In the early days of industry, workers had little protection. They were often injured on the job.

**Labor Unions**

Some employees began forming organizations called labor unions. These groups tried to force business owners to increase wages, shorten the workday, improve safety in the workplace, and provide insurance benefits. Union members thought if every single worker demanded these things, the owners would have no choice but to provide them.

Some labor unions held strikes to demand better wages. A strike is a time when workers refuse to work until business owners meet their demands. Strikes made the owners of factories and mines angry. They often called in the police to end the strike. Business owners also hired strikebreakers to work while their employees were striking. Union members hated strikebreakers because as long as people were working, business owners didn’t have to meet union demands.

**Samuel Gompers**

Samuel Gompers was born in London and moved with his family to New York City when he was 13. In London, Gompers had learned to make cigars. After arriving in America, he went right to work in a cigar factory. Gompers listened intently as the men around him argued about unions’ and workers' rights. He joined the Cigar Rollers’ Union when he was 14, but the organization soon collapsed.

Gompers was very skilled at making cigars, and he knew he should be treated fairly. He read newspapers, magazines, and pamphlets about labor unions and reorganized the Cigar Workers’ Union. He believed unions should be part of the basic structure of American business. He also believed workers were no better or worse than business owners—they just had different jobs.

After many years of working with various unions, Gompers realized most small unions had the same goals—safer working conditions and higher pay. He believed unions could accomplish more if they joined together. Gompers met with several union leaders and organized the American Federation of Labor (AFL). He became its first president.

Within ten years, the AFL had more than one million members. As part of this huge organization, labor unions of all kinds had much more power. They were able to negotiate for far higher wages and safer work environments.