

# Sources from the Past

## Testimony for the Factory Act of 1833: Working Conditions in England

*During the 1830s and 1840s, deplorable conditions in England's factories and mines led the British Parliament to conduct a series of investigations on the subject. Investigators asked doctors, workers, and factory owners many questions about working conditions and their effects on laborers. The results of these investigations led to parliamentary legislation, such as the Factory Act of 1833, designed to protect workers from the worst effects of industrialization.*

Testimony of John Wright.

How long have you been employed in a silk-mill?—More than thirty years.

Did you enter it as a child?—Yes betwixt five and six.

How many hours a day did you work then?—The same thirty years ago as now.

What are those hours?—Eleven hours per day and two over-hours: over-hours are working after six in the evening until eight. The regular hours are from six in the morning to six in the evening, and two others are two over-hours. . . .

Why, then, are those employed in them said to be in such a wretched condition?—In the first place, the great number of hands congregated together, in some rooms forty, in some fifty, in some sixty, and I have known some as many as 100, which must be injurious to both health and growing. In the second place, the privy is in the factory, which frequently emits an unwholesome smell; and it would be worth while to notice in the future erection of mills, that there be betwixt the privy door and the factory wall a kind of a lobby of cage-work. 3dly, The tediousness and the everlasting sameness in the first process preys much on the spirits, and makes the hands spiritless. 4thly, the extravagant number of hours a child is compelled to labour and confinement, which for one week is seventy-six hours. . . . 5thly, About six months in the year we are obliged to use either gas, candles, or lamps, for the longest portion of that time,

nearly six hours a day, being obliged to work amid the smoke and soot of the same; and also a large portion of oil and grease is used in the mills.

What are the effects of the present system of labor? —From my earliest recollections, I have found the effects to be awfully detrimental to the well-being of the operative; I have observed frequently children carried to factories, unable to walk, and that entirely owing to excessive labour and confinement. The degradation of the workpeople baffles all description: frequently have two of my sisters been obliged to be assisted to the factory and home again, until by-and-by they could go no longer, being totally crippled in their legs. And in the next place, I remember some ten or twelve years ago working in one of the largest firms in Macclesfield, . . . with about twenty-two men, where they were scarce one half fit for His Majesty's service. Those that are straight in their limbs are stunted in their growth; much inferior to their fathers in point of strength. 3dly, Through excessive labour and confinement there is often a total loss of appetite; a kind of langour steals over the whole frame—enters to the very core—saps the foundation of the best constitution—and lays our strength prostrate in the dust. In the 4th place, by protracted labour there is an alarming increase of cripples in various parts of this town, which has come under my own observation and knowledge.

Are all these cripples made in the silk factories?—Yes, they are, I believe. . . .

### For Further Reflection

- In Wright's opinion, what aspect of labor in the silk factories is the most damaging for children?

Source: Dennis Sherman et al. *World Civilizations: Sources, Images, and Interpretations*, 3rd ed., Vol. II. Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2002, pp. 119–20.

stage for industrialization in western Europe by abolishing internal trade barriers and dismantling guilds that discouraged technological innovation and restricted the movement of laborers. The earliest continental center of industrial production was Belgium, where coal, iron, textile, glass, and armaments production flourished in the early nineteenth century. About the same time, France also moved toward industrialization. By 1830, French firms employed about fifteen thousand skilled British workers who helped establish mechanized textile and metallurgical industries in France. By the mid-nineteenth century, French engineers and inventors were devising refinements and innovations that led to greater efficiencies especially in metallurgical industries. Later in the century a boom in railroad construction stimulated

economic development while also leading to decreased transportation costs.

German industrialization proceeded more slowly than did Belgian and French, partly because of political instability resulting from competition between the many German states. After the 1840s, however, German coal and iron production soared, and by the 1850s an extensive railroad network was under construction. After unification in 1871, Bismarck's government sponsored rapid industrialization in Germany. In the interests of strengthening military capacity, Bismarck encouraged the development of heavy industry, and the formation of huge businesses became a hallmark of German industrialization. The giant Krupp firm, for example, dominated mining, metallurgy, armaments production, and shipbuilding.

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## Marx and Engels on Bourgeoisie and Proletarians

*Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels were the most scathing critics of early industrial society. Indeed, their critique extended to industrial capitalism in general. In their view, contemporary society pitted capitalists (whom they called the bourgeoisie in their Manifesto of the Communist Party) against proletarians. Marx and Engels argued that in the short term capitalists would exploit the proletarians, but that over the longer term proletarians would become aware of their misery, rise up, and destroy capitalist society.*

**The history of all hitherto** existing society is the history of class struggles.

Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes. . . .

The modern bourgeois society that has sprouted from the ruins of feudal society has not done away with class antagonisms. It has but established new classes, new conditions of oppression, new forms of struggle in place of the old ones.

Our epoch, the epoch of the bourgeoisie, possesses, however, this distinctive feature: it has simplified the class antagonisms. Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat. . . .

The bourgeoisie has stripped of its halo every occupation hitherto honoured and looked up to with reverent awe. It has converted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science, into its paid wage-labourers. . . .

The need for a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It

must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere. . . .

The weapons with which the bourgeoisie felled feudalism to the ground are now turned against the bourgeoisie itself.

But not only has the bourgeoisie forged the weapons that bring death to itself; it has also called into existence the proletariat, who are to wield those weapons—the modern working class—the proletarians.

In proportion as the bourgeoisie, i.e., capital, is developing, in the same proportion is the proletariat, the modern working class, developed—a class of labourers, who live only so long as they find work, and who find work only so long as their labour increases capital. These labourers, who must sell themselves piecemeal, are a commodity, like every other article of commerce, and are consequently exposed to all the vicissitudes of competition, to all the fluctuations of the market. . . .

The advance of industry, whose involuntary promoter is the bourgeoisie, replaces the isolation of the labourers, due to competition, by their revolutionary combination, due to association. The development of Modern Industry, therefore, cuts from under its feet the very foundation on which the bourgeoisie produces and appropriates products. What the bourgeoisie, therefore, produces, above all, is its own grave-diggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable.

### For Further Reflection

- How did Marx and Engels's historical embrace of the concept of class struggle shape their understanding of the great forces clashing during this industrial age?

*Source:* Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. Trans. by Samuel Moore. London: W. Reeves, 1888.

their hopes in representative governments and called for the election of legislators who supported socialist reforms.

**Social Reform** Although socialists did not win control of any government until the Russian revolution of 1917, their critiques—along with those of conservatives and liberals—persuaded government authorities to attack the abuses of early industrialization and provide security for the working classes. Parliament prohibited underground employment for women, like the drawer Betty Harris, as well as for boys and girls under age ten and stipulated that children under age nine not work more than nine hours a day. The 1830s and 1840s saw the inception of laws that regulated women's working hours,

while leaving men without protection and constraints. The intention behind this legislation was to protect women's family roles, but it also reduced women's economic opportunities on the grounds of their special frailty. Coming under pressure from the voting public and labor unions, governments increasingly accepted that the state was responsible for the social and economic welfare of its citizens. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, European countries, led by Germany, adopted social reform programs, including retirement pensions, minimum wage laws, sickness, accident, and unemployment insurance, and the regulation of hours and conditions of work. These reforms of liberal capitalist societies were a prelude to the modern welfare state.