

Research Article

Lessons Learned from the American Federation of Labor Regarding Crisis Leadership and Innovative Managerial Practices in January 1899

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Abstract

The study delves into the tactics and crisis handling exhibited by the American Federation of Labor (abbreviated as AFL) focusing on a week in January 1899 as detailed in the AFLs historical letters stored in the Library of Congress (document mss51185, on reel 18, in volume 26). The paper brings attention to lessons, for management, and social science by studying how the AFL handles strikes and national organizing challenges along with its responses to lockouts, in a crisis scenario focusing on decision making under pressure delegation of tasks democratic leadership and intelligence gathering. The research investigates historical events which include The Textile Strike in Augusta, the Ludington Lockout Crisis and Delaware labor intelligence efforts that demonstrate enduring examples of proactive Information Gathering, Strategic Benchmarking, Efficient Communication, Pragmatic Leadership, and Collaborative hotspots - effective management for modern research. Utilizing both the documents and insights, from scholars specialized in labor history reveals how AFL President Samuel Gompers (1850-1924) along with his associates showcased leadership abilities-managing swift decision making alongside seeking input, from others and cultivating inclusive unity-despite the challenges posed by industrial unrest. Samuel Gompers played a role, within the AFL back, in January 1899. During that time frame he contributed to the development of management strategies. Showcased crisis leadership skills.

Keywords

Samuel Gompers, American Federation of Labor (AFL), January 1899, Management Strategies, Crisis Leadership

1. Introduction

During the 1800s, in Americas history; there was a boom in industrial growth with many labor conflicts and disputes happening regularly [1]. The relationship between workers and employers was changing drastically during this time. Samuel Gompers led the American Federation of Labor to become the labor union in the country [2]. Their role was not just to support workers but to deal with the various challenges,

in politics and the economy back then. During the week of January 21-27, in 1899 was marked by labor tension that demanded swift action and creative leadership approaches [3]. The documented records of the AFL during this time shed light on the obstacles faced when navigating a large scale federation amidst turmoil and disputes [4]. Historical records indicate that textile employees had been protesting for nine

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Received: 16 July 2025; **Accepted:** 5 August 2025; **Published:** 5 September 2025



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weeks, against salary cuts. The president has chosen Will H Winn to assist and coordinate the workers in Augusta and the broader Southern region [5]. Meanwhile in Ludington Michigan workers face a lockout situation by their employer. The president acted swiftly by assigning Henry C Barter from the Longshoremens Union who's familiar, with the work and nearby location to help settle the disagreement without waiting for Council approval [6]. This research aims to delve into the management strategies and crisis leadership of the AFL during a week, in January 1899. It specifically looks into decision making processes, leadership delegation practices, mechanisms of accountability and strategies for union inclusion. Through an examination of seven letters penned by Samuel Gompers, the research endeavors to reveal how the AFL managed the demand, for action while upholding principles of collaborative decision making and strategic information gathering. The importance of the research issue is evident, in its connection to studies and modern management research [8]. While there is literature on the growth of the labor movement little focus has been given to the internal management strategies and crisis management approaches that enabled organizations such, as the AFL to endure and adjust amidst significant obstacles [10, 11]. Exploring how Gompers and his peers handled these challenges not enhances our understanding of labor history. Also provides valuable insights, for contemporary organizations facing instability and the requirement, for diverse leadership. Recent studies, in the history of labor have brought attention to the difficulties that the AFL encountered when trying to unite workers from backgrounds such as race and gender and from different regions. This was especially evident in the states where employer resistance and racial segregation were particularly strong. Scholars like Eric Arnesen and Wayne Flynt have emphasized how the South presented both a chance for organized labor to flourish and a formidable obstacle, to its progress. Dorothy Sue Cobble has brought up how the AFL is finding ways to connect directly with groups by bypassing traditional channels. However, there have been limited studies looking into how the AFL makes crisis decisions on a day, to day basis and how they document these processes in their communication. By combining records, with academic viewpoints in this study aims to close that divide and present the discoveries not just to labor historians but also to researchers and professionals in areas like business administration and social studies, as a whole [16].

2. Methodology and Sources

This study focuses on an examination of seven documents - letters penned and signed by Samuel Gompers between January 21st and 27th in the year 1899 - archived in the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress (cataloged as mss51185. reel 18. vol 26). The documents that were reviewed consist of letters including one, from Samuel Gompers to Jerome Jones dated January 25th 1899 (fol. 44, 45)

letters from Gompers to members of Executive Council, on January 26th 1899 (fol. 46) William J Spencer (fol. 47) James O'Connell (fol. 48) William J Gillhrop (page 49) Theodore J Shaffer (fol. 50) and P. J McGuire (fol. 51). During the research process we chose documents written by Gompers within a week to delve into a period of organizational efforts and decision making activities accurately focused on that timeframe. We carefully transcribed each letter word for word. Meticulously analyzed them for insights, into Gompers managerial abilities such, as his methods of communication, leadership style, negotiation tactics, and problem solving strategies. We manually encoded the themes identified in the letters using tools as needed to highlight recurring trends in how challenges were addressed and management approaches were implemented [9]. A comparison was made of the correspondence to evaluate the similarities and differences, in Gompers' management approach when communicating with recipients and in situations.

3. Results

Samuel Gompers correspondence analysis uncovers five leadership abilities that're still relevant today in management practices. He showed decision making by dealing with crises-a strategy valuable for organizations to effectively tackle pressing issues in today world. His use of data driven approaches align with the focus, on evidence based management and analytics before critical judgments are made. Gompers' effective delegation empowered individuals to manage tasks; showcasing the significance of trusting team members and utilizing expertise for optimal outcomes. His leadership style that includes everyone and supports the involvement of marginalized groups resonates with the present day focus, on diversity and inclusion that tends to enhance the strength and creativity of organizations. Moreover, his dedication to accountability by presenting decisions for evaluation emphasizes the importance of transparency and shared governance in promoting a culture of trust and collaboration, in modern management practices.

4. Discussion

4.1. Textile Strike in Augusta, Georgia

In the correspondences (fol. 44, 45) the attention is drawn to the textile strike happening in Augusta, Georgia. Gompers communicates with Jerome Jones mentioning the urgency for measures for the Textile Workers currently engaged in a strike, in Augusta. He designates Mr. West from Columbus as an organizer, for a duration of four weeks [3]. The firm and resolute reaction indicates a rising acknowledgment that workers, in the regions need to be included in the labor union movement for the AFL to achieve success across the nation despite facing racial and employer oppositions. As high-

lighted by Wayne Flynt and Eric Arnesens [13] discussions the South posed both a prospect and a daunting hurdle for labor during the transition, into the new century [18]. The strategy employed by Gompers mirrors the method outlined by Dorothy Sue Cobble [14], for AFL's "affiliate" approach. Deploying organizers directly to establish local unions and circumventing traditional or unproductive intermediaries as required. When Gompers speaks of supporting an "union, with an positive goal " it indicates a willingness to embrace innovative organizing methods and promote solidarity across racial lines despite the significant challenges faced during that era [12]. The message highlights that it is time for AFL to ramp up its efforts, in the region among both "white and colored wage earners." This shows an acknowledgment of requiring union initiatives in a region marked by deep racial divides. In his letter to the Executive Council on January 26th of 1899 (fol. 46) Gompers defends his appointments in a time situation by saying that "These appointments were made without being able to seek consent, from the Executive Council." The query presented to you is this. Should the President's actions, in these situations receive approval?" This combination of decision making and democratic confirmation showcases an responsible leadership approach. Moreover, to collect information efficiently Gompers sends inquiries, to different leaders of craft unions like Spencer, O'Connell, Gillhop, Shaffer and McGuire. These requests ask for details on wages and hours in comparison to aspects. They inquire if the conditions are better or worse than average and if there is any form of organization present along with its extent. This showcases an approach based on information gathering and collaboration, across unions. The manuscripts also show a value of inclusivity when Gompers states that "We strongly believe in unwavering unionism... I firmly believe that women should not be left out of union activities." It is crucial for everyone to feel included and secure, within the union community.

4.2. The Ludington Lockout Crisis - Effective Delegation, Distributed Leadership

In the months of 1899, in Ludington Laborers' Union in Michigan encountered a problem. Their employer resorted to a 'lockout' strategy where workers were barred from entering their workplace as part of a labor disagreement situation arising within the union grounds itself causing concerns for its sustainability and impacting the worker's income stability along with the standing of organized labor, in that area. Samuel Gompers faced a task as the head of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) needing to react while handling responsibilities and ensuring accountability, within the organization during a crisis in Ludington Michigan Laborers' Union lockout situation was addressed promptly by Gompers without delay; "The Laborers' Union in Ludington is facing a lockout issue; we have a representative here in town working on their behalf, with the Executive Council ready to provide

necessary support" [7]. Of waiting for approval, from the executives before taking any actions on the matter at hand Gompers decided to entrust Henry C. Barber with the responsibility, a local expert in unions who had firsthand knowledge of the situation. This highlighted the significance of aligning talents and resources to address crisis needs. By selecting Barter due to his familiarity with the work and proximity to the location Gompers ensured that the unions response would be prompt and efficient. Moreover, Gompers granted Barter the authority to make decisions on site demonstrating a leadership approach and confidence, in representatives. As he swiftly made these choices Gompers stayed open and accountable, by keeping the Executive Council informed and seeking their approval afterwards; "I made these appointments without consulting the Executive Council. Now I ask you this; Should the Presidents decisions, in these matters be supported?" This mix of decision making and subsequent democratic approval is a part of effective leadership. Gompers consistently promoted togetherness and encouragement among union members by expressing his trust, in their dedication and skills with words like " I'm confident that you will do everything you can to make it happen." These various strategies - reactions to issues, at hand assigning tasks, strategically giving authority, holding individuals accountable and boosting morale signify a rounded and principled method of dealing with crises as evidenced in the AFLs 1899 letters [15].

4.3. Wilmington, Delaware Labor Intelligence Gathering

In January of 1899 when the American labor movement was dealing with unrest and growing union participation, in the United States of America (USA) the American Federation of Labor led by Samuel Gompers at that time saw a need to increase its impact not in troubled Delaware but across other regions as well where questions about working conditions and union presence among skilled workers arose as an important concern point of discussion. In order to ensure that the AFLs resources and organizing strategies were put to use in the efficient way possible during this critical period of time Gompers reached out to key figures, within various national craft unions seeking reliable and comparative data to guide their initiatives moving forward. His aim was to collect information, about salaries and working hours as the level of union representation, in Wilmington so that the AFL could better understand the situation and provide appropriate assistance. The examination draws from correspondences sent to union leaders including William J Spencer and James O'Connell among others on January 26th in 1899. He reached out to the leaders of the union requesting details, on aspects like wages and working hours in comparison to key factors such as the average standards and presence of any organized structure there [19]. This emphasis, on gathering facts demonstrates a management approach rooted in data analysis

and evidence based practices. Gompers introduced the idea of benchmark by asking leaders to compare the conditions, in Wilmington with those in locations. He sent letters to leaders in trades like plumbers and carpenters to streamline the process and maintain consistency, in the information collected. This approach facilitated comparisons and effective analysis of the situation. He established goals, for those providing information to him by saying that he didn't require figures and details but rather something close to being accurate. His emphasis on seeking achievable insights of striving for perfection showcases his ability to adapt and be flexible as a manager. Through his efforts in reaching out to union leaders, across the country Gompers fostered a sense of accountability among them. This helped strengthen a network and ensured that decisions made at the level were grounded in the realities of local communities. [19].

4.4. Inclusion and Union Membership

During this phase, in history for the American Federation of Labor (AFL) there was a growing debate surrounding the inclusion of workers and women in its unions-a topic of particular significance in the racially segregated South and in emerging industries where more women were joining the labor force. In a communication to Jerome Jones concerning this issue directly addressed by Gompers states that "We stand firm in our belief, in consistent unionism... I firmly believe that women should not be excluded from union membership as everyone deserves rights..." [3, 17]. When it comes to worker's rights issue according to Gompers perspective is straightforward; he argues that all workers should be included in unions regardless of their skin color to fulfill the social goals. He mentions the importance of creating union with a beneficial purpose hinting at being open, to more inclusive ways of organizing [3]. Gompers decisions and messages are rooted in values focused on the idea of consistent unity that goes beyond discrimination based on race or gender. By expressing these ideas and setting a compass for the organizations direction, through Principle Leadership demonstration that states "We uphold the values of thoroughness and unwavering commitment to unity... It is my belief that women should not face exclusion from unity efforts; everyone deserves security..." [3]. He acknowledges that the AFL's resilience lies in bringing all workers including those from marginalized backgrounds. This stance is not about ethics but about the practical aspect of things; it recognizes the need for inclusivity, from both an organizational and strategic standpoint. Strategic Inclusivity is evident, in Gompers mention of the need for action to support the Textile Workers currently striking in Augusta and his emphasis on involving both colored wage earners, in union initiatives [3]. Of avoiding or stifling discussions regarding race or gender issues Gompers tackles them openly and takes charge to diminish internal conflicts by providing clear guidance. Gompers is sending a message to the union membership by saying "All must be

secure " indicating that inclusion is now an official policy of the AFL and giving local leaders the confidence to do the same, without hesitation. He demonstrates a readiness to rethink approaches by mentioning the possibility of supporting union with a positive and consistent goal in mind. Showing adaptability, in both structure and strategy to promote inclusivity. His willingness to embrace " structures and solidarity across racial lines" is evident, in his readiness to side-step traditional conservative channels and establish new community organizations when necessary [18].

4.5. Democratic Ratification

Democratic approval, within the AFLs crisis in January 1899 involved Gompers swiftly addressing labor issues like deploying organizers to strikes or handling lockouts on his initiative before seeking endorsement, from the AFL Executive Council for his actions later on. When time was urgent decisions needed to be made swiftly in certain situations Gompers didn't delay for the lengthy process of receiving full Council approval. Instead after taking action by organizers and allocating resources to support textile workers on strike, in Augusta and laborers locked out in Ludington, he presented his choices to the leadership for their approval. To illustrate, Gompers informed the Council that these appointments had been made without waiting for the consent of the Executive Council. The query posed to you is this - *Should the Presidents deeds in these affairs be supported?* This indicates that Gompers did not view his power as boundless or dictatorial but acknowledged the authority of the Council and valued transparency. In this scenario "democratic validation" implies that decisive action taken by a leader during a crisis was reviewed and validated by official collective consent post action. The method upheld the efficiency of handling crises and the idea of leadership in the AFL.

The AFL documents, from January 1899 provide an enlightening insight into the management obstacles and innovative practices of the labor movement during a critical period in its development. In a collection of correspondence and assessments from that time frame Samuel Gompers and the AFL leadership showcased a combination of responsiveness in times of crisis purposeful guidance and transparent accountability. Through actions when confronted with strikes and lockouts-as signing trusted coordinators as required and rallying support, before formal authorization- Gompers embodied effective crisis leadership. His actions consistently reflected a dedication, to seeking approval through Executive Council support promptly sought afterward-a strategy that kept the AFL agile and credible while avoiding gridlock and upholding collective decision making values. Equally significant is the insight provided by these documents into the AFL's developing ethos of inclusivity and strategic acumen. Gompers vocal support for organizing all workers of their race or gender indicated a substantial transition, towards a more inclusive and socially conscious union movement. His

dedication, to collecting information and evaluating working conditions in areas often disregarded like the Southern regions and sectors such as port work and daily labor showcased a shift towards leadership based on evidence and proactive engagement with the community at large. The compilation of events and choices detailed in these seven correspondences demonstrate principles of management that hold true even in current times. The significance of quick and well informed responses in times of crisis; the need for responsibility and collaborative decision making; and the value of broadening inclusivity and unity within an organization. The events that occurred in January 1899 within the AFL highlight the importance of leadership in times of crisis well as the need for leaders to be open to democratic oversight and input when making decisions affecting the organization and its members. The actions taken by Gompers and his team during that period set a base for the labor movement as we know it today and provide insights on how to navigate conflicts dynamic situations and shared goals effectively, over time.

5. Conclusion

The AFL correspondence from January 1899 delivers more than historical information because it contains principles which remain relevant for modern management practices. The crisis management effectiveness of Samuel Gompers during the Augusta Textile Strike and Ludington Lockout and his intelligence-gathering activities depends on decisive action and strategic delegation and inclusive decision-making and post-action accountability. The crisis management skills of Gompers became evident through his quick response to these situations by sending trusted personnel followed by democratic approval for stabilization of organizations under pressure. Gompers chose Mr. West to deliver aid to the Augusta Georgia textile strike immediately because he needed to bypass Executive Council approval to meet urgent needs. During the Ludington Michigan lockout he delegated authority to Henry C. Barber because of his local knowledge and then submitted his appointments to the Executive Council for approval while maintaining operational flexibility. Gompers used wage and hour data from various craft unions to evaluate Wilmington Delaware conditions before resource allocation while fighting for workplace inclusion of white and Black and women workers in hostile segregated areas. The episodes demonstrate three essential management lessons which remain relevant today: leaders should take decisive action during emergencies and assign critical tasks to trusted experts while obtaining democratic validation for their quick decisions and base their choices on practical data and build strength through inclusive practices. Leaders who implement these practices in modern business and public and nonprofit sectors achieve better results in uncertain times while building confidence and strengthening long-term resilience and maintaining organizational integrity.

Abbreviations

AFL	The American Federation of Labor
fol	Folio, Latin Folium
mss	Manuscript
USA	United States of America
vol	Volume

Author Contributions

Jovana Pavlovic is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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