

Labor for Sale

While a handful of business leaders became rich, many Americans—especially immigrants—were mired in poverty. According to a 1906 report, more than 60 percent of American workers did not earn enough money to support a family. Having only their labor to sell, the poor in America included most factory and farm workers and almost all immigrants.

The "sweatshop" was a part of life for many immigrants who worked in cities. A sweatshop was a factory that also served as an apartment. Hours were long, pay was low, and working conditions were unsafe. Twenty or more employees often lived in the same apartment.

The average workweek in 1905 was 58 hours. A week's wage for the

average worker in this period was about \$25, though many—especially women and blacks—made less. As assembly lines were used more and more throughout industry, work became increasingly dull and, sometimes, dangerous. Accidents in factories were common.

Child Labor

Some sweatshop workers were children. For many of them, school was a luxury that their families could not afford. Nearly 2 million children under age 16 were employed in factories and fields in the early part of the 20th century. This was about 15 percent of the nation's schoolchildren. In 1900, one out of three workers in southern cotton mills was under age 16. Working



One Woman's Story

Ella May Wiggins had nine children to raise. Alone. Her husband had been crippled in a work accident. He became an alcoholic and left her.

Her 60-hour week working nights in a cotton mill paid just enough to buy groceries. Her nine children grew up in rural North Carolina without shoes or medicine. Four of them died of whooping cough.

Ella May joined the union at the cotton mill and became a leader. During a strike in September 1929, she was murdered by a mob that shouted, "We're all 100 percent Americans, and anybody that don't like it can go back to Russia."

This boy (above left), who lost two fingers in a factory accident in 1912, received no compensation from his company. The people below were slum dwellers.

hours and conditions were so severe that a 1907 law was passed to limit the time a child could work to 60 hours a week. This was considered humane.

After 12 hours on the job, children sometimes fell asleep at their work. This earned them a bucket of cold water in the face. Worse still, sleepy children sometimes got their fingers and hair caught in the machinery. Many were killed on the job. At that time, few companies set safety rules.

The Urban and Rural Poor

The poor in both factories and fields had little time for anything but work. Steelworkers had 12-hour workdays, six days a week. Sometimes they worked 16 or 24 hours at a time. In 1919, an unskilled worker at U.S. Steel earned less than \$1,500 a year—just barely enough to feed, clothe, and shelter a family of five. Others earned much less. A maid earned about \$7 a week, sometimes working 80 to 100 hours.

The living conditions of the poor were hardly any better. In cities, they were crowded together in small, dingy apartments that had little light or fresh air. The death rate for infants of the city poor was incredibly high—43 percent at the turn of the century. In the country, especially the rural South, few homes of the poor had an adequate roof or heat.

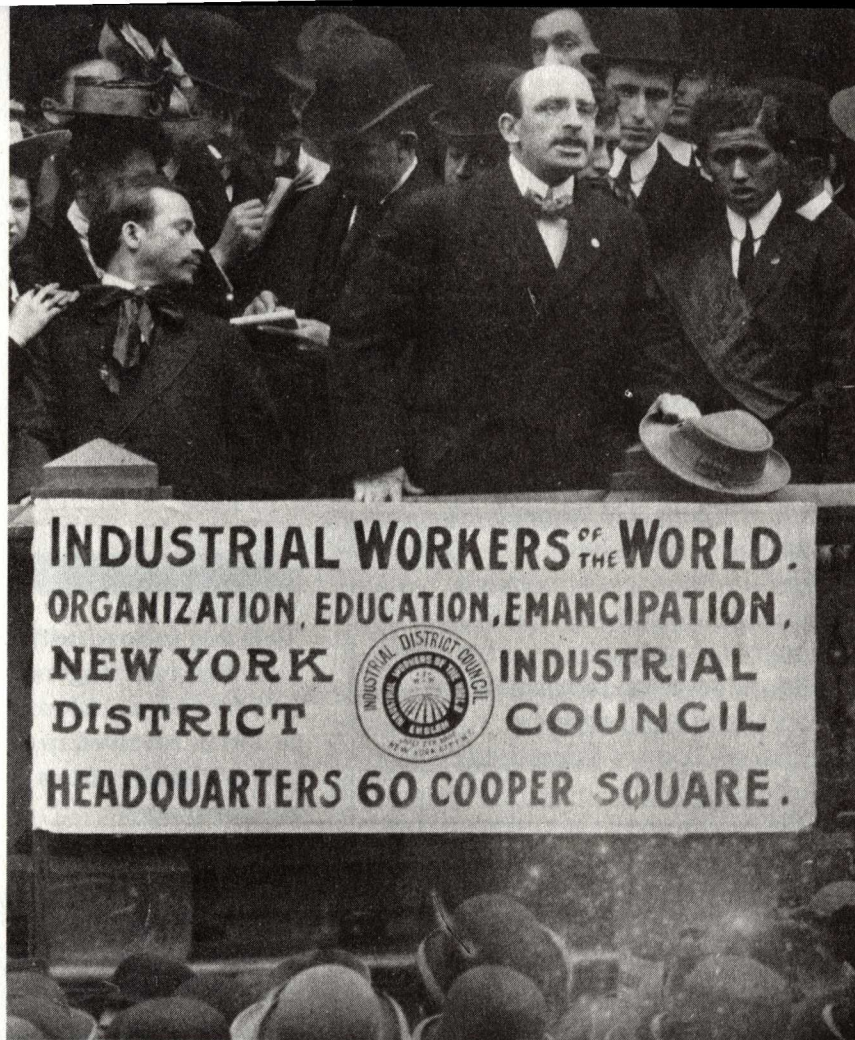
Unions Step In

To fight low wages and unbearable living conditions, workers had formed



Young factory workers (above) picket for better pay and time off for school. Coal mines (right) hired many young boys to work for low pay.





The Industrial Workers of the World was one of the most radical unions of the times. The IWW found members among the poorest of American workers.

Martyr for Labor's Struggles

After he was shot by a firing squad, IWW organizer Joe Hill became the symbol of the labor movement's struggle. Hill had made a name for himself as a writer of workers' songs. He took the melodies of popular gospel hymns and rewrote them with words that antiunion people considered dangerous.

In 1914, he was accused of killing a grocer in Utah. Many believed that the charges were false and his trial was unjust. He was found guilty and executed in 1915. More than 30,000 people attended his funeral. Legend has it that Joe Hill's last words were "Don't waste any time mourning. Organize!"

unions. They attracted millions of members. The American Federation of Labor (AFL) demanded shorter hours and higher wages. Other groups, including the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), fought for more extreme goals. The IWW wanted to end the pay-scale system and to overthrow capitalism.

The IWW was led by a towering figure, Big Bill Haywood. A mine accident had crushed one of his hands and left him blind in one eye. To workers, these injuries added to his power as a speaker and leader. The IWW found members among the poorest of American workers—especially migrant workers. Its members were called "Wobblies" and included a number of Communists. They carried red membership cards. Anticapitalist, antireligious songs were printed in the IWW's famous "Little Red Songbook."

The Wobblies quickly became the target of terrorist attacks. Conservatives feared a revolution like the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, in which workers overthrew the government. Attacks against the Wobblies got worse during and after World War I. Strikes in southern and western states, often organized by the IWW, turned into bloodbaths more than once. ■

In your opinion, do unions still help fight social injustice in the United States? Would you support a union boycott (organized refusal to use or buy a product)? If your answer is "It depends"—what does it depend on?