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As America's factories grow in the late 19th century, so do the demands for unions as workers struggle with long hours, low wages and dangerous working conditions.

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Transcript

The Rise of Labor Unions

NARRATOR: As America’s industrial economy grew in the late 19th century, factories replaced farms, and workers struggled with long hours, low wages, and dangerous working conditions. At mills, mines, and railroads across the country, workers soon began to organize unions.

Professor CHRIS CAPOZOLLA (MIT): 1870 is an important turning point. The Census reveals for the first time that the majority of American men work for a living, work for someone else. So this old America of small businesses and farms is just starting to disappear. By the 1880s, things were moving very quickly, and industrialization was underway. There were all kinds of new labor movements popping up.

CAPOZOLLA: The Knights of Labor is designed to protect workers’ independence, and it’s designed to be open to everyone. There are only four kinds of people who are excluded from membership in the Knights of Labor: Bankers, lawyers, liquor dealers and professional gamblers.

NARRATOR: Though the Knights initially had lofty goals to reform the American economy, its power began to fade in 1886 after a railroad company squashed the workers’ effort to strike. As the Knights’ role in the labor movement was shrinking, another organization, called the American Federation of Labor, or AFL, was gaining strength. It was led by cigar-maker Samuel Gompers.

O’DONNELL: Gompers was a key figure. And he kind of stepped away from some of the visionary goals...
of the Knights of Labor, who really wanted to transform society in a lot of ways. And he said, “Really, it’s about bread and butter issues. It’s about short hours, higher wages, better conditions, and that’s it.” And the AFL was very successful in a lot of ways.

NARRATOR: Successful and long-standing. After merging with the Congress of Industrial Organizations in 1955, the AFL became the AFL-CIO and continues to be a key force in the American labor movement today.