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How the Other Side Lived

PAGE SMITH

Since the colonial era, a shortage of labor in America had kept wage levels higher here than overseas. Even so, the American worker had a miserable time of it in the grim industrial age. The expansion and mechanization of the factory system, which took place at an incredible rate after the Civil War, forced workers to make painful adjustments that reduced their status and independence.

Before industrialization, as C. Vann Woodward has said, skilled artisans who owned their own tools were likely to take pride in their craft and enjoy a strong bargaining position. The new factory system, Woodward points out, lowered the workers' status, forcing them to surrender their tools, a good deal of their bargaining power, and almost all the pride they took in their product. Under the employ of people they never knew and probably never saw, they operated a machine that made their craftsmanship insignificant, because their place at the machine could be taken by an unskilled worker. Their relationship to their work and to the boss became increasingly impersonal. With the factory growing ever larger, workers felt a dispiriting loss of identity, security, and meaning in the value of labor.

To make matters worse, the mass of statutes that protects factory workers today had not been enacted in the Gilded Age. This meant that laborers, including women and children, were at the mercy of the industrial bosses. In "company towns," employers owned all the houses, stores, and services and often bossed and harassed workers to the point of tyranny. With little to restrain them beyond their own consciences and the weak protest of labor, employers were likely to cut costs by slashing wages. Throughout the 1890s, wages remained at an average of $9 a week; farm workers received far less than that.

Despite how bad things were, workers in industrial America were slow to organize. Part of the problem was the bitter opposition of the industrial leaders, who broke strikes with

hired thugs and associated organized labor with socialism and anarchy. But another difficulty was the fragmentation of the work force, which was divided by color and race, sex and age, as well as by national origin, geography, philosophy, and styles of protest. The utopian Knights of Labor, founded in 1869, did attempt to unite the disparate working population, appealing to both skilled and unskilled workers regardless of race, color, or nationality. The Knights understood clearly that the consolidation of industry made the consolidation of labor imperative. Rejecting strikes as a useful weapon, the organization sought political as well as economic objectives, demanding equal pay for both sexes, an eight-hour workday, and the abolition of child labor. But the union was only marginally successful: at its peak, the Knights of Labor could claim little more than 700,000 members. When labor conditions became intolerable, workers in specific areas ignored the Knights of Labor and resorted to spontaneous strikes to protest their lot, only to meet with adamant hostility on the part of police, business and government leaders, and the public itself.

The other major union of the period was the conservative American Federation of Labor (AFL), a loose coalition of craft unions founded under Samuel Gompers in 1881. From the outset, the AFL shunned government intervention in management-labor relations and rejected political goals in favor of specific economic benefits for skilled workers alone. It had little quarrel with industrial consolidation, and it ignored the mass of unskilled laborers across the land.

Let us accompany historian Page Smith on a journey through the plants, railroads, steel mills, oil fields, and coal mines of the Gilded Age and examine the lives and working conditions of the men, women, and children employed by industrial captains such as Andrew Carnegie. As Smith makes clear, American workers in the iron age of industry toiled in conditions almost inconceivable to us today. Smith's account reminds us that, necessary though industrialization was for the United States, it came at a terrible human cost.

GLOSSARY

JONES, MARY "MOTHER" Legendary champion of the rights of miners and the author of a graphic "account of a miner's life."

MARX, ELEANOR, AND EDWARD AVELING The daughter of Karl Marx and her husband toured the United States in 1886, surveying labor conditions there and talking with socialists and labor leaders; the Avelings concluded that the condition of working men and women in America was as bad as that of Britain's laboring class.

PHILLIPS, WENDELL Former abolitionist who raised his voice on behalf of the American worker; he demanded higher wages and shorter working hours and urged organization and group efforts to challenge "the organization of capital."

THE SHANTY BOY A kind of documentary story about the brutal and dangerous conditions in American lumber camps.

In 1886 Karl Marx's daughter Eleanor Marx Aveling and her husband, Edward, visited the United States to make a general survey of labor conditions and to talk with socialists and labor leaders around the country. They were struck by the activity in the labor movement generally, both in unionization and in radical political action on the part of various socialist and anarchist groups. In their opinion, the condition of workingmen and women in the United States was in every important respect as bad as that of the British working class. In addition, unionization in America was twenty or thirty years behind that in Britain. On the other hand, there were far more labor newspapers and journals in the United States than in Britain. The Avelings counted ninety-seven, including one entitled the *Woman's World* and excluding most of the foreign-language socialist and labor journals. Wherever the Avelings went they addressed large crowds of working-class people with a substantial admixture of middle- and upper-class reformers. In a twelve-week tour they visited thirty-five cities and towns as far west as Kansas. The meetings were, the Avelings wrote, "with the very rarest exceptions, largely attended. In many places hundreds of people were unable to gain admission.... We have never spoken to any audiences like the American audiences for patience, fairness, anxiety to get at the meaning of the speaker," they added. The Avelings found an enormous curiosity about the doctrines of socialism, which heretofore had been preached largely by Germans for German immigrants. "And in every town we met, both in private and in public, the leading men and women in the various working-class organizations."

In the view of the Avelings, British laborers still believed that "there is a community of interests between them and their employers.... But in America this mutual deception is nearly at an end. The workingmen and the capitalists in the majority of cases quite understand that each, as a class, is the deadly and inexorable foe of the other...." The capitalists believed the struggle must end "in the subjugation of the working class," while the workingmen were equally convinced it would end "in the abolition of all classes."

... The Avelings were also struck by the degree to which the labor commissioners of the various states in their statistical reports revealed a profound sympathy for the workingmen and women of their states. The report of the Massachusetts commissioners on conditions in Fall River, for example, noted that "every mill in the city is making money ... but the operatives travel in the same old path — sickness, suffering, and small pay.... There is a state of things that should make men blush for shame."

In state after state the testimony of workers in different industrial crafts was monotonously the same. Things were getting worse with each passing year. "Times are harder now than I ever knew them before," a laborer in Kansas declared, while another said, "The condition of the laboring classes is too bad for utterance, and is rapidly growing worse." The testimony was also uniformly to the effect that "the rich and poor are further apart than ever before." A coal miner reported that he had had to move five times during the year to find employment. In Michigan a worker in a shoe factory testified: "Labor to-day is poorer paid than ever before; more discontent exists, more men in despair, and if a change is not soon devised, trouble must come...."

The Avelings were convinced by their reading of the reports of the state labor commissioners and their own observations that, hours and wages aside, the physical demands placed by American employers on their workers were much more severe than those prevailing in Britain. American laborers started to work at an earlier age than their British counterparts, worked more strenuously, and died, on the average,

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almost a decade earlier. Thus the life expectancy of a British iron molder was fifty years and eleven months, while "the American moulder dies before he reaches the age of forty. . . ."

Employers and foremen practiced innumerable small deceits: short measures in the cloth mills; short weights in the mines; fines for the mildest infractions of innumerable restrictive rules governing every action of the worker. Blacklists and intimidation were common. Many workers reported to the Avelings that they were afraid to be seen talking to them for fear of losing their jobs and being thereafter blacklisted as troublemakers, radicals, or union sympathizers. Workers were threatened with loss of their jobs simply for voting for political candidates antithetical to their employers. It was common practice for newly employed workers to be required to take an "ironclad oath" to belong to no working-class organization. Even subscription to a labor journal or newspaper could be cause for dismissal. Western Union, for example, required an oath which read, "I,— — —, . . . hereby promise and agree . . . that I will forthwith abandon any and all membership, connection, or affiliation with any organization or society, whether secret or open, which in any wise attempts to regulate the conditions of my services or the payment therefor. . . ." The Knights of Labor, which became the first major union in the country, was often specifically proscribed. The employees of the Warren Foundry were required immediately to "free [themselves] from a combination in hostility to the company. . . . If they are not willing to do so, we request them to leave our premises. . . ."

Employers often required their workers to accept in whole or in part company script in lieu of money, which script, needless to say, could be redeemed only at the company store. Companies commonly deducted from their employees' pay — in addition to advances from the company store — money for the salary of a doctor or nurse, rent for a company house, and coal given out by the company on credit. Thus it was not unusual for workers at the end of the year to find themselves actually in debt to the company that employed them. The reports of the New Jersey labor commissioners in 1884 contained numerous instances of workers who ended a year of labor in debt to the company. A worker in Paterson reported, "My actual earnings last year were but 100 dollars, while the cost of living was 400." A silk worker in the same town reported a 50 percent reduction in wages over a three-year period. A railroad employee told the Kansas commissioners: "A man . . . has to wait 50 days before he receives a cent of wages, and then only gets paid for 30 days, leaving the proceeds of 20 days' labor in the company's hands until he quits their employ."

Of a sample of 520 Michigan workers, 146 were paid weekly, 32 biweekly, 177 monthly, and 28 on demand, while 137 had no regular payday. Of the 137 with no regular payday, a number reported waiting 60 to 90 days for their pay. Only two-fifths of Michigan's factory employees were paid weekly, while two-fifths were paid monthly. As for hours, of 65,627 mill and factory "hands" in the state, 76 percent worked 60 hours a week or more. Moreover, 12 percent of the men, 22 percent of the women, and 34 percent of the children worked more than 10 hours daily.

Ironically, the men, better organized, worked on the average fewer hours than the women and children (the last worked longest of all). Tram drivers in Fall River, Massachusetts, worked an average of 15 hours a day, while for streetcar conductors in Kansas, 16 and 17 were standard. In New York bakers averaged 16 hours, six days a week. In the Pennsylvania coal mines 14 to 18 hours a day were typical, and one witness before the labor commissioners reported, "I know that some [men] go into the mines on Sunday, trying to make a living and cannot, while their employers own Sunday-schools, churches, preachers, Government bonds . . . with yachts, steamboats, orange plantations, and are very rich."

Along with low pay and long, long hours, workers in most trades and industries had to contend with

extended periods of unemployment. In Topeka, Kansas, in 1885, of 660 skilled workmen, 156 worked part-time and 108 had no work at all. During the year 1 out of 5 skilled and unskilled workers was unemployed.

A constant complaint voiced to the Avelings on their tour in 1886 was that hundreds of thousands of men had been displaced by machines, a fact confirmed by one Philadelphia manufacturer, who told the Avelings that in a thirty-year period "machinery has displaced 6 times the amount of hand labor formerly required." In carpets, weaving, spinning ten to twenty times fewer workers were required; in spinning alone seventy-five times fewer. In the milling of flour one person did the work done by four a few decades earlier, while in machine tooling "one boy can produce as much as was formerly produced by 10 skilled men." In mining the story was similar. In the Hocking Valley of Ohio, improved machines enabled 160 men to do the work of 500.

The housing conditions of working-class men and women had deteriorated to an alarming degree. In New York City in 1883 there were 25,000 tenement buildings containing 1,000,000 inhabitants. Some 19,000 tenements accommodated 50 or more persons each, and families of 6 to 8 people living in a single room were not uncommon. The New York labor commissioners noted that the tenants "cook, eat, and sleep in the same room, men, women, and children together. Refuse of every description makes the floors damp and slimy, and the puny, half-naked children crawl or slide about it."

At Fall River sixteen houses occupied by more than 500 human beings used the same privy, and the odor was hardly to be endured in summer. In Lowell "the tenants of a single block had to carry their refuse of all kinds, and human excrements ... into Austin Avenue for deposit." In another block in Lowell, commissioners counted thirty-six tenements containing thirty-six families and 396 persons. Such "excessively filthy," "unsanitary," "foul," wretched, and dirty lodgings were the property of the mill-owners, whose workers were often required to live in them as a condition of employment.

In cigarmaking operations, often carried on at home, "I see women," one witness reported to the New York labor commissioners, "surrounded by filth with children waddling in it, and having sores on their hands and faces and various parts of the body.... They are all the time handling this tobacco they make into cigars." Every industry had its own peculiar health hazards. "Sewing machine girls are subject to diseases of the womb," a report noted, "and when married mostly have miscarriages. In tobacco factories women are mostly affected with nervous and hysterical complaints, consumption and chest ailments...."

"We have lived in English factory towns," the Avelings wrote, "and know something of English factory hands; but we may fairly say we have never in the English Manchester seen women so worn out and degraded, such famine in their cheeks, such need and oppression, starving in their eyes, as in the women we saw trudging to their work in the New Hampshire Manchester. What must the children born of such women be?" A consequence of the starvation wages paid women workers and the uncertainty of their employment was that many of them were driven to part-time prostitution or, as the New York labor commissioners' report put it, "*quasi* prostitution.... When out of work they cohabit with one or two men, but when work was obtained dropped such associations." In addition, many women complained to the commissioners that they were taken advantage of sexually by their bosses or employers. In Kansas City and Indianapolis two clergymen told the Avelings "of the fearful state of women forced to choose between starvation and prostitution" in those "flourishing towns."

It was also evident to the Avelings that wherever possible men were replaced as factory operatives by women and children, who were paid far lower wages. The criterion in replacing a man with a woman or child was simply whether the latter had the strength to operate a particular machine.

The New Jersey labor commissioners noted: "Woman and child labor is much lower priced than that of men . . . the hours of labor are longer and the rate of wages less, women never agitate, they merely 'toil and scrimp, and bear.'" However, those women who joined the Knights of Labor received the same wages as the men. Tens of thousands of women worked in what later came to be called sweatshops as seamstresses paid by piecework. The New York labor bureau report for 1885 noted that an expert at crocheting shawls could make no more than 12 to 15 cents a day. Seamstresses, in addition, were required to pay for the machine and for the thread they used. A sewer earned $1.50 per dozen for trousers. Vests were 15 cents apiece; gloves, 90 cents a dozen. An experienced "tailoress" earned no more than $3 or $4 a week. Less skilled millinery workers made 12 cents a day and were paid every two weeks. While the law required that chairs be provided for women workers, they were frequently not allowed to sit down. Of 1,322 women studied in a survey of the New York clothing industry, 27 earned $6 per week and 534 earned $1 a week. Fines were exacted, such as 25 cents for being five minutes late (two days' wages for a millinery worker); $1 for eating at the loom; 25 cents for washing hands; for imperfect work, for sitting down, for taking a drink of water, and so on.

The rooms in which women worked were foul, poorly ventilated, dirty, and badly lighted. It was a common practice to lock the workers in their rooms, thereby risking lives in case of fire. "One hundred women and small girls work in a cellar without ventilation, and electric light burning all day," the New York commissioners reported. Workers often suffered crippling injuries and sometimes incurable diseases. A woman who made artificial flowers found that her hands had been "poisoned" by the coloring she used. When she could not work, she was discharged, and the labor commissioners had to bring suit against her employer to collect 50 cents in back wages.

Mill "girls" came in all ages; many were married, and many were immigrants and the daughters of immigrants. All of them received lower wages than their male coworkers. Before the advent of protective legislation, most worked longer hours than men, too. Although wretchedly paid, these textile workers may have been better off than their sisters in city sweatshops, who were paid by piecework and frequently earned no more than $1 a week. Despite their hard lives and soiled clothing, the women seem proud to be photographed on the job. (Museum of American Textile History)

Increasingly child labor competed with schooling. A report of the New Jersey labor commissioners of 1885 noted that of an estimated 343,897 children of school age in the state, 89,254 attended no school, and of these, the majority worked in factories or in mines. In New York, out of 1,685,000 children and young people between the ages of five and twenty-one, only 1,041,089 were listed as enrolled in the "common schools," and average daily attendance was 583,142. In other words, on any given day an average of 1,101,958 children were *absent from school.*

Fully a third of these Massillon, Ohio, iron-mill workers were children. On the average, children in nineteenth-century mines and factories worked ten hours a day, often in dangerous conditions, and were paid at the bottom of the wage scale. Frequently, child labor competed with schooling. In one city alone, on any given day, two-thirds of the school-age children were absent from school. Labor commissioners feared that the country was raising "an army of uneducated and undisciplined children." (Massillon Museum)

Even allowing for a number educated in private schools, the figure seemed to the commissioners "almost incredible." They declared: "An army of uneducated and undisciplined children is growing up among us."

Each year saw an increase in the numbers of children laboring. In Michigan statistics indicated that seventy-one "establishments" — factories and businesses — in forty-six towns and cities employed 350 boys and girls between eight and fourteen years of age. In New Jersey there were twice as many children employed in factories in 1880 as there had been ten years earlier, while the increase of women was 142 percent in the same time. In Detroit in 1885, ninety-two businesses employed 372 boys and girls at 50 cents a day for the boys and 31 cents for the girls. In Connecticut, out of a factory labor force of 70,000, 5,000 were children under fifteen.

In the mills of Yorkville, in New York City, children under fourteen worked an eleven-hour day,

while in the cigar factories, which employed many children, the workday was ten hours. "In the smaller bakeries," the Avelings reported, "children of from 9 to 13 start work at eleven at night and go on until 4 in the morning."

The Pennsylvania mines were dangerous places for boys. Thousands were killed or maimed each year without compensation or aid of any kind except that which might be provided by some local charitable group. The *Luzerne Union* reported in January, 1876: "During the past week nearly one boy a day has been killed, and the public has become so familiar with these calamities, that no attention is given them after the first announcement through a newspaper or a neighbor." A Sunday school convention that met in Scranton in 1874 was taken on a tour of the nearby mines, where they saw the "bare-footed, black-faced urchins . . . picking slate from the dusty diamonds" and then heard a lecture on the "wonders of the Great Creator" — that was to say, on fossils.

A Fall River textile worker named Thomas O'Donnell told a Senate Committee on Labor-Capital Relations in 1883: "I have a brother who has four children besides his wife and himself. All he earns is $1.50 a day. He works in the iron works at Fall River. He only works nine months out of twelve. There is generally three months of stoppage . . . and his wife and family all have to be supported for a year out of the wages of nine months — $1.50 a day for nine months to support six of them. It does not stand to reason that those children and he himself can have natural food and be naturally dressed. His children are often sick, and he has to call in doctors." O'Donnell himself earned $133 a year with which to feed a family of four. He dug clams and scavenged wood and coal.

Two seven-story factory buildings in Rochester, New York, one employing 150 and the other about 270 women, had only one stairway each. An Ohio fire inspector, describing similar conditions, wrote that "it is somewhat difficult to speak with calmness of men who, while liberally insuring their property against fire, so that in case of such a visitation — a danger always imminent — their pockets shall not suffer, will not spend a dollar for the security of the lives of those by whose labor they profit."

A Massachusetts labor commissioner sounded more like a reformer than a bureaucrat when he wrote at the end of a report describing the conditions of child labor in that state: "I plead for the little ones. . . . In these days of legislative interference, when the shield of the State protects the dumb beast from the merciless blows of his driver; when the over-worked horse is remembered and released from his work . . . it would seem pitiable if childhood's want of leisure for rest of body and education should be denied them. Massachusetts . . . goes on regardless of the consequences, protecting the strong, forgetting the weak and poor . . . under the false plea of non-interference with the liberty of the people. The children have rights that the State is bound to respect. Their right is to play and make merry; to be at school, to be players not workers."

Quite by accident the Avelings discovered one of the most exploited groups in the United States: cowboys. Taken by their hosts in Kansas City to a Wild West show, they got into conversation with a handsome, blue-eyed cowboy named Broncho John, who, with encouragement from the Avelings, described vividly the manner in which ranchers exploited their hands. "To our great astonishment," the Avelings wrote, "he plunged at once into a denunciation of capitalists in general and of ranchowners in particular. Broncho John estimated that there were at least 10,000 cowboys" — the Avelings believed there were many more — and "no class is harder worked . . . none so poorly paid for their services" because "they have no organization in back of them" while their employers had "one of the strongest and most systematic and, at the same time, despotic unions that was ever formed to awe and dictate to labor." Listening to Broncho John, the

Avelings, confident that "a Cowboy Assembly of the Knights of Labor or a Cowboy Union is sure to be started in the near future," devoted a whole chapter in their study *The Working-Class Movement in America* to the hardships of the cowboy.

Mary ("Mother") Jones, whose labors on behalf of miners made her a legendary figure among those who labored in the earth, wrote a vivid account of a coal miner's life: "Mining at best is wretched work, and the life and surroundings of the miner are hard and ugly. His work is down in the black depths of the earth. He works alone in a drift. There can be little friendly companionship as there is in the factory; as there is among men who build bridges and houses, working together in groups. The work is dirty. Coal dust grinds itself into the skin, never to be removed. The miner must stoop as he works in the drift. He becomes bent like a gnome. His work is utterly fatiguing. Muscles and bones ache. His lungs breathe coal dust and the strange, damp air of places that are never filled with sunlight. His house is a poor makeshift and there is little to encourage him to make it attractive.... Around his house is mud and slush. Great mounds of culm, black and sullen, surround him. His children are perpetually grimy from play on the culm mounds. The wife struggles with dirt, with inadequate water supply, with small wages, with overcrowded shacks."

The breaker boys, who picked flint and rocks out of the coal, Mary Jones wrote, "did men's work and they had men's ways, men's vices and men's pleasures. They fought and spit tobacco and told stories out on the culm piles of a Sunday. They joined the breaker boys union and beat up scabs." Mother Jones lamented to her death that there was "still too little joy and beauty in the miner's life"; the end of the "long, long struggle" was not yet.

Lumbering was akin to mining in the type of man it attracted and the arduous and highly hazardous nature of the work involved. John W. Fitzmaurice, who worked in lumber camps, told the story of them in *The Shanty Boy,* a kind of documentary which painted a vivid picture of the cruelly hard and dangerous conditions. He quoted the foreman of one such camp as declaring, "It's saw-logs we're after out here," and Fitzmaurice added, "it is saw logs men are after in the woods, and in the rush, push and crush to get them, God help the sick or wounded!" The men were pitted against each other in merciless competition for the number of logs cut in a day. At the end of each day the tally was made. "As each speaks the others listen nervously, and with ill-concealed jealousy, to the men with the big figures.... This hurry and rush brings to the surface the 'survival of the fittest,' and the weakling or debauched fall out by the way. Consequently, the hospital business never lags." The larger camps had bars and prostitutes as standard adjuncts.

In every industry the story was monotonously the same: paupers' wages; the constant fear of dismissal; wretched and unsanitary working conditions; ten-, twelve-, and even fourteen-hour days (sixteen for bakers); six- and sometimes seven-day weeks; erratic pay; little or no compensation for injuries or fatalities; a constant increase in the number of women and children employed under such conditions; and, worst of all, the widespread conviction that workingmen and women (not to mention children) had been losing ground ever since the end of the Civil War.

Under such circumstances it is hardly surprising that the number of strikes increased year by year following the Great Strikes of 1877. In 1881 there were 471 strikes affecting 2,928 companies and 129,521 employees. Five years later the number of strikes had risen to 1,411, involving 9,861 companies and almost half a million employees. Roughly half (46 percent) of the struck companies acquiesced in the principal demands of the strikers. Over 3,000 more strikes were partially successful, and 40 percent of the strikes, involving 50 percent of the strikers, were judged "failures."

But the formation of unions was dishearteningly slow. The fierce competition between mine opera-

tors was one factor impeding effective unions. Marginal operators, struggling, especially in depression years, to stay solvent or at least existent, saw unions as dangerous enemies. Even more significant was the constant turnover of workers themselves. In such circumstances it was difficult for able leadership to emerge and to develop loyalty among a transient population. Every mining village had a nucleus of professional men, storekeepers, mine officials, and a few "old families," but the workers themselves came and went through the middle years of the century with bewildering rapidity. Rather than endure the rigors of long strikes, miners would simply decamp. The mineowners suffered from this phenomenon almost as much as the workers themselves. One deplored the fact that "the best men have of course gone," while the least enterprising and capable remained. In the Pennsylvania coal fields the widely varying national origins of the workers were another deterrent to common action. Welsh, Irish, English, and Germans had provided the initial cadres. During and more dramatically after the Civil War, Italians, Poles, and Slovaks began to come in increasing numbers. Italians were especially in demand as strikebreakers in the bituminous coal fields of Pennsylvania. Race wars were common. Particular traits were attributed by employers to each ethnic group. The Welsh, for example, were described by one mineowner as "a little tricky, & [apt] to lie a little more or less gently, as it suited their purposes," and as "bearing malice, and . . . being clannish." The larger towns where different ethnic groups lived were divided into sections or neighborhoods called by such names as "Scotch Hill, Welshtown, Shanty Mill or Cork Lane or Paddy's Land, Nigger Hill, Dutch Hollow, . . . Little Italy, Hungarian Hill, Polander Street." Each ethnic group had its own social customs, from the exuberant Polish wedding to the Welsh eisteddfod and the German *Turnverein* or *Sängerfest*. The different nationalities often could not even converse with each other, let alone work together to improve conditions.

When the Sage Foundation put out a report on the conditions in the Carnegie steel mills, it emphasized the role of immigrant labor. Slavs and Italians were given preference in employment, the report stated, "because of their docility, their habit of silent submission . . . and their willingness to work long hours and overtime without a murmur. Foreigners as a rule earn the lowest wages and work the full stint of hours. . . .

"Many work in intense heat, the din of machinery and the noise of escaping steam. The congested conditions of most of the plants in Pittsburgh add to the physical discomfort . . . while their ignorance of the language and of modern machinery increases the risk. How many of the Slavs, Lithuanians and Italians are injured in Pittsburgh in one year is unknown. No reliable statistics are compiled. . . . When I mentioned a plant that had a bad reputation to a priest he said: 'Oh, that is the slaughter-house; they kill them there every day.' . . . It is undoubtedly true, that exaggerated though the reports may be, the waste in life and limb is great, and if it all fell upon the native-born a cry would long since have gone up which would have stayed the slaughter."

With the slaves freed, [former abolitionist] Wendell Phillips . . . devoted a portion of his reformist energies to the plight of the Indian, but he had more than enough left for the workingman. He had watched the postwar business and financial interests, the growth of the railroads, and the first stirrings of modern industrialism with growing alarm. In October, 1871, at the Boston Music Hall, he expressed his indignation with the "capitalists." A few months later, addressing the International Grand Lodge of the Knights of St. Crispin, Phillips urged his listeners to "get hold of the great question of labor, and having hold of it, grapple with it, rip it open, invest it with light, gathering the facts, piercing the brains about them . . . then I know, sure as fate, though I may not live to see it, that *they will certainly conquer this nation in twenty years.* It is impossible that they should not." Phillips stressed the importance of organ-

ization. "I welcome organization," he declared. "I do not care whether it calls itself trades-union, Crispin, international, or commune; any thing that masses up a unit in order that they may put in a united force to face the organization of capital; anything that does that, I say amen to it. One hundred thousand men [the number of members claimed by the Knights of St. Crispin]. It is an immense army. I do not care whether it considers chiefly the industrial or the political question; it can control the land if it is in earnest." The abolitionists had been only a handful, but they "knew what they wanted, and were determined to have it. Therefore they got it." It was the same with the struggle of workingmen for decent conditions and decent wages.

Phillips offered his listeners a larger vision than simply higher pay and shorter hours. When he looked "out upon Christendom, with its 300,000,000 of people," he saw that a third of them did not have enough to eat. "Now, I say," he declared, "that the social civilization which condemns every third man in it to be below the average in the nourishment God prepared for them" was ordained from below, by greedy and sinful men, rather than from above. "Now I say that the civilization that has produced this state of things in nearly the hundredth year of the American Revolution did not come from above." Long hours, poor food, and hard work brutalized a man and crowded him "down to mere animal life, . . . eclipsed his aspirations, dulled his senses, stunted his intellect, and made him a mere tool to work. . . . That is why I say, lift a man; give him life; let him work eight hours a day; give him the school; develop his taste for music; give him a garden; give him beautiful things to see and good books to read. . . . Unless there is power in your movement, industrially and politically, the last knell of democratic liberty in this Union is struck; for, as I said, there is no power in the State to resist such a giant as the Pennsylvania road. . . . From Boston to New Orleans, from Mobile to Rochester, from Baltimore to St. Louis, we have now but one purpose, and that is, having driven all other political questions out of the arena, the only question left is labor — the relations of capital and labor."

Those relations, however, became increasingly strained. In 1886, labor militancy reached a climax when the rhetoric of solidarity resulted in spontaneous strikes, sympathetic work stoppages, and even boycotts and political demonstrations nationwide. In Chicago's Haymarket Square, labor militancy turned violent. During an anarchist demonstration against police brutality, someone hurled a bomb that killed a police officer and fatally injured five other people. Although the bomb thrower was never identified, a jury convicted eight anarchists, four of whom died on the gallows. The episode was a terrible reversal for the incipient labor movement, as courts and police clamped down and unions became associated in the public mind with disorder and violence. The Knights of Labor suffered an irreversible decline in membership; by 1893, it was dead.

That left only the American Federation of Labor, the conservative union of exclusively skilled workers, which by 1905 had a membership of more than 1.5 million. As America entered the twentieth century, the vast majority of American workers — 30 million men and 8 million women — remained unorganized, underpaid, and overworked. In 1909, for example, a laborer in a manufacturing plant toiled fifty-nine hours a week for less than $10. Not until Woodrow Wilson's presidency did the federal government abolish child labor and grant railroad workers an eight-hour workday.

Questions to Consider

1 Who were Eleanor and Edward Aveling, and what was their political bias? What were they looking for in America? What useful comparisons could the Avelings supply to highlight their picture of working-class America? Why does Page Smith use the Avelings' journey around working America to structure his article?

2 What effect did the arrival of ever-increasing waves of immigrants have on America's workingclass populations? How did the owners of industry use immigrant labor? What problems did the isolation of individual ethnic groups present for labor organizers? What was the effect of mechanization on workers?

3 Drawing on what you have read here, describe a typical American industrial town in the late nineteenth century. Where would people live in the town? How would they live? Describe a typical working day for a man, a woman, a child. What would a mining town look like? What was the significance of the company store?

4 Where was the United States government in relation to all the misery and squalor of the urban and industrial working classes? What was the role of the state labor commissions and private foundations such as the Sage Foundation? Was there any sympathy for the plight of laboring people? What essential philosophies associated with democracy and capitalism made government slow to pass protective legislation? Why might the workers themselves have resented some aspects of protective legislation?

5 "The formation of unions was dishearteningly slow," says Page Smith. The Avelings found labor organization in America twenty or thirty years behind that in England. Discuss the obstacles that stood in the way of American labor organization, particularly among miners and unskilled laborers.