



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 happened 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 societies. These changes began in Great Britain and the United States before spreading to other parts of the world, and this particular article will focus on those two societies as case studies. Other articles will take a more global view.

In particular, this article focuses on the rise of reformers as a response to industrialization. While wealthy industrialists and the emerging middle class often lived in nice houses and could afford the new goods being pumped out by factories, most of the workers who made those goods struggled to make ends meet. They lived in crowded tenement houses, which were apartment buildings with tiny rooms, no ventilation, and poor sanitation.¹

Some people became concerned: These new living and working conditions created social problems. In the United States and Great Britain, citizens pressured their governments to reform (improve) society. They wanted the government to help the urban poor, fix unsafe work conditions, end child labor, and repair poor sanitation.

In the United States and Great Britain, reformers were often inspired by a new form of Christianity. This wave of Christianity became popular in the nineteenth century. Called evangelical Christianity, it emphasized that individuals had the power to change their lives. They could ensure their own salvation and improve their communities. Some historians argue that evangelical Christianity was democratic because it focused on the power of the individual. Evangelical Christianity valued the individual's own religious experience over the learning and authority of the clergy. Therefore, it provided inspiration for ordinary people who wanted to create change in society. But not all reformers were inspired by Christianity. Journalists, union activists, workers, and women may also have been motivated by Enlightenment ideals of liberty, equal rights, and separation of church and state.

Women's rights

Women were very active in reform movements. Many were influenced by the renewed interest in Christianity that was inspiring a wave of social activism. For example, many women participated in the movement to abolish slavery. That movement was grounded in new evangelical Christian ideas about the equality of all people before God. However, women were often not allowed to engage in public debates or speak at anti-slavery conventions. Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton were denied the right to speak at the 1840 anti-slavery convention in London. So they decided to form a society to advocate for the rights of women. An important American group that mixed anti-slavery and women's rights activism was the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, led by Mott and the women of a leading African American family—Charlotte, Harriet, Sarah, and Margaretta Forten.



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

Many of the same biblical passages that women abolitionists used to argue against slavery could also be used to support the equality of women. In 1848, the first American convention focused on women's rights was held in

¹ While there were reform movements in other parts of the world, they did not always start for the same reasons. In some cases, these movements happened later. Reformism in the U.S. and Britain were efforts to counteract the negative social effects of industrialization. But many societies in other parts of the world were just beginning to witness the rise of industrial capitalism.

Seneca Falls, New York. Approximately 200 women and 40 men met and adopted the “Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments.” This declaration called for political and economic rights for women. However, it would take 70 more years for women to gain the right to vote in the United States, and progress was equally slow in most other parts of the world.

Labor reforms

Working conditions and the ability to make enough money to survive were problems with industrialization that many people identified early. In Britain, the Luddites were a secret society that destroyed new industrial machines in the 1810s. Many of them were skilled artisans who saw machines replacing them. The machines could make cheaper cloth, or metal, than an artisan. Also, artisans were generally decently paid, but they were being forced to become poorly paid factory workers. So, across Britain and in particular, in the industrialized north, they smashed machines and threatened factory owners until the army put them down.

Women were also active in the labor movement. Pauline Newman started working at a garment factory called the Triangle Shirtwaist Company in New York City when she was a child. She became a union organizer and actively campaigned for worker safety in Philadelphia. It was there in 1911 that the Triangle Shirtwaist factory burst into flames. It was the deadliest industrial disaster in the history of the city, and one of the deadliest in U.S. history. The fire resulted in the deaths of 146 garment workers. Most of these workers were recent Italian and Jewish immigrant women ages 14 to 23. Pauline Newman, having worked at the factory for many years, was friends with many of the victims. When the state of New York established the Factory Investigation Commission (FIC) to inspect shops and guarantee workers’ safety, Newman became one of the FIC’s first inspectors. The fire led to legislation requiring improved factory safety standards. This period saw the growth of unions that fought for better working conditions for factory workers.



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

It was not only the workers themselves pushing for labor reforms. Journalists also wrote articles exposing the problems that existed in American factories. Author Upton Sinclair hoped to show the American public the horrible effects of capitalism on workers in the Chicago meatpacking industry. His book, “The Jungle,” described how workers lost their limbs, were exposed to dangerous chemicals, and caught infectious diseases while working long hours in cold, cramped conditions. He hoped that this would lead to labor reforms. However, Sinclair’s vivid descriptions of the industry did not immediately lead to labor legislation. But public outcry did lead to the passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act and the Meat Inspection Act in 1906.



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 the poor housing that many urban factory workers lived in. These often included tenements—crowded buildings, often hastily put up and with few toilets—where large families often shared tiny apartments. Glasgow, in Scotland (northern Britain), was one of the first cities to have large tenements, meant to house workers in the industrial dockyards. Because they were cheap housing, they soon spread.

Jacob Riis, a Danish-born American journalist and photographer wrote about the terrible conditions in New York City's tenements. He wanted to influence public opinion and get the city's government to create new housing designs to ease crowding and improve safety. Riis' book, "How the Other Half Lives" (1890), described how as many as 12 adults slept in a room that was only 13 feet across. Riis wrote that the infant death rate in these tenements was as high as 1 in 10. Following his reports, the city conducted studies of tenements. In 1901, city officials passed the Tenement House Law. This set higher standards for safety and sanitation in the tenements. Some of the improvements included higher quality construction materials, mandatory fire escapes, and more windows in order to give residents access to air and light.

Public health

Reformers also became concerned with public health during this period. One of the first Industrial-era health reforms was the building of sewers and clean water systems in some British cities. Thomas Hawksley built some of the first urban clean water systems in Britain in the 1870s. He figured out that hooking up pipes to a pump and an engine would keep pressure in the water system. This would stop dirty water from getting into the pipes. In London, meanwhile, the disease known as cholera killed tens of thousands of people each year until Joseph Bazalgette figured out that a sewer system could keep the water supply cleaner.

New York physician Stephen Smith was similarly concerned with the unhealthy environment in American cities. He was the first to link the spread of typhus and cholera to the unsanitary conditions in New York City. He was gravely concerned about the negative impact the city environment had on human health. As a result, he organized and directed a sanitary survey of the city. The survey described overflowing public toilets, streets filled with horse manure, and unhygienic slaughterhouses. Smith testified before the New York Senate and Assembly. One year later, New York passed the first public health legislation in the country. Smith's work in New York served as a model for other cities. Soon after, Chicago and Boston followed suit. Public health reformers all over the United States began to pressure their local governments. By 1875, a new Public Health Act ensured the government was responsible for making sure drinking water was safe, sewage waste properly managed, and contagious disease contained.

Education

Reformers were also concerned about the well-being of children during this time. Many children worked in factories instead of attending school. Due to workers' low wages, an entire family would have to work in order for a family to afford food and rent. This included small children. The British Parliament set up a commission in 1832 to investigate child labor in factories. As a result, the government passed The Factory Act of 1833. It regulated excessive child labor and set limits on how many hours per day children could work. This was the first British government regulation of the industrial workplace. By the 1880s the government made education mandatory for all children ages 5 to 10. Around the same time, the United States established free elementary education in every state. However, the U.S. did not pass a federal law restricting child labor until 1916.

Reform efforts during this time gave birth to a number of important changes in the United States and Great Britain. These included mandatory public education, child labor laws, and eight-hour workdays. Reforms also addressed minimum wage, compensation for workplace accidents, and improved sanitation infrastructure. These reforms laid the groundwork for later twentieth-century social justice movements like the civil rights and feminist movements and influenced reform movements in other regions of the world.

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