Responses to Industrialization

By Rachael Hill

The Industrial Revolution led to rapid changes in people's living and working conditions. In response to poor working conditions, labor movements organized alliances known as unions and pushed for reforms. Reform movements took place around the world but started in Britain and the United States. They focused on labor rights, social welfare, women's rights, and working to end slavery.

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The Industrial Revolution brought major changes to most societies. These changes began in Great Britain and the United States before spreading to other parts of the world. For that reason, this article focuses on just those two countries. Later, we will look at the world as a whole.

In particular, this article focuses on responses to the problems industrialization created. Consider the situation in the early 1900s. Rich factory owners and the members of a growing middle class lived in nice houses. They filled their homes with the new goods being turned out by factories. However, most of the workers who made those goods struggled to survive. Most were paid very poorly. They lived in crowded and unsafe housing.[1]

Some people in both the United States and Britain were very concerned about these problems. They pressured their governments to reform (improve) society. They wanted the government to help the poor, fix unsafe and unhygienic work and housing conditions, and end child labor.

In the United States and Great Britain, reformers were inspired by a new form of Christianity, called evangelical Christianity. Evangelical Christianity encouraged the idea that people could change their own lives. This influenced many reformers to change society themselves. However, not everyone was inspired by evangelical Christianity. Some were inspired by the Enlightenment. Enlightenment focused on liberty, equal rights, and the separation of church and state.

Labor reforms

Poor working conditions and very low wages were two major social problems created by industrialization. They led to the formation of a new labor movement. This movement was determined to improve the situation of industrial workers.

Many women took part in the labor movement. Women have a long history of participating in reform movements, including the movement to end slavery. These women were also inspired by evangelical beliefs. Pauline Newman is one well-known example. When she was a child, Newman started working at a New York City garment factory called the Triangle Shirtwaist Company. She later became a union organizer and actively campaigned for worker safety. In 1911 the Triangle Shirtwaist factory burst into flames. The fire was the deadliest industrial disaster in the history of the city. It resulted in the deaths of 146 garment workers. Many of the victims were friends of Newman's. The terrible fire led to new laws requiring improved factory safety. To make sure these laws were followed, the state of New York established the Factory Investigation Commission (FIC). Its job was to inspect shops and factories. Newman became one of the FIC's first inspectors.

Cartoon of a women's rights convention showing male opponents trying to disrupt the convention from the balconies. Public domain

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1 Reform movements around the world did not always start for the same reasons. Also, in some countries, reform began later than in the United States and Britain. In part, this was because these countries were slower to industrialize.

This period also saw the growth of unions that fought for better working conditions for factory workers. However, it was not only the workers themselves who were pushing for labor reforms. Journalists and other writers pushed for reform as well. Some wrote about the problems that existed in American factories. Writer Upton Sinclair revealed the horrible conditions that Chicago meatpackers faced. In his book, "The Jungle" (1906), Sinclair wrote that workers were forced to spend long hours in cold, cramped, and dangerous conditions. Some lost arms and legs. They were sickened by dangerous chemicals and came down with various diseases. Sinclair's shocking book did not lead to new labor laws, as he had hoped it would. However, it did help to bring about the passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act and the Meat Inspection Act in 1906.

Demonstration of protest and mourning for the Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire of March 25, 1911. The U.S. National Archives, public domain.

Two officials inspect a tenement in New York City, 1901. U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, public domain.

Housing

Journalists also played an important role in exposing poor housing conditions. Many workers lived in tenements. These were crowded and cheaply made buildings in which large families often shared tiny apartments. Tenements were very unhealthy. They were very crowded and usually had few toilets.

Journalist Jacob Riis wrote about the terrible conditions in New York City's tenements. His book, "How the Other Half Lives" (1890), described how as many as 12 adults slept in a room that was only 13 feet across. Tenements were also very unsanitary (unhealthy). Most did not provide clean drinking water. Toilets were rare and there was no good way to get rid of waste. These conditions were terrible for children. As many as 1 in 10 babies living in tenements ended up dying, Riis revealed. After Riis published his reports, the city conducted studies of tenements. In 1901, New York City officials passed the Tenement House Law. This set higher standards for safety and sanitation in the tenements.

Public health

Reformers also worried about public health. One of the first health reforms made was building sewers and clean water systems in Britain. In London, more than 10,000 people died each year of a disease called cholera. Cholera can be spread through unclean water. Joseph Bazalgette figured out how to build a sewer system to keep the water clean.

Public health reforms spread to the United States as well. A physician named Stephen Smith was worried about unclean living environments in New York City. He studied the overflowing toilets, streets with horse manure, and dirty slaughterhouses. This led to the Public Health Act. This new law made governments responsible for clean drinking water, care of public sewage, and prevention of disease.

Education

Reformers were also concerned that working children were not receiving a proper education. Many children worked in factories instead of attending school. Due to workers' low wages, a single worker could not earn enough to pay for a family's food and rent. Instead, the entire family had to work. This included small children.

Reformers pushed their governments for changes, and those efforts paid off. In 1832 the British Parliament set up a commission to investigate child labor in factories. As a result, the government passed the Factory Act of 1833. It set limits on how many hours a day children could work and limited the type of work they could do. In the 1880s, the British government made education mandatory (required) for all children ages 5 to 10. Around the same time, the United States established free elementary education in every state. However, the United States did not pass a national law limiting child labor until 1916.

Reformers won other important victories for workers, such as the eight-hour workday. They also pushed for change in other important areas. They fought to end slavery and demonstrated for women's rights. They improved public health and made cities cleaner through the introduction of sewer and clean water systems.

These reforms in the United States and Britain influenced reform movements in other parts of the world. They also laid the groundwork for later twentieth-century social justice movements such as the civil rights and feminist movements.

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