In the mid-19th century, the vast majority of American work was still done on the farm. By the turn of the 20th century, the United States economy revolved around the factory.

Most Americans living between the 1870s and 1900 – also known as the Gilded Age – worked 10-hour shifts, six days a week, for wages barely enough to survive. Men, women, and children as young as 8 worked tirelessly. Medical coverage did not exist, and pregnant women were often fired. People who got hurt on the job got nothing.

**Workers unite to demand change**

Soon workers realized that they must unite to demand change. They lacked money, education, or political power, but they knew that there were simply more workers than there were owners. Together, they formed unions to bargain with factory owners.
Bosses often took extreme measures to prevent a union from taking hold. Still, slowly but surely unions grew.

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

It began with the Great Upheaval. Railroad workers in West Virginia decided they had had enough when their pay was cut for the second time in eight months. On July 16, 1877, they declared that no train would leave until the owners restored their pay.

It took federal troops to arrive before the trains could leave, and even then they were sabotaged and harassed. Only one train reached its destination.
Workers versus bosses

The battle was clearly drawn between workers and bosses, and each side had their own tools.
Workers often used the strike – they stopped working so that the company would lose money and eventually agree to a change. Most of the time, workers were demanding higher wages and better working conditions.

In small communities, workers could also convince the townspeople to boycott. Townspeople would stop buying things from a factory until the owners agreed to change.

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

**Management strikes back**

Owners had tools of their own, like a lockout, or a reverse strike, in which the owner tells the employees not to show up until they agree to a pay cut. Sometimes they made workers sign a yellow-dog contract, or an oath to never join a union.

Bosses hired strikebreakers, or scabs, to take the place of the regular labor force during a strike. The striking workers often responded with violence.

Before the 20th century, the government never sided with the union – strikes were often declared illegal, and strikers were thrown into prison. The government sometimes even sent 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 banning prison labor.

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

**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. 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 laborers. 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 an effective 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 ranks of the AFL 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 were basically like communists, and based their beliefs on the writings of Karl Marx, the German philosopher. They suggested that the government should own all industries and divide the money more equally.

Eugene V. Debs founded the American socialist movement. He was born in Indiana in 1855 and 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 5000 employees. 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 was not originally a socialist, but his experience with the Pullman Strike led him to believe that drastic 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, or IWW. Founded in 1905, the "Wobblies" encouraged their members to fight for justice directly against their employers. Although small in number, they led hundreds of strikes across America. The IWW won few battles, but their efforts sent a strong message across America that workers were being mistreated.
Quiz

1 Which paragraph from the section "Workers unite to demand change" supports the inference that workers took a big risk when they formed a union?

2 Read the paragraphs from the section "Workers versus bosses."

In small communities, workers could also convince the townspeople to boycott. Townspeople would stop buying things from a factory until the owners agreed to change.

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

Which conclusion is BEST supported by these paragraphs?

(A) Workers in small cities often got the support of townspeople by threatening them with violence.

(B) People in small communities often took the side of the workers against the bosses.

(C) People in small communities were often willing to help workers commit violent acts.

(D) Workers in large cities were often more successful at striking than workers in small cities.

3 Read the section "Eugene V. Debs and American socialism."

How does this section differ from all the other sections?

(A) It provides information about a union founder.

(B) It describes the results of a strike by union members.

(C) It identifies the type of workers in a union.

(D) It describes how a strike led to the formation of a political party.
Read the section "The Wobblies."

How does this section contribute to the main idea of the article?

(A) It provides another example of a union that used strikes to fight for justice for its workers.

(B) It shows that some unions were very successful in using strikes to achieve their goals.

(C) It suggests that the smaller unions were more successful than the larger unions.

(D) It provides an example of a union that encouraged workers to work together with employers.