

# What Does the Working Man Want?

**Samuel Gompers**

## Introduction

The rapid expansion of manufacturing in the decades following the Civil War created great wealth in the United States, but that wealth was not equally distributed. Socialists, union leaders, and other advocates of worker rights complained that the owners of capital build their fortunes on the backs of working people. On May 1, 1890, Samuel Gompers (1850–1924), the president of the American Federation of Labor, addressed a gathering of working people and union leaders at Louisville, Kentucky. Gompers called for an eight-hour working day and more freedoms for working people in America and around the world. Unlike anarchist and socialist leaders or the more radical union officials in the Knights of Labor or the later IWW, Gompers preferred unionization and collective bargaining to political action or revolutions. He was willing to cooperate with business leaders and government officials to advance the cause of labor.

*Source: "A News Account of an Address in Louisville," in The Samuel Gompers Papers: The Early Years of the American Federation of Labor. Volume 2, 1887–1890. Edited by Stuart Kaufman. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 307–314.*

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## Document:

My friends, we have met here today to celebrate the idea that has prompted the thousands of working-people of Louisville and New Albany to parade the streets of y[our city]; that prompts the toilers of Chicago to turn out by their fifty thousand or hundred thousand of men; that prompts the vast army of wage-workers in New York to demonstrate their enthusiasm and appreciation of the importance of this idea; that prompts the toilers of England, Ireland, Germany, France, Italy, Spain, and Austria to defy the manifestos of the autocrats of the world and say that on May the first, 1890, the wage-workers of the world will lay down their tools in sympathy with the wageworkers of America, to establish a principle of limitation of hours of labor to eight hours for sleep, eight hours for work, and eight hours for what we will.

It has been charged time and again that were we to have more hours of leisure we would merely devote it to debauchery, to the cultivation of vicious habits—in other words, that we would get drunk. I desire to say this in answer to that charge: As a rule, there are two classes in society who get drunk. One is that class who has no work to do in consequence of too much money; the other class, who also has no work to do, because it can't get any, and gets drunk on its face. I maintain that that class in our social life that exhibits the greatest degree of sobriety is that class who are able, by a fair number of hours of day's work to earn fair wages—not overworked. The man who

works twelve, fourteen, and sixteen hours a day requires some artificial stimulant to restore the life ground out of him in the drudgery of the day. ...

Now, I don't want to see drunkenness on the part of any one, nor is it my intention to make a temperance speech, but we have outlived the charge made against us that we have devoted our leisure time to drunkenness and debauchery. I ask you where you find your tradesmen and mechanics and other workmen working more hours a day, is it not a fact that there is a larger degree of drunkenness in the community than where they work nine, ten or eight hours? And where the shorter hours have ruled, you find there is a greater degree of sobriety, far surpassing anything that has ever been seen before.

We ought to be able to discuss this question on a higher ground, and I am pleased to say that the movement in which we are engaged will stimulate us to it. They tell us that the eight-hour movement can not be enforced, for the reason that it must check industrial and commercial progress. I say that the history of this country, in its industrial and commercial relations, shows the reverse. I say that is the plane on which this question ought to be discussed—that is the social question. As long as they make this question an economic one, I am willing to discuss it with them. I would retrace every step I have taken to advance this movement did it mean industrial and commercial stagnation. But it does not mean that. It means greater prosperity; it means a greater degree of progress for the whole people; it means more advancement and intelligence, and a nobler race of people. I would not unsay one word that I have said, except to make it stronger. I would not retrace one step I have taken in my connection with this movement for the eight-hour law. I call on the wage-workers of Louisville and New Albany and the whole world to enforce it.

They say they can't afford it. Is that true? Let us see for one moment. If a reduction in the hours of labor causes industrial and commercial ruination, it would naturally follow increased hours of labor would increase the prosperity, commercial and industrial. If that were true, England and America ought to be at the tail end, and China at the head of civilization.

"Is it not a fact that we find laborers in England and the United States, where the hours are eight, nine and ten hours a day—do we not find that the employers and laborers are more successful? Don't we find them selling articles cheaper? We do not need to trust the modern moralist to tell us those things. In all industries where the hours of labor are long, there you will find the least development of the power of invention. Where the hours of labor are long, men are cheap, and where men are cheap there is no necessity for invention. How can you expect a man to work ten or twelve or fourteen hours at his calling and then devote any time to the invention of a machine or discovery of a new principle or force? If he be so fortunate as to be able to read a paper he will fall asleep before he has read through the second or third line.

"Why, when you reduce the hours of labor, say an hour a day, just think what it means. Suppose men who work ten hours a day had the time lessened to nine, or men who

work nine hours a day have it reduced to eight hours; what does it mean? It means millions of golden hours and opportunities for thought. Some men might say you will go to sleep. Well, some men might sleep sixteen hours in a day; the ordinary man might try that, but he would soon find he could not do it long. He would have to do something. He would probably go to the theater one night, to a concert another night, but he could not do that every night. He would probably become interested in some study and the hours that have been taken from manual labor are devoted to mental labor, and the mental labor of one hour will produce for him more wealth than the physical labor of a dozen hours.

“I maintain that this is a true proposition—that men under the short-hour system not only have opportunity to improve themselves, but to make a greater degree of prosperity for their employers. Why, my friends, how is it in China, how is it in Spain, how is it in India and Russia, how is it in Italy? Cast your eye throughout the universe and observe the industry that forces nature to yield up its fruits to man’s necessities, and you will find that where the hours of labor are the shortest the progress of invention in machinery and the prosperity of the people are the greatest. It is the greatest impediment to progress to hire men cheaply. Wherever men are cheap, there you find the least degree of progress. It has only been under the great influence of our great republic, where our people have exhibited their great senses, that we can move forward, upward and onward, and are watched with interest in our movements of progress and reform.

“I have said this much about the employers and their interest as connected with this question of the reduction of the hours of labor. Now, I want to say a word as to the workingman. There are many people who believe that when the hours of labor are shortened wages necessarily fall. There is no more unsound proposition, politically or socially. We notice that in any country where the hours of labor are longest, not only are the employers the poorest, but the wage-workers are the poorest. It applies not only to countries, but it applies with the same force to States and cities, to different shops in cities, and affects the different industries in any one city. You notice in any of the establishments of Louisville or New Albany, or any other place you have been in, that the people who enter the factory or establishment the earliest in the morning and leave it the latest at night always receive the lowest wages in that establishment. And you notice that those who come latest in the morning and leave earliest in the evening are the best paid. This is no dream; it is a truth. I have another thought to express, if you have patience to listen. First: A man who works eight hours a day can’t afford to work as cheap as the man who works sixteen or eighteen hours a day. I will tell you why: The man who works eight hours a day has sixteen hours a day left. He must do something with them. He will go to the theater, read a magazine, or visit a friend at home, and when he does so he must have decent clothes.

“He may take his wife or his best girl to a friend’s. If he happens to be married, he takes his wife, and he wants her to be neat and clean and dressed fairly well. When his friend visits him he wants to have, probably, a pretty picture on the wall, or perhaps a piano or organ in his parlor; and he wishes everything about him to be bright and attractive. Take the other working man; he has no necessity for decent clothes—nobody comes to see

him; he simply comes home to go to bed. He does not see his wife except when he returns from his work, and he is too tired to think about pictures and pianos. When he comes home the lamp is turned down ready for him to go to bed. For books and the study of political economy, or books treating of the condition of the people, or the current news in the newspapers, he has no time. Why, if it depended on him, you would not see the boasting publications of the papers claiming to have the largest circulation in the world. You will always find that the wage-worker who works the longest hours in the day has the least. Take, for example, China. There you will find that he receives six or eight cents a day—enough to pay for his rice and an occasional rat, as a luxury. You will find in the foreign countries people receiving in wages about as much as will supply them with those degrees of comfort that they are willing to live upon. In France they get enough to buy a square meal and a little wine. In America, workingmen can have a beefsteak much oftener, and perhaps a little better beefsteak, because they demand it. Whenever a man finds that he can live on just so much, he generally finds also that he doesn't get a cent more than what is necessary to get it. If a workingman thinks he can live on a sandwich and a herring, he is pretty apt to find that his employer is going to pay him just enough to get that sandwich and herring.

“The man who works the long hours has no necessities except the barest to keep body and soul together, so he can work. He goes to sleep and dreams of work; he rises in the morning to go to work; he takes his frugal lunch to work; he comes home again to throw himself down on a miserable apology for a bed so that he can get that little rest that he may be able to go to work again. He is nothing but a veritable machine. He lives to work instead of working to live.

“My friends, the only thing the working people need besides the necessities of life, is time. Time. Time with which our lives begin; time with which our lives close; time to cultivate the better nature within us; time to brighten our homes. Time, which brings us from the lowest condition up to the highest civilization; time, so that we can raise men to a higher plane.

“My friends, you will find that it has been ascertained that there is more than a million of our brothers and sisters—able-bodied men and women—on the streets, and on the highways and byways of our country willing to work but who cannot find it. You know that it is the theory of our government that we can work or cease to work at will. It is only a theory. You know that it is only a theory and not a fact. It is true that we can cease to work when we want to, but I deny that we can work when we will, so long as there are a million idle men and women tramping the streets of our cities, searching for work. The theory that we can work or cease to work when we will is a delusion and a snare. It is a lie.

“What we want to consider is, first, to make our employment more secure, and, secondly, to make wages more permanent, and, thirdly, to give these poor people a chance to work. The laborer has been regarded as a mere producing machine, as Judge Toney said, but back of labor is the soul of man and honesty of purpose and aspiration. Now you can not, as the political economists and college professors, say that

labor is a commodity to be bought and sold. I say we are American citizens with the heritage of all the great men who have stood before us; men who have sacrificed all in the cause except honor. Our enemies would like to see this movement thrust into hades, they would like to see it in a warmer climate, but I say to you that this labor movement has come to stay. ... I say the labor movement is a fixed fact. It has grown out of the necessities of the people, and, although some may desire to see it fail, still the labor movement will be found to have a strong lodgment in the hearts of the people, and we will go on until success has been achieved.

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