

# Labor Unions

The factory system developed during the Industrial Revolution as a new way of producing goods by employing machine power, division of labor, and unskilled workers. These manufacturing efficiencies came along with dangerous working conditions and long hours. There were no laws that set minimum safety standards in the workplace. There was no minimum wage, and there were no laws to protect workers from being treated poorly or even fired by their employers if they complained.

Eventually workers in all industries began to come together into groups to demand changes. These groups were called labor unions. The first labor unions in the United States formed during the Industrial Revolution. A labor union is a large group of workers, typically working in the same field, that use the strength of their numbers to ensure that workers rights are protected. While a factory owner could simply fire one or two complaining workers, he could not afford to lose his entire workforce. Labor unions fought for safer working conditions, shorter work hours, and higher wages.



Labor unions used several tactics to achieve their goals. They would negotiate on behalf of the workers for better conditions or higher wages. Often, when an agreement could not be reached with the factory owners, the labor unions would organize a strike. A strike is when workers refuse to work, en masse, until their demands are met. Strikes often became violent. For example, during the Great Railroad Strike of 1877, workers went on strike after the B&O Railroad company reduced their wages for the third time in a year. The strikers tried to prevent the trains from running, and government troops were called in to stop the strike. The strike lasted 45 days, and several strikers were killed. The strike was unsuccessful in getting higher wages restored; however, it made workers realize that they did have power in their relationship with their employer.