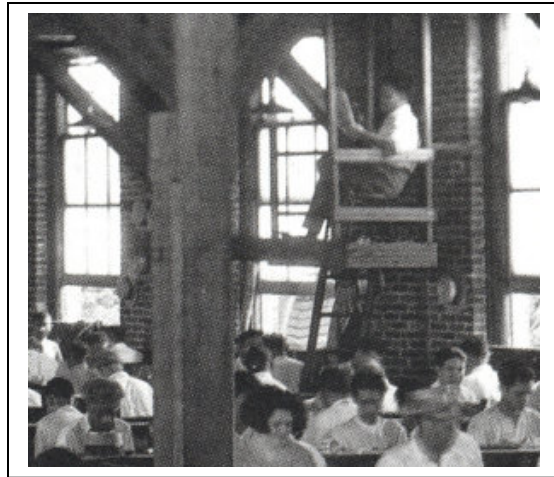


**SAMUEL
GOMPERS'
CLASSROOMS
1873**



In 1873, Samuel Gompers, future leader of the American Labor movement, joined an educational trade-union oriented club that sought out economic and social issues to read about and discuss among themselves. This was one of several “classrooms” through which Gompers, who left school at a very early age, acquired his formal education. His most important “classroom” of all was, however, the factory where he earned a living, became a labor leader, and began to influence American’s history.

The follow excerpt is from Gompers’ Autobiography, where he explains how his quiet workplace created a unique “classroom.” Read the material, paying particular attention to the final two sentences. It is the goal of this course to try and duplicate the spirit that Gompers and his “shop mates” experienced over one hundred and thirty years ago.

Any kind of an old loft served as a cigar shop. If there were enough windows, we had sufficient light for our work; if not, it was apparently no concern of the management. There was an entirely different conception of sanitation both in the shop and in the home of those days from now. The toilet facilities were a water-closet and a sink for washing purposes, usually located by the closet. In most cigar shops our towels were the bagging that came around the bales of Havana and other high grades of tobacco. Cigar shops were always dusty from the tobacco stems and powdered leaves, Benches and work tables were not designed to enable the workmen to adjust bodies and arms comfortable to work surface. Each workman supplied his own cutting board of lignum vitae and knife blade.

The tobacco leaf was prepared by strippers who drew the leaves from the heavy stem and put them in pads of about fifty. The leaves had to be handled carefully to prevent tearing. The craftsmanship of the cigar maker

was shown in his ability to utilize wrappers to the best advantage to shave off the unusable to a hairbreadth, to roll so as to cover holes in the leaf and to use both hands so as to make a perfectly shaped and rolled product. These things a good cigar maker 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 feeling in song. Often we chose someone to read to us who were a particularly good reader, and in payment the rest of us gave him sufficient of our cigars so he was not the loser. The reading was always followed by discussion, so we learned to know each other pretty thoroughly. We learned who could take a joke in good spirit, who could marshal his thoughts in an orderly way, who could distinguish clever sophistry from sound reasoning. The fellowship that grew between congenial shop mates was something that lasted a lifetime.

(Samuel Gompers, *Seventy Years of Life and Labor: An Autobiography*, (New York: E.P. Dutton & Company, 1925), pp. 44-45.

Now go to the Samuel Gompers Project's web site and read "Who Was Samuel Gompers, Anyway?" and look over the Timeline on the site devoted to his life.