

Samuel Gompers, Testimony before Congress, 1900



ABOUT THE READING Samuel Gompers was president of the American Federation of Labor from 1886 to 1924. He lobbied for shorter working hours, safer working conditions, and collective bargaining rights. Gompers believed that unions would not only protect workers' interests, but would also lead to opportunities for workers to educate themselves and to improve their lives. In this passage, Gompers discusses the barriers that workers faced in the struggle for better working conditions.

VOCABULARY

arbitration settlement of a dispute by a third party

enjoined prohibited by court order

jug jail

injunction a written order granted by a court



As you read think about how Gompers describes the relationship between employers and workers.

We ask for State legislation, and we are told to go to the Federal Government; we come to the Federal Government and it is contended that these things rightfully belong to the States. It does not make a particle of difference. If we come here to the Federal Government and ask for remedial legislation, we are told that these things will come when they become a custom, and not by legislation. And then we go to employers, to their companies, and ask them to confer with us in order to inaugurate that custom, and they tell us, "If you do not get out of here we will put a boot in a place where it will feel uncomfortable." If we strike or ask that the matter be submitted to arbitration, we are told there is nothing to arbitrate. If we strike in order to enforce what we believe to be our rights, we are **enjoined**; and if we exercise what we believe to be our rights in spite of

Neither the state nor the federal government wants to help the unions. Each insists the welfare of workers is the other's responsibility.

If the labor union asks for someone to help settle the dispute, then the union is told there is no dispute.

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the **injunction**, we are guilty of contempt of court and are put in the **jug** during his honor's pleasure. There is not anywhere we can go for the purpose of trying to bring about some remedy, some change, some improvement but we are met by the same opposition, prompted by the same cause, prompted by the same motive, and that is to leave the workman helpless to the mercy of the employing class. I think, though, I may say that that time has gone by. The workingmen of our country have learned somewhat of their rights, and they propose to stand by them, and they have the courage to do so, too.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. According to the federal government, how would the improvements the workers wanted be achieved?

2. Why did Gompers think labor legislation was necessary? Do you agree or disagree? Explain your answer.

3. Judging by this testimony, do you believe that the labor unions were trying to follow the law? Explain your answer using details from the excerpt.
