

Working in Gilded Age America:

The Failure of the Union Movement to Reform Capitalism

- *Why are a lot of Industrial jobs opening up?*
 - Industrial revolution
 - immigration
 - Transformative to the American economy; remake the way people make their living
- Mass production of good requires:
 - people
 - uniform parts
 - a different skills set-->unskilled workers; enter your immigrants
- Quotes to think about when considering the economy becoming industrialized: (late 19th century)
 - Walt Whitman
 - the rise of capitalism/industrialization brought out a "hollowness of heart" and a "depravity of the business classes"
 - Mark Twain
 - humorous; get rich dishonestly if we can, honestly if we must
 - "He Lies in The American Land" song (popular amongst immigrants)
 - a joke common amongst immigrant communities "they told me the streets would be paved in gold; first thing i learned--the streets weren't paved in gold; second thing--streets weren't paved; third thing--they expected me to pave them"

Wages and Working Conditions

- **Cannot generalize about a singular working class experience--varieties of work and working conditions abounded.**
 - Skilled or unskilled labor?** (one of the most important factors in terms of shaping the experience of a worker in the industrialized United States)
 - How well do you know English?** (not the same thing as are you intelligent or not, although the two things did get conflated in very discriminatory ways)
 - Gender; age**
 - Men fare better than men
 - Children fare worse than grown ups
 - Ethnicity**
 - "Race is an artificial thing constructed; ethnicity is a thing that is real--a whole pseudo science thing going on in the 19th century that was trying to differentiate ethnicities--science that we would discredit today"
 - Had a tremendous effect on people's wages and working conditions; we can call it silly today but they made decisions based on ethnicity at that time
 - "No Irish/Italian need apply"--a racial-izing of ethnicity going on that affected if people were going to be able to make a living or not
 - **American Coal Miner**
 - Not going to do well
 - working in a coal mine is not safe (e.g., black lung disease)
 - Doing this because of the lack of skills
 - Father makes \$250/YEAR
 - 7 people in this particular family; 3 children in schools (lucky--most children in families with unskilled working parents do not have this opportunity)
 - Father only works 30 weeks a year--> **boom and bust cycles of the industrial work schedule--seasonal**; only got paid for the weeks he worked; no staggering of pay
 - *A member of a trade union*
 - Families diet=bread, coffee, salt meat, butter, sausage (not really balanced obviously)
 - **English Iron and Steel Worker**-->better off than the first family, but he is an immigrant...
 - breaking the myth that native born families did better than immigrants-->depended largely on SKILL OF THE WORK as far as quality of life went
 - Father in this family makes \$1,040 dollars/YEAR
 - Oldest son also works, \$300/year, possibly apprenticing his dad to learn the trade
 - 6 family members total; 3 kids in school also
 - owned their own home, 9 rooms in said home--pretty good size house for that time
 - maintains a garden--fresh fruits and vegetables--better diet than the first family
 - saving money every year
 - dad also a member of a union

- **Irish Coal Miner**
 - Actually in slightly better financial position than the American coal mining family
 - How?
 - Some of the children worked too
 - Dad made \$420/year
 - 18 yo and 21 yo son made same amount per year
 - 16 year old son apprenticing and making \$150 per year
 - pretty solid cash flow, not that diff amount of income than the english iron and steel family but the children aren't in school and they're working much harder to maintain their position in society and their status is riskier because of unskilled work vs. skilled work
- **Unskilled Immigrant Laborers**
 - \$230-270/year
 - lived in rented housing
 - no union membership
 - no ability to send kids to school
 - common job was to work as a scavenger--cleaning the outhouses and clean them up.....
- **No job security what so ever**

large # of immigrants/work accidents when there is an over supply of workers and undersupply of job=no job security

 - No labor laws to protect your job--no contracts; if you get sick your employer can dismiss you at will and theres lines of people outside everyday willing to take your job
- **Upton Sinclair's "The Jungle"**

wants to write the great american novel and has a political intention behind it
he thinks by telling the story of one immigrant family and everything that happened to them will make people wonder "can all these things really happen to this one family?"--paints a very grim picture
set in Chicago; steel industry/meat packing--hero in this novel works in a meat packing plant

 - Sinclair describes the state of the sausage making room/working condition/what parts of the animal usable and non-usable were used; problem with the rats in the plants and the poison (ARSON) they laid around the factory to kill rats; not the poison we use in the 21st century
 - conditions of the building structure not safe
 - water would leak from the floor above into the piles of meat

Lots of people read this book and weren't so ready to join the Socialist Party of America but were angry
- Working conditions could be vile; the work the laborers were doing could be vile in it of it self
- LOTS of cost saving going on, which is common in capitalism but not only at the workers expense but also the consumers expense
- **Average annual wage for working class americans in late 19th century=\$400-500/year**
a family needed \$800/year to have security or what we would call being above the poverty line now a day
- **Who made what:**

Women made about half of what men made (e.g., 200-300 hundred/year)
children made less than adults
skilled workers made more than unskilled workers
- **Child labor laws**

even the states that DID have child labor laws, most of the kids like 60% were exempt from these anyway

 - "I'm sure I didn't want to work for the money. I just wanted to work, I reckon. Oodles of kids. All of us used to do it together"--southern white in a cotton factory reminiscing on his working there as a child
 - Do you buy it?
 - made to think they needed to work
 - society as a whole
 - parents who needed the money
 - not like people were saying 'go to college and do whatever you want you can be a doctor if you never give up blah blah blah'
 - given a message: "this is your socioeconomic status."
 - very valuable in these factories--'tiny nimble fingers'
 - typically worked the night shifts to make sure everything was working properly
 - probably working at the farm during the day/going to school if they were lucky enough
 - tired as shit--they would throw water on them to wake them up
 - "it is the so-called competition of the unorganized, defenseless woman worker....tends to reduce the wages of the father and the husband... no necessity of the wife contributing to the support of the family by working."
reflects the views of some males (obviously not ones in unskilled working families who NEEDED money)
Samuel Gompers

- it was easier to scapegoat unskilled female workers than unskilled male workers
 - assuming rightfully so that there was no day care for her to put her children in
 - not paid by the hour but paid by the amount of work she accomplishes; two of the kids in the pic on the slideshow are helping her sort the nut meat or whatever the fuck it is
 - to sum up--this woman hardly poses a threat to male union labor*
 - Is she in control of her destiny or a victim of capitalism? or both?** somewhere b/t the 2; doing something about her status but her choices are very limited in the economic context of where/ when she lived
- Didn't just do all of the work in the cities--important to remember
- "better thing to put the 'dirty' ones into separate schools till they learn to clean up and become eligible to better society" about Mexican and american children--quote from a person in in the southeast
 - Quote reflects the different class position between Mexican-Americans in the U.S. who are at middle class status and those that were in the U.S. not in the middle-class and doing things like tenant farming
- "When I got to San Francisco I was half starved because I was afraid to eat the provisions of the barbarians."
 - words of a Chinese immigrant to the U.S. about the white people barbarians
 - dysentery-white people much more likely to get this than Chinese because they drank water in the form of hot tea and killed germs in the water by boiling it