

Module 05: Industrialization and Its Discontents: The Great Strike of 1877

Context

Industrialization and Wages

The Great Strike of 1877 occurred in direct response to the fundamental social, economic, and technological changes the United States had experienced during the previous century. In the hundred years since the nation's founding, industrialization had profoundly transformed America. The advent of large-scale factories, extensive transportation networks, and giant corporations had brought economic might to the nation, a seemingly endless stream of material goods to its citizens, and unprecedented wealth to those with enough disposable income to invest in the growing economy. But not everyone benefited equally from the economic expansion that had accompanied industrialization. In particular, America's working class — the men, women, and children who operated the machines that churned out goods in the nation's factories — felt they had disproportionately borne the burden of industrialization while failing to share in its benefits. Edward Bellamy's utopian novel, *Looking Backward* (1888), vividly captured a sense of how many working-class Americans came to view their plight. In it, he compared the American economy to a giant carriage in which "the masses of humanity were harnessed to and dragged toilsomely along a very hilly and sandy road." Hunger was the driver of the carriage and the well-to-do its passengers.

Uncertain Employment

As Bellamy's metaphor suggested, many workers, despite toiling long hours, barely managed to earn enough money to survive. While real wages had increased during the second half of the nineteenth century, many laborers still failed to receive a "living wage," the minimum amount necessary to provide the basic food, shelter, and clothing they and their family needed to stay alive. Regular expansions and contractions in the economy meant that boom periods of higher wages and full employment were inevitably followed by bust periods of wage reductions, shrinking work hours, and unemployment. Even during times when the economy was on a relatively even keel, about one third of laborers could expect to be without work for about three months of the year. As industrialization took hold, business cycles seemed to become increasingly severe. The long depression that began in 1873 and continued until 1879, for example, was characterized by

widespread business failures, a long series of wage cuts, a reduction in work hours, and unemployment rates reaching as high as 14 percent or more.

Inadequate Poor Relief

At the same time, the limited system of poor relief that had been created in the United States by the second half of the nineteenth century — chiefly public almshouses and private charities — was ill-equipped to deal with high unemployment rates and pervasive poverty. Many of those in positions of power embraced a philosophy captured in the old expression "root, hog, or die," meaning that individuals should work hard to provide for themselves and their families or face the harsh consequences of failure. Proponents of such a laissez-faire philosophy feared that guarantees of governmental or private poor relief would remove incentives to labor, causing workers to become unproductive and lazy.

The Changing Workplace

Changes in the organization of work and employer-employee relations further contributed to worker discontent. As industrialization took hold, the workplace became increasingly large and impersonal. Before the Civil War, most production took place in small workshops operated and directly supervised by their owners. Owners thus had constant contact with their workers, whom they came to know personally; the physical intimacy tended to make owners more sympathetic to their employees' plight and workers less likely to view owners as members of a class with diametrically opposed interests. After the war, giant factories employing hundreds, even thousands of laborers became common. Owners increasingly relied on a team of managers to deal with day-to-day operations in the factory, widening the social distance between them and their workers. As the size of factories increased, owners and managers came to view their employees less as individuals with their own needs and desires and more as interchangeable cogs in a machine. A manager summed up the spirit of the new era in 1883, when he offered a blunt analogy between his employees and the equipment in his factory: "I regard my people as I regard my machinery. So long as they can do my work for what I choose to pay them, I keep them, getting out of them all I can. What they do or how they fare outside my walls I don't care to know, nor do I consider my business to know. They must look out for themselves as I do myself" (Thernstrom 520).

The Deskilling of Labor

Industrialization also transformed the nature of work itself. Before the coming of large-scale factories, most goods were crafted by skilled artisans forced to complete long apprenticeship periods to learn their trade. Craftsmen took pride in their work and performed each of the various tasks needed to make a finished product. The modern factory, however, subdivided tasks to take maximum advantage of mechanization while making it possible to hire cheaper, less-skilled workers. The shoe industry serves as a typical example of the process of mechanization and the deskilling of craft labor. Trained artisans once constructed entire shoes themselves. By the late nineteenth century, however, factories had divided the shoe manufacturing process into dozens of different steps, each performed by different groups of laborers. Increasingly, factory workers remained at a single machine, performing the same mind-numbing task over and over again for days, months, even years at a time. The displacement of skilled labor that accompanied the growth of large, highly mechanized factories both demoralized workers and made them much easier to replace.

The Regimented Workplace

The length of the typical workweek became a common complaint. Long hours had been the norm before the Civil War, with the average non-agricultural laborer toiling about eleven hours a day, six days a week. In the small workhouses where most production took place, periods of intense effort were interspersed with long dinners, visits to nearby taverns, and other breaks that had become a commonly accepted part of the pre-industrial order. Industrialization resulted in a modest decrease in the average hours of work during the nineteenth century (to 60 hours per week by 1900), but the decrease was more than offset by the increased discipline imposed in modern factories. Managers established strict work schedules with little time for meal, bathroom, or other breaks, and foremen gained power to enforce the schedules with the threat of fines or dismissal. In the increasingly regimented workplace, factory employees were driven mercilessly to increase production rates.

Accident Rates

The furious work pace of the modern factory was not only physically exhausting but also quite dangerous. Without adequate safety measures in place, fatigued workers fell victim to appallingly high accident rates. By the late nineteenth century, industrial accidents took the lives of about 35,000 American wage earners

annually and more than a half a million of them missed three or more days of work due to serious job-related injuries. Injured workers and their families received little or no compensation for their lost income. While they might sue their employers for damages suffered, lawyers at the time remained expensive and plaintiffs in such cases rarely prevailed in court.

Conclusion

Low wages, uncertain employment, a lack of adequate poor relief, the emergence of large, impersonal workplaces, a deskilling of labor, rigid factory discipline, the dizzying pace of production, long hours, high accident rates, and a growing sense of worker dissatisfaction all contributed to the outbreak of the Great Strike of 1877. A new debate about the meaning of freedom in the industrial age had come to the forefront. Who would benefit from industrialization? What rights did workers possess? And what did freedom and equality mean in an increasingly industrial America? In the summer of 1877, just as Reconstruction came to an end, angry, helpless, and desperate workers went out on strike in an effort to make their voices heard.