. These antinomies (contradictions), in turn, arose from and help explain the tensions and trends within the labor movement of the era. Gompers address encompassed and uneasily reconciled each of these two major antinomies: the first between a republicanism that was incompatible with the dynamic of capitalist development and a socialism that grew out of that dynamic; the second between the anticipation of cataclysmic change and the evolutionary path charted by the Gompers’-led labor movement.

To understand the first antinomy, it is important to recall that nineteenth century producers’ republican discourse valorized a society with a balanced, though not necessarily equal distribution of wealth and was suspicious of class differentiation into a permanent working class and permanent capitalist class. Both these developments threatened to dissolve the republic of small proprietors into an oligarchy of wealth. Republican thinkers did not believe that such corruption followed from the dynamics of a capitalist economy; rather they resulted from bad laws and policies, such as a protective tariff, state-chartered monopolies, high interest rates resulting from currency manipulation, or onerous taxes to prop up an overweening bureaucracy. Whatever the cause, corruption resulted in a privileged minority assuming power, robbing the producers of the fruits of their labor, and enabling them to accumulate illicit wealth and dismantle republican liberties.¹⁰

Mid-nineteenth century artisans and workers found in republicanism a discourse sufficiently capacious and flexible to accommodate their needs and aims. What has been termed “artisan republicanism” viewed capitalist social relations as “wage-slavery” and voiced economic concerns in political language. It was this version of republicanism that Gompers and his circle of Marxists in New York City sought to appropriate and redefine in their struggle to Americanize their socialist project. In the mid-1870s, Gompers and his Gotham associates forged an alliance with the “Boston Eight-Hour Men,” led by Ira Steward and George McNeill and the remnants of a national labor movement battered by depression. Out of this three-pronged alliance came a new version of republicanism, to which Gompers consistently adhered during the Gilded Age.¹¹

The first labor organization to embody the new labor republican coalition, the International Labor Union applied the terms used in the struggle against monarchy, aristocracy, and tyranny to the economic sphere. Its 1878 Declaration of Principles stated: “The political rights of a people are not more sacred than their economic rights.” The “wage system,” it asserted, “is a despotism.” But because “the wealth of the world is distributed through the wage system, its better distribution must come through higher wages,” achieved through “solidarity of the laborers.” It looked forward to a time when “wages shall represent the earnings not the necessities of labor; thus melting profit upon labor out of existence and making co-operation or self-employed labor the natural and logical step from wage labor to free labor.” The ILU synthesis was widely influential, serving as a model during the Gilded Age for both trade unionists and

labor reformers—the former because it made space for an evolution fueled by the trade union struggle for shorter hours and higher wages, and the latter because it ratified their goal of escaping the wage system altogether.¹²

Gompers's address, fifteen years later used the same labor republican language though without reference to the republic.¹³ In the first few pages, he returned to labor's artisan past earlier in the century, a time when workers owned their own tools and shops. Using terms like "petty larceny," and "plunder," he alluded to their dispossession and transformation into wage workers. Capitalists, who overthrew "a well-established system of industry," owed their ascendancy to "royal and federal potentates," and exercised control through "monstrously unjust privileges," "arbitrary rule," "absolute power," and "monopoly." The new capitalists were not only illegitimate in the way they obtained their wealth and authority, but they were "incompetent" at the trade and produced debased and bogus goods. In short, like the old aristocracy against whom Americans had waged their revolution, they were parasites and tyrants.

The story of artisan dispossession was almost identical to Karl Marx's history of "primitive accumulation" in the first volume of *Capital*, which Gompers had read carefully.¹⁴ But, where Marx had emphasized the enclosures of land, which had "separated the producers from the means of production," Gompers emphasized the confiscation of the tools of the "master workman" (389). Gompers's passionate identification in this speech with the artisanry—at this time he still worked at his cigar maker's trade—is not surprising. Cigarmaking had suffered a nearly catastrophic decline in status, pay, and working conditions since the advent of the cigar mold, the 1873 depression, and the rise of tenement house work.¹⁵ Gompers's view of the capitalist role in production as parasitic and fundamentally illegitimate reflected this experience and mark his language in these pages as that of an older republicanism.

Once this early story had been told, Gompers's tone and language shifted noticeably. On page 391, the language became descriptive and scientific. In this new discourse, capital instead of being the subject of passionate condemnation was carefully divided into two parts. Capitalists in the first group produced honest goods, while the second "parasitic" group produced "bogus" goods described as "adulterated," "useless," and "imitations of luxuries." In this second group were the once-lauded small artisan manufacturers, who having "failed in establishing order in their own ranks,"—likely a reference to cutthroat competition—rob and degrade their employees. Gompers's attitude toward these small employers, who existed at the margins of the market and could not avoid to pay a living wage, echoed his testimony in 1883 before a Senate committee, where he said they deserved "to be crushed out as manufacturer[s] and forced to take to the field as a laborer[s]."¹⁶

From this point on, capital is analyzed and judged from the standpoint of society as a whole rather than the imperiled artisan. The capitalist too underwent a shift. He was now recognized as improving the ability to produce. "Every effort," Gompers noted, "every ingenious device has been utilized to cultivate the greater productivity of the worker" (393). The source of this productivity was society, not capital. Trade unionists, said Gompers in a passage that anticipates our knowledge economy, "regard all capital, large and small, as the fruits of labor economics and discoveries, inventions and institutions of many generations of laborers and capitalists, of theoreticians and practitioners, practically as indivisible as a living man" (392).

Society, not labor or capital alone, was the source of wealth. For Gompers and future progressives increasing functional specialization and the division of labor, social interdependence, and the generalized application of science to the production process through technology—in a word, what Marx had called “socialization” or social labor—meant that wealth was the product of society rather than of individual labor. If wealth was the fruit of society, Gompers concluded, then capitalists were merely “wealthy social parasites” (390). This was a quite distinct use of the term parasite. In republican language parasites were those who lived off the labor of others, while in socialist discourse, they lived off the fruits of society or social labor.¹⁷ It is telling that toward the end of his address, Gompers returned to the labor republican moral precept that labor creates all wealth, when he stated that unionists “regard the workman as the producer of the wealth of the world” (395). This open inconsistency may be taken as an indication that Gompers’s attempt to suture two distinct discourses prevalent among labor activists was not seamless.¹⁸

In the same way that Gompers relied on the terms parasite and capital to mediate or fudge different meanings produced by their contextualization in two different discourses, he also used another key word: “degrade.”¹⁹ The words degrade, degradation, or similar terms—debilitate, debase, and pervert—were used seven times in the speech; barbaric or barbarism in reference to capital was used twice; and parasites or parasitic in reference to capital’s relation to society was used three times. Instead of artisans’ labor being degraded as in republican language, it was now society that was being degraded. Gompers employed the word “society” ten times in his address, and all but three usages referred to capital “failing to protect” it and “undermining [its] very foundation.”

To Gompers, capital and the power of capitalists were distinct from civilization and society. The address did not even include the term “capitalism.” Gompers used the term “capitalist system” four times, but not with the all-inclusive meaning that is used today. On the other hand, the terms “capitalists” or “capitalist class” were employed twenty-three times and “capital” three times. For Gompers, capital was alien to society, a disruptive, chaotic force, creating a “state of industrial anarchy” in the womb of society (390).²⁰ Society, on the other hand, was represented by the “consuming power of a people”—“the civilizing influence of our era” (393). Because capital failed to protect, indeed degraded, society’s power to consume by keeping wages low, the resulting inability of purchasing power to keep pace with production gave rise to revolving periods of prosperity and depression. Consequently, workers were subjected to alternating periods of idleness and debilitating overwork, and the family life of workers was destroyed by pitting children and both sexes against each other in the labor market, undermining the family wage.

Trade unions, alternatively, were society’s “only hope” because they would ameliorate the conditions that degraded everyday social relations, protect society’s “consumptive power,” and “relieve the choked and glutted condition of industry and commerce” then crippling the nation’s economy. More generally, the labor movement would bring “order” and “industrial harmony” out of the “social chaos” created by capital, thereby defending the highest standards of civilization (390). By framing labor’s mission in societal terms, Gompers could claim that labor stood for the common good and thereby assert a “moral universality” for union labor that many labor historians have denied existed among “pure and simple unionists” like Gompers.²¹

The second great antinomy present in Gompers's address was the one between apocalyptic change and gradual, evolutionary change. This was not an antinomy coterminous with republicanism and socialism, for each side harbored both revolutionaries and reformers. That this distinction cut across the lines of these discourses is suggested by the case of the Chicago anarchists, who combined a resort to revolutionary violence with quite orthodox labor republican views.

On the one hand, a civilization and society debased by capital invited cataclysmic change, which could take the form of an insurrection from below cleansing a republic that had degenerated into an oligarchy of wealth. Taken as a whole, Gompers's impassioned denunciation of capital as ethically untenable and his reliance on the trope of prophecy, suggests such a belief. This view was far from uncommon among trade unionists. The editor of the leading labor paper in Chicago argued that "however, much [the men of the labor movement] disagree on tactics, they stand together on the great ethical proposition that society as it is presently constituted is corrupt and vicious, and that its only salvation is its complete reconstruction. ... It would surprise the wealthy to know how often violent revolution is discussed without any expressions of disapproval. They think they are on a railroad train hurtling toward a chasm."²²

On the other hand, trade unionism with its less than revolutionary methods and its ambition of securing legally binding trade agreements with employers promised evolutionary change accomplished by an accretion of workplace gains and political reforms. Moreover, throughout his career, Gompers had stood against those who thought that wages could not rise under the existing "competitive system," that a revolutionary situation was imminent, and who wanted to subordinate unions to the electoral initiatives of a socialist political party. Whether his opponents were the 1870s Lassallean socialists, the 1880s "Progressives" within the Cigarmakers Union, or the 1890s Daniel De Leon-led Socialist Labor Party, Gompers had persistently warned against the trap of relying on impoverishment to produce insurrection and forsaking achievable gains.²³ In his address, Gompers reaffirmed this position, stating that the labor movement's "methods were always conservative, their steps evolutionary" (392).

The contrast between these two positions—precipitate revolution and evolution—both within the labor movement and within Gompers's address was quite glaring, but Gompers had already found a way of reconciling them. Beginning in the 1870s, the alliance that Gompers and other New York City Marxists had built with the Boston-based eight-hour movement and trade union leaders had found common ground in the strategy that trade union organization, the struggle of the eight-hour day, and the subsequent ability to win strikes for higher wages and other benefits would gradually prepare workers for the prospect of revolutionary change. The demand for the eight-hour day was the critical link between reform and revolution. Steward and his followers believed that shorter hours would allow workers the leisure necessary to raise their ambitions and adopt a higher standard of living; rising wages would follow. Rising wages would make possible increased consumer purchasing power, which would create a market for the mechanized production of these new high wage jobs and alleviate depressions caused by overproduction. Though reducing overproduction and expanding markets for machine production was in the short-term interest of capital as well as labor, Steward expected this virtuous cycle to fuel an evolution in which rising wages would cut into profits and gradually undermine the power of capital over labor and ultimately the wage system itself. This scenario was

the substance of Gompers's core belief that winning the economic struggle in civil society was the indispensable prelude to political success.²⁴

For almost two decades, Gompers had espoused Steward's strategy of integrating revolution into a labor progressive reform agenda. In his address he reiterated that the way out of the Sybil's prophecy was through an evolution fueled by the trade unions in their day-to-day struggle for shorter hours: "The eight hour day movement has clearly revealed the power of the working people to realize an improved industrial system, and raises the hope that we may yet be able to stem the tide of economic, social and moral degradations" (394). By taking advantage of constantly improving productivity, the shorter hours movement "has been the most faithful of all reformatory attempts of modern times" (394).

We now have the context for understanding Gompers's well-known demand for "more." In famous phrases, Gompers stated:

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 (396).

These, along with other "wants" enunciated by Gompers, went far beyond wages and tangible goods. Indeed, none of the wants referred to goods and services that could be directly purchased. Nor was it a demand for greater control over the workplace or the means of production. As Rosanne Currarino has written, "more" did not merely denote increased consumption; it was also "a wide-ranging demand for greater participation in society writ large." It was a claim for full inclusion and sharing in the rising standards of a civilization whose development was fueled by modern machine production and rising productivity.²⁵

Gompers's approach in this matter had its origins in Steward's theory that expanded leisure time would reintegrate workers into the middle class or bourgeois culture of the day, which he and other labor spokespersons referred to as "civilization." Freed from the debasing impact of excessive toil, poverty, and drudgery, wrote Steward, workers would leave behind the insularities and limitations of working-class culture and become "discontented with their situation, by ... observ[ing] the dress, manners, surroundings, and influence of those whose wealth furnishes them with leisure." If you "tempt every producer of wealth then, by theatres, concerts, fine clothes, stories; and the leisure to enjoy, and the higher wages necessary to support them, ... wiser fellows [will use these opportunities] to study political economy, social science, the sanitary condition of the people, the prevention of crime, woman's wages, war and the ten thousand schemes with which our age teems for the amelioration of the condition of man." For Gompers as well as for Steward, "more" meant that workers wanted the abundance and quality of life, that is, the social goods increasingly available to the middle classes of the day.²⁶

If such an outlook encompassed progressive change and reform, it also less obviously made room for emancipatory change. A week earlier, Gompers, along with six other national labor leaders, had issued a public statement regarding the depression, which made this explicit. "We believe," they stated, "that the wage system can be succeeded by a better [one] only through the increase of the purchasing power of a day's work" and "that a constant increase in wages and in reduction of profits will make a capitalistic or employing class unprofitable and unnecessary, thus eliminating classes and

establishing equity." In the address Gompers alluded to this possibility when he wrote in parentheses "(as long as the wage system shall last)" (396).²⁷

Such rhetoric was more than boilerplate. Thirty-five years later, J. B. S. Hardman recognized the same dynamic animating the Gompers's-led labor movement, but worded it in the phrases of group theory. If the possession of power and its accumulation motivate social groups, reasoned Hardman, "they cannot avoid transgressing the bounds of their immediate objectives. Sooner or later they enlarge the scope of their activity and their ambitions to a point beyond which the social order cannot let them proceed without throwing itself out of gear." For Hardman, the anticipation of this point, meant that "immediate and ultimate objectives meet; in it they are integrated and correlated."²⁸

Gompers's synthesizing alternative to the reform or revolution binary paralleled key elements of social democracy, a new transnational outlook, and political ideology emerging in the mid- to late 1880s. Social democrats believed that the productive apparatus erected by capital could be reformed and utilized "more and more" for the common good without a revolution. Gompers is not normally classed as a social democrat. James Kloppenberg encapsulates the standard view when he contrasts "the blinkered business unionism of Samuel Gompers American Federation of Labor" to the social democratic idealism of Richard T. Ely, Walter Rauschenbusch, and William James.²⁹ Nonetheless, a case can be made that Gompers shared key common elements with late nineteenth to early twentieth-century social democrats.

First, Gompers, like the social democrats, repudiated mainstream "political economists" for their view that capital was "spontaneous and natural" (390) and "the unscientific analogy between commercial commodities and human labor" (392).³⁰ Gompers cited a French workman who replied to the statement of an official that labor was merely "merchandise." Responded the workman, if "merchandise is not sold at one certain time, it can be sold at another, while if I do not sell my labor it is lost for all the world as well as myself; and as society lives only upon the result of labor, society is poorer to the whole extent of that which I have failed to produce" (392). Instead, Gompers and the AFL latched onto the new "social economics" emerging on both sides of the Atlantic.

Social economics, like the economic thinking of that decade emerging from the new American Economic Association was an attempt to revise classical political economy to sympathetically engage "the social question."³¹ Social economics was closely associated with the American Federation of Labor. In 1889 as part of its eight-hour day campaign, Gompers and the AFL published a pamphlet by the social economists, George Gunton and George E. McNeill, and a decade later, another pamphlet by the social economist, Lemuel Danyrid. The pamphlets did more than rationalize shorter hours. They attempted to define a new science of economics that would place more value on consumer demand in response to the chronic tendency of production to outpace consumption. According to Danyrid, the new economics "should be pursued to secure the largest amount of happiness and comfort and the highest development of all." In a book on the topic published in 1892, Gunton wrote that "Instead of a system of 'commodity' economics which justifies human degradation as a means of cheapening wealth, we have a system of *social* economics, which shows that the most effective means of promoting the industrial welfare of society on a strictly equitable basis, must be sought in influences which develop the wants, and elevate the social life and character of the masses."³²

Second, like the social democrats, Gompers wanted to reinsert ethics into the discourse of political economy. In his insistence that labor not be treated as a commodity governed by natural law but according to the highest standards of civilization, Gompers had much in common with the “new economists” of the late 1880s, Henry Carter Adams, Richard T. Ely, John R. Commons, John Bates Clark, and even more with the social economist George Gunton. All believed the laws of the market were not natural but human created and historical in nature and could be revised in accordance with social will.

Third, Gompers also shared with social democrats like Eduard Bernstein the outlook that the movement was everything and the end goal nothing. The goal was a continuous *process* rather than a destination. Nor was it inevitable. In place of looming revolution, social democrats substituted democracy. Labor leaders like Gompers were comfortable with that approach.³³

Fourth, like social democrats, but unlike orthodox socialists in the Socialist Labor Party, Gompers always remained suspicious of statism or paternalism. As he had learned from Marx, workers had to be the agents of their own emancipation; it could not be handed to them by the state, as the Lassallean and other party-based socialists with whom he had contended since the 1870s, believed.³⁴ For that reason, he also refused to call for state-sponsored abolition of private property as revolutionary socialists did. Like the social democrats, Gompers believed that property was already becoming socialized through the consolidations of proprietary property taken by the large corporation. The task was to realize the benefits of this evolution without excessively empowering the state. For Gompers the way to do this was through unions and collective bargaining.

For all this, Gompers was not quite a social democrat in the transnational sense defined by Kloppenber and Daniel T. Rodgers. In the address, he did not embrace the agenda of a cross-class progressive social reform movement operating through electoral politics, though he would gradually warm to national electoral participation during the progressive period. AFL leaders did support government reform on the level of state governments, but Gompers was more suspicious of positive state action on the national level during this period than were social democrats, though he was never the voluntarist some have made him out to be.³⁵

Samuel Gompers’s thinking has usually been characterized as one or another side of a polarity: pure and simple (vs. political) trade unionist, business (vs. social) unionist, job- (vs. class) conscious unionist, scarcity- (vs. abundance) conscious unionist, pro-capitalist (vs. Marxian socialist), and prophet of consumer culture (vs. producer republican). But Gompers was first and foremost a *spokesperson* for a federation of international unions. He also viewed himself as a tribune of the people, often addressing unorganized workers and public gatherings as at the Chicago Fair. Consequently, he could hardly help but be sensitive and responsive to the swirling, contradictory currents in the movement he led and the thinking of those he hoped to organize and persuade. His words had to reflect, conciliate, and bridge a variety of views; he could not impose his own thinking or free-lance with impunity. His thinking, therefore, is best characterized as a working synthesis, a stitching together of different discourses and beliefs. The antinomies of that synthesis are on full display in “What Does Labor Want.”

Such tensions and divisions present in the labor movement were glaringly revealed at the AFL convention the following year, when Gompers and his allies opposed and defeated the socialists’ plank 10 calling for collective ownership of the means of

production. Of course, Gompers already had an alternative to a political revolution. It was an evolution without a determinate end, driven by the contradiction between the socialization of the labor process and the capitalist's appropriation of its fruits. Far from that discourse being a casualty of the transition to an emerging corporate age as some have presumed, Gompers and AFL leaders carried this commitment forward through the first quarter of the twentieth century as notable observers attested, including J. B. S. Hardman, William English Walling, and Frank Tannenbaum.³⁶

By combining the vision of social change with what Gompers had in common with the new social economics and social democracy, we can better understand the attraction of that approach to his audience. It was a viable middle road between convulsive change and defense of the existing order and at the same time a pathway and way station from the older and fading discourse of producerism to an emerging common ground under both socialism and corporate capitalism.

NOTES

¹The description is from an 1891 interview in *The Samuel Gompers Papers, Vol. 3: Unrest and Depression, 1891–1893*, eds. Stuart B. Kaufman and Peter J. Albert (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 42.

²Richard Schneirov, *Labor and Urban Politics: Class Conflict and the Origins of Modern Liberalism in Chicago, 1865–97* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press 1998), 332–33.

³For an example of the former position, see John Laslett, "Samuel Gompers and the Rise of American Business Unionism" in *Labor Leaders in America*, eds. Melvyn Dubofsky and Warren Van Tine (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 62–88; and for the latter, see Lawrence Glickman, *A Living Wage: American Workers and the Making of Consumer Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); and Rosanne Currarino, "The Politics of 'More': The Labor Question and the Idea of Economic Liberty in Industrial America," *Journal of American History* 93 (June 2006): 17–36.

⁴Martin J. Sklar, *The Corporate Reconstruction of American Capitalism, 1890–1916* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 2–4, 10–13, 16–17, 20–23; James Livingston, *Pragmatism and Political Economy of Cultural Revolution, 1850–1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 84–118; Richard Schneirov, "Thoughts on Periodizing the Gilded Age: Capital Accumulation, Society, and Politics, 1873–1898," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 5 (July 2006): 189–224; and Rosanne Currarino, *The Labor Question in America: Economic Democracy in the Gilded Age* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012).

⁵Two groups of historians view Gilded Age capitalism as under serious challenge. The first group, cited in note 4, views capitalism as internally challenged, economically in crisis, and unable to secure hegemony over other social groups. The second group emphasizes Gilded Age capitalists as under siege from without, by Populist producers, rebellious unskilled workers, or by a radical middle class; see Elizabeth Sanders, *Roots of Reform: Farmers, Workers, and the American State, 1877–1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Robert D. Johnson, *The Radical Middle Class: Populist Democracy and the Question of Capitalism in Progressive Era Portland, Oregon* (Princeton, NJ, and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003); Shelton Stromquist, *Re-inventing "The People": The Progressive Movement, The Class Problem, and the Origins of Modern Liberalism* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

⁶"The Economic Basis of Imperialism" in *The United States in the Orient* (1900; Port Washington NY: Kennikat Press, 1971), 9; See also Sklar, *Corporate Reconstruction*, 20–33, 43–47; David M. Gordon, Richard Edwards, and Michael Reich, *Segmented Work, Divided Workers: The Historical Transformation of Labor in the United States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 94–99, 101–3; James Livingston, *Origins of Federal Reserve System: Money, Class and Corporate Capitalism, 1890–1913* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), 49–67.

⁷David Montgomery, "Strikes in Nineteenth-Century America," *Social Science History* 4 (Winter 1980): 81–104.

⁸Kenneth M. Roemer, *The Obsolete Necessity: America in Utopia Writings, 1888–1900* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1976), 171–78; Matthew Schneirov, *The Dream of a New Social Order: Popular Magazines in America, 1893–1914* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 163–74; Carl S. Smith, *Urban*

Disorder and the Shape of Belief: The Great Chicago Fire, the Haymarket Bomb, and the Model Town of Pullman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Frederick Cople Jaher, *Doubters and Dissenters: Cataclysmic Thought in America, 1885–1918* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1964); Schneirov, *Labor and Urban Politics*, 298–301.

⁹Hereafter, all pages cited in the text in parentheses are from Samuel Gompers, “What Does Labor Want?” *Gompers Papers*, Vol. 3, 388–96. Gompers’s address is appended to this article.

¹⁰On the values, politics, and traditions of small-producer republicanism see James L. Huston, “The American Revolutionaries, the Political Economy of Aristocracy, and the American Concept of the Distribution of Wealth, 1765–1900,” *American Historical Review* 98 (Oct. 1993): 1079–1105; Ronald Schultz, “The Small-Producer Tradition and the Moral Origins of Artisan Radicalism in Philadelphia, 1720–1810,” *Past & Present* 127 (May 1990): 84–116; Victoria Hattam, “Economic Visions and Political Strategies: American Labor and the State, 1865–1896,” *Studies in American Political Development* 4 (Spring 1990): 82–129; Thomas Goebel, “The Political Economy of American Populism from Jackson to the New Deal,” *Studies in American Political Development* 11 (Spring 1997): 109–48.

¹¹There is a large literature on labor republicanism in the Gilded Age beginning with David Montgomery, “Labor and the Republic in Industrial America: 1860–1920,” *Le Mouvement social* 111 (Apr.–Jun. 1980): 201–15; most recently see Alex Gourevitch, *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth: Labor and Republican Liberty in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Edward T. O’Donnell, *Henry George and the Crisis of Inequality: Progress and Poverty in the Gilded Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015). On the limits of republicanism as a paradigm for understanding labor history see Schneirov, *Labor and Politics*, 9–10, 237–40, 298–99; and Sarah Babb, “A True American System of Finance: Frame Resonance in the U.S. Labor Movement, 1866–1896,” *American Sociological Review* 61 (Dec. 1996): 1033–52; on the alliance that led to the ILU see Kenneth Fones-Wolf, “Boston Eight Hour Men, New York Marxists and the Emergence of the International Labor Union: Prelude to the AFL,” *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* 9 (Apr. 1981): 47–59.

¹²The ILU Declaration of Principles is reprinted in George E. McNeill, *The Labor Movement: The Problem of To-Day* (New York: M. W. Hazen, 1887), 161–62.

¹³Gompers acknowledged his adherence to Steward’s economic theories in 1883 testimony before a Senate committee; see *Report of the Committee of the Senate upon the Relations between Labor and Capital*, 5 vols, vol. I. (Washington, DC: GPO, 1885), 293–94.

¹⁴*Capital*, vol. I, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage, 1977 [1867]), chap. 33; The reliance of Gompers’s thinking in large part on Marx is demonstrated in Stuart Bruce Kaufman, *Samuel Gompers and the Origins of the American Federation of Labor, 1848–1896* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1973); and William M. Dick, *Labor and Socialism in America: The Gompers Era* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1972). However, Gompers relied on other intellectuals as well; see George B. Cotkin, “The Spencerian and Comtian nexus in Gompers’ labor philosophy: The Impact of Non-Marxian Evolutionary Thought,” *Labor History* 20 (Fall 1979): 510–23.

¹⁵Dorothee Schneider, *Trade Unions and Community: The German Working Class in New York City, 1870–1900* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 50–59.

¹⁶*Report of the Senate Committee on Labor and Capital*, I:336.

¹⁷For a contemporary understanding of socialization see Richard T. Ely, *Studies in the Evolution of Industrial Society* (New York: Chautauqua Press, 1903), 57–61, 63–64, 87–99. On Marx and the socialization process, see Michael Harrington, *Socialism: Past and Future* (New York: Penguin, 1989), chap. 1; more generally see Thomas L. Haskell, *The Emergence of Professional Social Science: The American Social Science Association and the Nineteenth-Century Crisis of Authority* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 11–15; Samuel P. Hays, “The New Organizational Society” in *American Political History as Social Analysis: Essays by Samuel P. Hays* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1980): 244–63; on the importance but relative absence of this category in the thinking of academics, see James Livingston, *Pragmatism, Feminism, and Democracy: Rethinking the Politics of American History* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 57–83.

¹⁸For other expressions of support for the labor theory of value by Gompers, see Alexander Yard, “A Fair Days’ Work: ‘The Shorter Hours Movement, Labor Reformers, and American Political Culture, 1865–1913 (PhD diss., Washington University, 1994), 129–30 and for other labor leaders, 116–37. But Gompers and other labor leaders also endorsed a needs-based theory of value, measured by the standard of living. As Lawrence Glickman points out, the two strands coexisted in this period; see *A Living Wage: American Workers and the Making of Consumer Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 31–32.”

- ¹⁹These terms can be seen as "floating signifiers"; see Louise Phillips and Marianne W. Jorgensen, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method* (London, Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2002), 39–40.
- ²⁰Michael Merrill, "'Capitalism' and Capitalism" *History Teacher* 27 (May 1994): 277–80.
- ²¹David Montgomery first asserted the moral universality of labor republicanism in "Labor and the Republic," 18. See also, William E. Forbath, *Law and the Shaping of the American Labor Movement* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 18.
- ²²*Rights of Labor*, Nov. 29, 1890.
- ²³Kaufman, *Samuel Gompers*, 47–48, 50–55, 134–36, 195–202.
- ²⁴Ira Steward, "A Reduction of Hours An Increase of Wages" and "The Power of the Cheaper Over the Dearer" in *A Documentary History of American Industrial Society*, eds. John R. Commons, Ulrich B. Phillips, Eugene A. Gilmore, Helen L. Sumner, and John B. Andrews (New York: Russell & Russell, 1958), 284–301; and Ira Steward, "Poverty," *Fourth Annual Report of the Bureau of Statistics of Labor* [Massachusetts] (Boston: Wright & Potter, State Printers, 1873), 411–39.
- ²⁵Currarino, *The Labor Question*, 93.
- ²⁶Yard, "A Fair Day's Work," 77–85; Steward, "A Reduction of Hours," 291, 295.
- ²⁷Quote from *The Carpenter* 13 (Sept. 1893), 9.
- ²⁸J. B. S. Hardman, "Union Objectives and Social Power" in *American Labor Dynamics in the Light of Post-War Developments* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1928), 104–5. More generally, see Dorothy Sue Cobble, "Pure and Simple Radicalism: Putting the Progressive Era AFL in Its Time" and responses in *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* 10 (Winter 2013): 61–87, 111–16.
- ²⁹On social democracy. see James T. Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory: Social Democracy and Progressivism in European and American Thought, 1870–1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), chap. 6, quote at 26; and Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge: Belknap, 1999), esp. chaps 1 and 2.
- ³⁰Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory*, 242.
- ³¹Glickman, *A Living Wage*, 57–60; and Currarino, *The Labor Question in America*, 99–102; on the European version of social economy, see Daniel T. Rodgers's discussion of the 1889 Paris Exposition in *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1999), 11–20.
- ³²Geo. E. McNeill, *The Eight Hour Primer: The Fact, Theory and the Argument. Eight Hour Series No. 1* (Washington, DC: AFL, 1889); George Gunton, *The Economic and Social Importance of the Eight-Hour Movement. Eight-Hour Series No. 2* (Washington, DC: AFL, 1889); Lemuel Danryid, *History and Philosophy of the Eight-Hour Movement Eight-Hour Series, No. 3* (Washington, DC: AFL, 1899), 8; George Gunton, *Principles of Social Economics, Inductively Considered and Practically Applied with Criticism on Current Theories* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1892), x.
- ³³Peter Gay, *The Dilemma of Democratic Socialism: Eduard Bernstein's Challenge to Marx* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952), 123–30; Miller, *Victor Berger and the Promise of Constructive Socialism*, 158; Samuel Gompers, "Revision or 'Revolution,'" *American Federationist* (Aug. 1914): 649–50.
- ³⁴Kaufman, *Gompers*, 44; Alexander Yard, "Coercive Government within a Minimal State: The Idea of Public Opinion in Gilded Age Labor Reform Culture," *Labor History* 34 (Fall 1993): 443–56; Richard Schneirov, "Political Cultures and the Role of the State in Labor's Republic: The View from Chicago, 1848–1877," *Labor History* 32 (Summer 1991): 376–400.
- ³⁵Gary M. Fink, "The Rejection of Voluntarism," *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* 26 (Jan. 1973): 805–19; Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory*, 285; Richard Schneirov "William English Walling: Socialist and Labor Progressive," introduction to William English Walling, *American Labor and American Democracy* (1926; New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2005).
- ³⁶Each of these three remarkable intellectuals was sympathetic and close to the AFL. See William English Walling, *American Labor and American Democracy*, Hardman, "Union Objectives and Social Power," 100–13; and Michael Merrill, "Even Conservative Unions Have Revolutionary Effects: Frank Tannenbaum on the Labor Movement," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 77 (Spring 2010): 115–33.

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An Address before the International Labor Congress in Chicago [August 28, 1893]
What Does Labor Want?

Samuel Gompers

A legend of ancient Rome relates that while the capitol was building, there came one day to the tyrannical king Tarquin the Proud, a poor old woman carrying nine books of the prophecies of the Sibyl, which she offered to sell for three hundred pieces of gold. The king laughingly bade her go away, which she did; but after burning three of the books she returned and asked the same price for the remaining six. Again treated with scorn, she retired, burnt three more of the volumes, and then came back demanding the same sum for the three which were left. Astonished at this conduct, the king consulted his wise men, who answered him that in those nine books, six of which had been lost, were contained the fate of the city and the Roman people.

To-day the marvelous Sibyl, who grows the grain, yet goes a-hungred; who weaves the silken robes of pride, yet goes threadbare; who mines the coal and the precious ores, yet goes cold and penniless; who rears the gorgeous palaces, yet herds in noisome basements, she again appears. This old, yet ever young Sibyl, called labor, offers to modern society the fate of modern civilization. What is her demand? Modern society, the most complex organization yet evolved by the human race, is based on one simple fact, the practical separation of the capitalistic class from the great mass of the industrious.

If this separation were only that resulting from a differentiation in the functions of directions of industrial operations and their execution in detail then that separation would be regarded as real, direct progress. But the separation between the capitalistic class and the laboring mass is not so much a difference in industrial rank as it is a difference in social status, placing the laborers in a position involving a degradation of mind and body.

This distinction, scarcely noticeable in the United States before the previous generation, rapidly became more and more marked,

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increasing day by day, until at length it has widened into a veritable chasm; economic, social and moral. On each side of this seemingly impassable chasm, we see the hostile camps of rich and poor. On one side, a class in possession of all the tools and means of labor; on the other, an immense mass begging for the opportunity to labor. In the mansion, the soft notes betokening ease and security; in the tenement, the stifled wail of drudgery and poverty. The arrogance of the rich ever mounting in proportion to the debasement of the poor.

From across the chasm we hear the old familiar drone of the priests of Mammon, called "Political Economists." The words of the song they sing are stolen from the vocabulary of science, but the chant itself is the old barbaric lay. It tells us that the present absolute domination of wealth is the result of material and invariable laws, and counsels the laborers, whom they regard as ignorant and misguided, to patiently submit to the natural operations of the immutable law of "supply and demand." The laborers reply: They say that the political economists never learned sufficient science to know the difference between the operation of a natural law and the law on petty larceny. The day is past when the laborers could be cajoled or humbugged by the sacred chickens of the augers, or by the bogus laws of the political economists.

The laborers know that there are few historic facts capable of more complete demonstration than those showing when and how the capitalists gained possession of the tools and opportunities of labor. They know that the capitalists gained their industrial monopoly by the infamous abuse of arbitrary power on the part of royal and federal potentates. They know that by the exercise of this arbitrary power a well established system of industry was overthrown and absolute power was placed in the hands of the selfish incompetents. They know that the only industrial qualifications possessed by these incompetents was the ability to purchase charters, giving the purchaser a monopoly of a certain trade in a specified city, and that the price of such charters, the blood money of monopoly, was such paltry sums as forty shillings paid to the king or a few dollars to congressional (mis) representatives. They know that by the unscrupulous use of such monstrously unjust privileges competent master workmen were deprived of their hard-earned rights to conduct business, and were driven into the ranks of journeymen; that the journeymen were disfranchised, and that the endowment funds for the relief and support of sick and aged members of the guilds and Unions, the accumulation of generations, were confiscated. They know that thus did the capitalist class have its origin in force and fraud, shameless fraud, stooping so low in its abject

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meanness as to steal the Trade Union's sick, superannuated and burial funds.

The laborers well know how baseless is the claim made by the political economists that the subsequent development of the capitalist class was spontaneous and natural, for they know that the capitalists, not content with a monopoly of industry enabling them to increase the price of products at will and reduce the wages of labor to a bare subsistence also procured legislation forbidding the disfranchised and plundered workmen from organizing in their own defense.

The laborers will never forget that the coalition and conspiracy law, directed by the capitalist against the journeymen who had sublime fidelity and heroic courage to defend their natural rights to organization, punished them with slavery, torture and death. In short, the laborers know that the capitalist class had its origin in force and fraud, that it has maintained and extended its brutal sway, more or less directly through the agency of specified legislation, most ferocious and barbarous, but always in cynical disregard of all law save its own arbitrary will.

The first things to be recognized in a review of the capitalistic system are that the possessors of the tools and means of labor have not used their power to organize industry so much as to organize domestic and international industrial war, and that they have not used the means in their possession to produce utilities so much as to extract profits. The introduction of profits, instead of the introduction of honest goods, being the primary and constant object of the capitalistic system. We have a waste of labor appalling in its recklessness and inhumanity, a misuse of capital that is really criminal and a social condition of cheerless drudgery and hopeless poverty, of sickening apprehension and fathomless degradation almost threatening the continuance of civilization.

The state of industrial anarchy produced by the capitalist system is first strongly illustrated in the existence of a class of wealthy social parasites; those who do no work, never did any work, and never intended to work. This class of parasites devours incomes derived from many sources; from the stunted babies employed in the mills, mines and factories, to the lessees of the gambling hells and the profits of fashionable brothels; from the lands which the labor of others has made valuable; from royalties on coal and other minerals beneath the surface, the rent paying all cost of the houses many times over and the houses coming back to those who never paid for them.

Then we have the active capitalists — those engaged in business. This number must be divided into two classes; the first consisting of those

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legitimately using their capital in the production of utilities and honest goods. The second, those misusing their capital in the production of “bogus” imitations of luxuries; of adulterations, and of useless goods, the miserable makeshifts specially produced for the consumption of underpaid workers. With this “bogus” class must be included not only the jerry builders and the shoddy clothiers, but also the quack doctors and the shyster lawyers, also the mass of insurance and other agents and middlemen. Coming to the laborers, we must regard them not only according to their technical divisions as agricultural, mechanical, commercial, literary and domestic, with numerous subdivisions, but also as economically divided in three classes — those engaged in the production of utilities, those engaged in all other pursuits, and those constituting the general “reserve army” of labor.”

The first economic division of laborers consisting mainly of agriculturists, mechanics producing utilities, and a very limited portion of those engaged in commerce. Upon this moiety devolves the task of supporting itself, the parasitic capitalists, the “bogus” capitalists, the workers engaged in ministering to the demands of the parasitic capitalists, the workers employed in the production of “bogus” and the immense reserve army of labor; also the army and navy, the police, the host of petty public functionaries; also the stragglers from the reserve army of labor, including the beggars, the paupers, and those driven by want to crime.

We have seen that the possessors of the tools and means of industry have failed in establishing order in their own ranks as evidenced in the class of parasitic capitalists and a class of “bogus” capitalists, miserable counterfeiters, who rob the wealth producers of the just reward of honest work, while they degrade the workers by

making them accomplices in their fabrications, then rob them by compelling them to buy the worthless goods they have fabricated, and finally poisoning them with their adulterations.

While failing to protect society in its consumptive capacity, the capitalist class has shared and degraded society in its productive capacity.

It has accomplished this result by establishing alternating periods of enervating idleness and debilitating overwork, by undermining the very foundation of society, the family life of the workers, in reducing the wages of the adult male workers below the cost of family maintenance and then employing both sexes of all ages to compete against each other.

Our fathers are praying for pauper pay,
Our mothers with death's kiss are white;
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Our sons are the rich man's serfs by day
Our daughters his slaves by night,

and finally, by refusing to recognize the workers in a corporate capacity, and by invoking the collusion of their dependents, the judges and the legislators, to place the organized outside the pale of the law.

Nevertheless, in spite of all opposition, the Trade Unions have grown until they have become a power that none can hope to annihilate.

To-day modern society is beginning to regard the Trade Unions as the only hope of civilization; to regard them as the only power capable of evolving order out of the social chaos. But will the Sibyl's demand be regarded or heeded before it is too late? Let us hope so. The Trade Unions having a thorough knowledge of the origin and development of the capitalist class, entertains no desire for revenge or retaliation. The Trade Unions have deprecated the malevolent and unjust spirit with which they have had to contend in their protests and struggles against the abuse of the capitalist system, yet while seeking justice have not permitted their movement to become acrid by the desire for revenge. Their methods were always conservative, their steps evolutionary.

One of the greatest impediments to a better appreciation by the capitalists of the devoted efforts of the Trade Unions to establish harmony in the industrial relations, has been the perverted view taken by capitalists in regarding their capital as essentially if not absolutely their own, whereas, the Trade Unions, taking a more and comprehensive purer view, regard all capital, large and small, as the fruits of labor economics and discoveries, inventions and institutions of many generations of laborers and capitalists, of theoreticians and practitioners, practically as indivisible as a living man.

Another impediment to the establishment of correct industrial relations has resulted from the vicious interference of the political economists with their unscientific analogy between commercial commodities and human labor. The falsity of their analogy was exposed in 1850 by a Parisian workman who was being examined before a commission appointed by the French government to inquire into the condition of the working people. One of the commissioners took occasion to impress upon their

witnesses that labor was merely a merchandise. The workman replied, if “merchandise is not sold at one certain time, it can be sold at another, while if I do not sell my labor it is lost for all the world as well as myself; and as society lives only upon the results of labor, society is poorer to the whole extent of that which I have failed to produce.”

The more intelligent will however before long begin to appreciate

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the transcendent importance of the voluntary organization of labor, will recognize the justice of the claims made by that organization and will become conscious that there is nothing therein contained or involved that would be derogatory to the real dignity and interest of all, to voluntarily and frankly concur in.

In order to understand the wants of labor it is essential to conceive the hypothesis upon which the claims are based, hence the necessity of presenting the foregoing.

What does labor want? It wants the earth and the fullness thereof. There is nothing too precious, there is nothing too beautiful, too lofty, too ennobling, unless it is within the scope and comprehension of labor’s aspirations and wants. But to be more specific : The expressed demands of labor are, first and foremost, a reduction of the hours of daily labor to eight hours to-day, fewer to-morrow.

Is labor justified in making this demand? Let us examine the facts.

Within the past twenty-five years more inventions and discoveries have been made in the method of producing wealth than in the entire history of the world before. Steam power has been employed on the most extensive scale. The improvement of tools, the consequent division and subdivision of labor, and the force of electricity, so little known a few years ago, is now applied to an enormous extent. As a result, the productivity of the toiler with these new improved machines and forces has increased so manifold as to completely overshadow the product of the joint masses of past ages. Every effort, every ingenious device has been utilized to cultivate the greater productivity of the worker.

The fact that in the end the toilers must be the great body of the consumers, has been given little or no consideration at all. The tendency to employ the machines continuously (the worker has been made part of the machines) and the direction has been in the line of endeavoring to make the wealth producers work longer hours.

On the other hand, the organized labor movement, the Trade Unions, have concentrated all their forces upon the movement to reduce the hours of daily toil not only as has been often said, to lighten the burdens of drudgery and severe toil, but also to give the great body of the people more time, more opportunity, and more leisure, in order to create and increase their consumptive power; in other words, to relieve the choked and glutted condition of industry and commerce.

The prosperity of a nation, the success of a people, the civilizing influence of our era, can always be measured by the comparative consuming power of a people.

If, as it has often been said, cheap labor and long hours of toil are

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necessary to a country’s prosperity, commercially and industrially, China should necessarily be at the height of civilization.

Millions of willing heads, hands and hearts are ready to frame and to fashion the fabrics and supply the necessities as well as the desires of the people. There are hundreds of thousands of our fellow men and women who cannot find the opportunity to employ their powers, their brain and brawn, to satisfy their commonest and barest necessities to sustain life. In every city and town in this broad land plenty, gaunt figures, hungry men, and women with blanched faces, and children having the mark of premature age, and emaciated conditions indelibly impressed upon their countenances, stalk through the streets and highways. It does not require a philanthropist, nor even a humanitarian, to evidence deep concern or to give deep thought, in order to arrive at the conclusion that in the midst of plenty, such results are both unnatural and wrong. The ordinary man may truly inquire why it is that the political economist answers our demand for work by saying that the law of supply and demand, from which they say there is no relief, regulates these conditions. Might we not say fails to regulate them.

The organized working men and women, the producers of the wealth of the world, declare that men, women and children, with human brains and human hearts, should have a better consideration than inanimate and dormant things, usually known under the euphonious title of "Property." We maintain that it is both inhuman, barbaric and retrogressive to allow the members of the human family to suffer from want, while the very thing that could and would contribute to their wants and comforts as well as to the advantage of the entire people, are allowed to decay.

We demand a reduction of the hours of labor which would give a due share of work and wages to the reserve army of labor and eliminate many of the worst abuses of the industrial system now filling our poor houses and jails. The movement for the reduction of the hours of labor is contemporaneous with the introduction of labor-saving machinery and has been the most faithful of all reformatory attempts of modern times, since it has clearly revealed the power of the working people to realize an improved industrial system, and raises the hope that we may yet be able to stem the tide of economic, social and moral degradations, robbing those who work of four-fifths of their natural wages, and keeping the whole of society within a few months of destitution.

Labor demands and insists upon the exercise of the right to organize for self and mutual protection. The toilers want the abrogation of all laws discriminating against them in the exercise of those functions

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which make our organizations in the economic struggle a factor and not a farce.

That the lives and limbs of the wage-workers shall be regarded as sacred as those of all others of our fellow human beings; that an injury or destruction of either by reason of negligence or maliciousness of another, shall not leave him without redress simply because he is a wage-worker. We demand equality before the law, in fact as well as in theory.

The right to appear by counsel guaranteed by the Constitution of our country is one upon which labor is determined.

To prescribe in narrower limits to the wage-workers and urge as a special plea that right is accorded before the courts is insufficient. The counsel of the toilers have earned their diplomas by sacrifices made and scars received in the battle for labor's rights rather than the mental acquirements of legends and musty precedents of semi-barbaric ages. The diplomas of labor's counsel are not written on parchment, they are engraved in heart and mind. The court our counsels file their briefs in and make their pleas for justice, right and equality, are in the offices of the employers. The denial to labor of the right to be heard by counsel — their committees — is a violation of the spirit of a fundamental principle of our Republic.

And by no means the least demand of the Trade Unions is for adequate wages.

The importance of this demand is not likely to be under-estimated. Adam Smith says: "It is but equity that they who feed, clothe and lodge the whole body of the people, should have such a share of the produce of their labor as to be themselves tolerably well fed, clothed and lodged." But the Trade Unions demand is for better pay than that which Adam Smith deemed equitable. The Trades Unions, taking normal conditions as its point of view, regards the workman as the producer of the wealth of the world, and demands that wages (as long as the wage system may last), shall be sufficient to enable him to support his family in a manner consistent with existing civilization, and all that is required for maintaining and improving physical and mental health and the self-respect of human beings.

Render our lives while working as safe and healthful as modern science demonstrates it is possible. Give us better homes is just as potent a cry to-day as when Dickens voiced the yearnings of the people a generation ago.

Save our children in their infancy from being forced into the maelstrom of wage slavery; see to it that they are not dwarfed in body and mind or brought to a premature death by early drudgery. Give

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them the sunshine of the school and playground instead of the factory, the mine and the workshop.

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 labor.

These are the demands made by labor upon modern society and in their consideration is involved the fate of civilization. For:

There is a moving of men like the sea in its might,

The grand and resistless uprising of labor;

The banner it carries is justice and right,

It aims not the musket, it draws not the sabre.

But the sound of its tread, o'er the graves of the dead,

Shall startle the world and fill despots with dread;

For 'tis sworn that the land of the Fathers shall be
The home of the brave and the land of the free.
*What Does Labor Want? A Paper Read before the International Labor
Congress, Chicago, Ill., September, 1893* (New York, n.d.).