

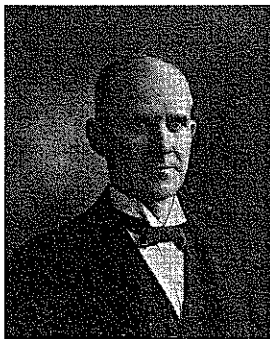
THE TRIUMPH OF INDUSTRY

Biography

Industrialization in the United States brought a wave of new wealth, innovation, and improved standards of living. Still, many people struggled to get by. Workers—in factories and mines, on railroads and ships—faced long hours, low wages, unsafe working conditions, and poor and crowded housing. These circumstances drove many workers to demand change. ♦ *As you read the following biographies, think about what each labor leader hoped to accomplish. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.*

Labor Leaders**Samuel Gompers (1850–1924)**

In 1863, at the age of 13, Samuel Gompers left his home in England to come to the United States. Like his father, he went to work as a cigar maker in New York City



Samuel Gompers,
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and joined the Cigarmakers' Union. Nearly 10 years later, Gompers went on to lead the American Federation of Labor. Gompers encouraged workers to organize by craft. He avoided party politics, convinced that labor unions should focus on increasing wages, gaining benefits, and improving working conditions through written contracts and collective bargaining. However, he did support presidential hopeful William Jennings Bryan in 1918 in order to protect unions from greater restrictions. He also delved into politics during World War I, when he formed the War Committee on Labor to encourage national unity. Gompers led the AFL from 1886 through 1894 and again from 1896 through his death in 1924.

Eugene V. Debs (1855–1926)

At age 14, Eugene V. Debs went to work in the railroad shops of Terre Haute and Indianapolis, Indiana. From there, he went on to help organize a branch of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen. Debs was committed to organizing industrial workers according to industry rather than according to craft. To this end, he helped start the American Railway Union, which



Eugene V. Debs,
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represented railroad workers who held many different jobs, and became its president. The American Railway Union experienced many successes and failures. Debs' imprisonment in connection with the 1895 Pullman strike made him more determined to fight for workers' rights. Debs, convinced that politics and labor rights were connected, ran for president on the Socialist ticket five times. In 1920, Debs received more than 900,000 votes for president, despite the fact that he was in prison for criticizing government enforcement of the Espionage Act.

Questions to Think About

1. Which labor leader was the first president of the American Federation of Labor?
2. Which labor leader started out in the railroad industry?
3. **Contrast** How did Gompers' approach to labor unions differ from that of Debs?
4. **Link Past to Present** Which labor leader's union remains most active today, and what tactic used by this union continues to dominate union efforts?