



Rise of the Proletariat

By Rachael Hill and Eman M. Elshaikh

The Industrial Revolution created a class of people who could only get money with their labor. As profits increased for company owners and working conditions got worse, labor movements pushed for reforms.

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Workers and capitalists

There's a famous phrase you might've heard before: "To put the squeeze on someone." It means to put financial pressure on a person. This political cartoon shows how low wages and high rent force George Pullman's employee to spend what little money he has left. In the 19th century, railroads were booming in the United States. The Pullman Company made railway cars at the time. In the late nineteenth century, the company cut workers' pay. For that, it was the target of a major nationwide workers' strike. The strike began south of Chicago in a town called Pullman. The company owned the entire town. So in Pullman, Illinois, the Pullman Company set the price of rent. Whatever the workers earned went right back to the company's owners in the form of rent. The owners got wealthier. Meanwhile, workers struggled to make ends meet.

Workers had little control over the cost of living. They couldn't decide their work hours, wages or conditions. Much wealth was being created. Still, wages, or pay, for laborers stayed low. Under this system, called *industrial capitalism*, workers had little power. Labor was the only way for them to make money. Mr. Pullman and business owners like him got much richer. It's because they owned the *means of production*—the tools, machines and materials used to create goods. Someone who privately owns all the materials needed to produce goods and provide services is a *capitalist*. Simply put, a capitalist holds *capital*. In this situation, capital includes the means of production. It also includes all other resources. Money and property are examples.



[A political cartoon called "The Condition of Laboring Man at Pullman."](#) How would it feel to be the employee in this image? Chicago Labor Newspaper, public domain.



[Workers leave the Pullman Palace Car Works, 1893.](#) Public domain.

Industrial capitalism

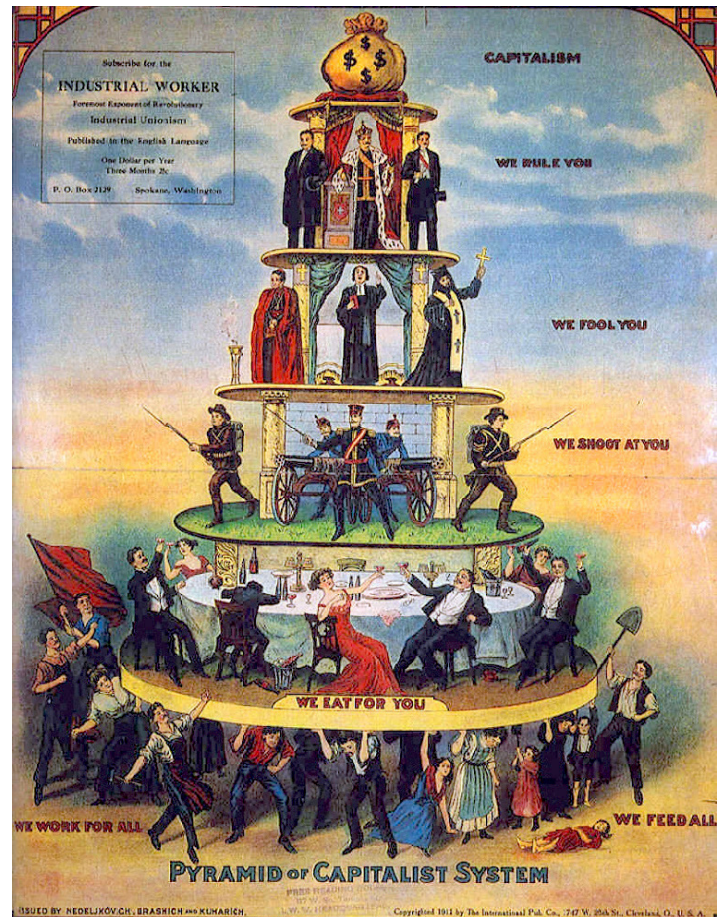
Sound familiar? That's because industrial capitalism has been around for 200 years. It has been the main global system of production and distribution. As we know it today, though, it has been changed by the actions of workers and reformers. You will read about them below.

You have already learned that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, industrial capitalism grew quickly. Mass production in Western Europe and the Americas became possible. Suddenly, goods could be made faster and cheaper than ever before.

Factory owners often got rich. As capitalists, they owned the means of production. In turn, they got all of the profits. But most ordinary people didn't own factories. Most were workers who sold their labor in return for a wage. They worked using the means of production owned by someone else to produce goods for someone else. When company profits went up, wages usually did not.

A class of workers

To keep up the fast pace of production, industries needed many laborers. Fortunately for them, populations were booming at the time. Many rural people were losing their land. So, they flooded into the cities to work at factories. Still, the high demand for labor was not met. So, many women and children also went to work. For some women, it was freeing. They could finally gain independent wages. For most, however, industrial work in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was very difficult. Most women had no political, social or economic rights outside the home. That meant they usually got stuck with tough, low-paying jobs. Often these were in domestic service (cooking or cleaning in homes), textile factories and coal mines. Women usually received one-third to one-half the pay that men received for equally hard work. On top of that, working women were still expected to cook, clean and care for children. They labored even after long hours of work outside the home. Importantly, women's unpaid work at home also allowed men to go out and work.



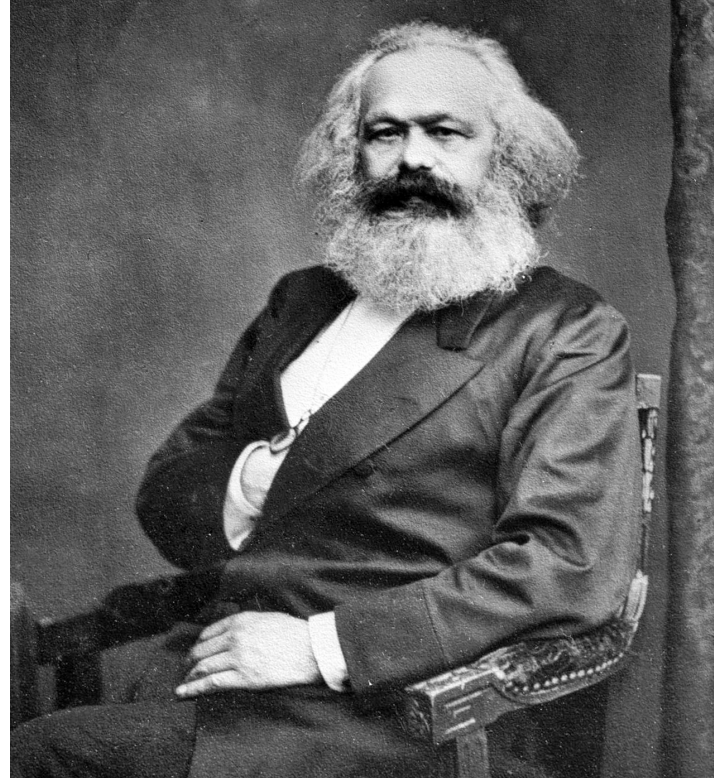
1911 American political cartoon criticizing capitalism. Public domain.



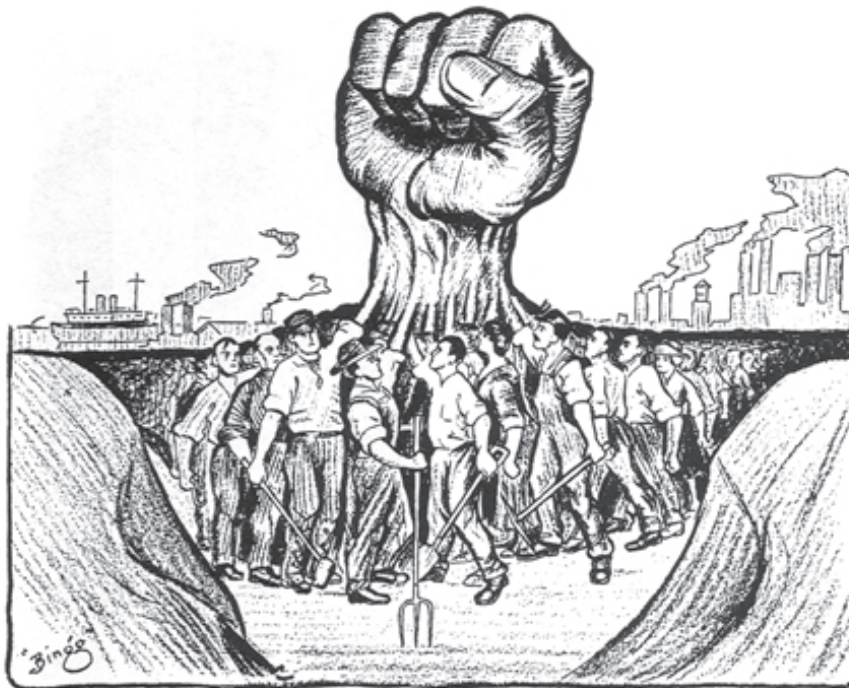
Illustration of female coal worker from 1842. Public domain.

Still, men and women both faced very rough work conditions. There was no minimum wage. Workers could be fired at any time for any reason. They usually worked 12 to 16 hours a day, six days a week. They only got 30 minutes for lunch and dinner. Workplace injuries and deaths were common. However, accidents rarely cost employers very much. So, there was little concern for workers' safety. Dead or injured workers were simply replaced.

Karl Marx was a German social scientist. He described industrial capitalism in great detail. Marx described his idea of the means of production, capital and wage labor. He also invented the term *proletariat*. It described the entire class of wage workers who can only earn money by selling their labor. Over time, workers in many places began to consider themselves part of the proletariat. They saw themselves as part of a social class with shared difficulties. Altogether, it brought them a step closer to the labor movements. Such movements would demand improvements to this system.



[German social scientist Karl Marx](#). John Jabez Edwin Mayal, International Institute of Social History, public domain.



Solidarity, June 30, 1917. The Hand That Will Rule the World—One Big Union.

[Cartoon published in the Industrial Workers of the World \(IWW\) journal "Solidarity" on June 30, 1917.](#) Ralph Chaplin, public domain.

So how did a person's thinking go from "my job is horrible and unfair" to "our system is horrible and unfair"? Industrial labor changed social life in unexpected ways. Many workers used to spend the day outside on farms. Now they were crammed inside crowded mills, factories and mines. This made it easier for people to talk and share their experiences. They could organize themselves into alliances. One type of alliance is a union. It's a group of workers with common interests. In the United States, for example, these common interests were better working conditions, shorter hours, and better pay. A nineteenth-century individual who went to their boss with these demands would have been laughed at or fired. Unions, however, used collective bargaining. It meant a large number of workers make the same demands at the same time. Employers couldn't fire and replace everyone at the same time. Doing so would slow the production of goods and hurt their profits. So this method was a way to force employers to meet workers' demands.

Workers formed unions in individual factories, whole industries, or even at the national level. Unions were an important part of many labor movements. They often expressed their demands for better working conditions through strikes and protests. Strike rates increased steadily in the nineteenth century. Workers became more organized. A global economic downturn, however, lasted from the 1870s to 1900. It meant that many workers were either laid off or had their wages cut. Soon even more unrest unfolded.

There were many unions, strikes and protests across the globe during the long nineteenth century. However, the groups' beliefs were not the same. Some labor movements pushed for reforms. Others demanded revolution. Reformers wanted improvements like better pay, safer conditions, and generally fair treatment. Meanwhile, revolutionists wanted to end the capitalist system. They aimed to replace it with something else.

Industrial capitalism on a global scale

Now, goods could be mass-produced cheaply and quickly in factories. Soon, huge markets for these new items opened up worldwide. Specifically, the lands that European powers were conquering and colonizing overseas were full of possible customers. Outside of Europe and North America, the labor movement looked pretty different. Still, there were broad patterns to most labor movements around the world.

For example, industrialization in India was heavily controlled by British colonial powers. However, so were the labor movements. The British government placed limits on some Indian industries like textile manufacturing. They did so to protect their own textile industry from competition. This slowed the development of these industries in India. But when business did pick up, it grew quickly. Indian workers were forced to work even longer hours than their British counterparts. Their pay was even lower, too. The British government had helped create protections for Indian laborers. Sounds nice at first. But why exactly did they do it? The British knew that these labor protections made Indian labor costlier. That also made the textiles cost more. Altogether that gave an advantage to British textile manufacturers. They could sell their goods at higher prices.

In some parts of Africa, wage labor emerged. However, colonial rulers helped companies keep wages low. They would stop labor organizing through laws and force. In general, though, the African wage labor force remained fairly small for decades. So, unions and labor movements only emerged after World War II. In these regions, trade unions¹ were important in post-World War II African independence movements.

It's also important to remember that many workers were not limited to one country. Labor moved across the globe in the form of enslaved peoples, migrant workers, and indentured laborers. An indentured servant works for a set time in exchange for something, like shelter or transportation. These international movements made it difficult to organize labor.

¹ A trade union is a group of people who are all in the same type of profession (trade). However, they do not necessarily work for the same company.



[Newly arrived indentured laborers](#) from British colonial India in the British West Indies. Public domain.

So, organized unions were an important part of many systems of labor, though certainly not all. Geographical, political, economic, and social factors made it hard for workers. They had trouble communicating and organizing themselves into labor movements. The labor movements that did succeed had different characteristics in different industrial settings. The common trends were major, though. Generally, workers owned only their labor, sold their labor for a wage, and had little to do with profits. They increasingly looked to alliances to improve their situations.

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