Workers leaving the Pullman Palace Car Works in 1893. The Pullman Strike was a nationwide railroad strike that started on May 11, 1894. Many of the Pullman factory workers joined the American Railway Union led by union leader Eugene V. Dubs. Photo from Wikimedia Commons

In the mid-1800s, most work in America was done on farms. By 1900, the work had shifted to the factory.

Most Americans living in the late 1800s worked 10-hour shifts, six days a week, for very little money. There were no laws that protected workers. Children as young as 8 worked. Medical coverage did not exist, and pregnant women were often fired. People who got hurt on the job got nothing.

Workers form unions to demand change

Soon workers realized that they must unite to demand change. Together, they formed unions to bargain with factory owners.

Organized labor has brought tremendous positive change to working Americans. Today, many workers enjoy higher wages, better hours, and safer working conditions.
Battle between workers and bosses

The battle was clearly drawn between workers or bosses. Each side had their own tools. Workers often used the strike. They would stop working so the company would lose money. They hoped this would make the owners agree to some changes. Most of the time, workers were demanding higher pay and better working conditions.

In desperate times, workers sometimes sabotaged equipment or used violence.
Tactics used by bosses

Owners had tools of their own. Sometimes they enacted a lockout, or a reverse strike. The owners would tell workers not to show up until they agreed to a pay cut. Sometimes they made workers promise to never join a union.
Bosses hired strikebreakers, called scabs, to take the place of the regular workers during a strike. The striking workers often responded with violence.

Before the 1900s, the government never sided with the union. Bosses persuaded the courts to declare a strike illegal. If the strike continued, the participants would be thrown into prison. The government would even be willing to send the army.

**The National Labor Union**

By 1866, there were about 200,000 workers in local unions across the United States. The first nationwide labor organization was named the National Labor Union. The NLU fought for higher wages and shorter hours. It also focused on political issues, like ending prison labor.

The NLU brought together skilled and unskilled workers, as well as farmers. (Skilled workers have a special skill, training, or knowledge, like plumbers or cooks.) However, it did not admit African-Americans. Unfortunately for the NLU, it tried to represent too many different groups. Soon after 1873, the National Labor Union withered away.

**The Knights of Labor**

The Knights of Labor was next. Begun as a secret society in 1869, the Knights admitted all workers, including women and African-Americans.

The Knights supported the entire political agenda of the NLU and more. At the height of its membership in 1886, the Knights boasted 750,000 workers. But then disaster struck.

**Tragedy in Haymarket Square**

In May 1886, the Knights went on strike demanding an eight-hour day for all workers. At a rally in Haymarket Square in Chicago, someone threw a bomb into the crowd. One police officer died and several people were injured.

Who was responsible? No one was really sure, but the American press, government, and general public blamed the Knights of Labor. Membership began to fall greatly.
American Federation of Labor

The next big labor organization was the American Federation of Labor. It was started by Samuel Gompers in 1886. The AFL was a loose grouping of smaller craft unions, such as the cigar makers' union and the hat makers' union. Every member of the AFL was a skilled worker.

Samuel Gompers was born in London in 1850. He came to New York City during the Civil War. He was a very good organizer and speaker.

Gompers wanted to keep it simple. He focused on "bread and butter" issues of higher wages and better working conditions. This helped him maintain the support of the American government and public. By 1900, the number of AFL members swelled to over 500,000.

Unions were growing in size and importance. There were over 20,000 strikes in America in the last 20 years of the 19th century. In many cases, workers' demands were completely or partially met. The AFL served as the most important national labor organization until the Great Depression.
Eugene V. Debs and American socialism

Still, some Americans still held extreme views. American socialists based their beliefs on the writings of the German philosopher Karl Marx. Socialists are basically the same as communists. They suggested that the government should divide money more equally. They also thought that the government or workers should own the factories.

Eugene V. Debs founded the American socialist movement. He formed the American Railway Union in 1892.

Two years later he led one of the largest strikes in American history — the great Pullman Strike. When its workers refused to accept a pay cut, the Pullman Car Company fired 5,000 workers. To show support, Debs called for the members of the American Railway Union to stop operating any trains that used Pullman cars. The strike was shut down by the government.

Debs’ experience with the Pullman Strike led him to believe that extreme action was necessary.

The following year, the Socialist Party was formed. At its height, the party numbered over 100,000 active members. Debs ran for U.S. president five times. In the election of 1912, he received over 900,000 votes.

The "Wobblies"

Even more extreme than the Socialists were the members of the Industrial Workers of the World, the IWW. Founded in 1905, the "Wobblies" encouraged their members to fight for justice directly against business owners. Although small in number, they led hundreds of strikes across America. The IWW sent a strong message across America that workers were being mistreated.