

Working Conditions

Name _____

Block _____

The Industrial Revolution brought many benefits – first to Great Britain and then to other countries. But it also created some difficult new problems, especially for factory workers and coal miners. The following describes the conditions under which these people worked and lived. You may find it hard to believe that human beings could endure such hardships. You may also have difficulty understanding how capitalists could treat their workers so badly or how governments could allow them to do so.

Remember, however, that most people in Great Britain in the eighteenth century were farmers. They worked from sunrise to sunset six days a week. They earned very low wages and often went hungry. Women and children often did heavy work alongside men. Years passed before the workers and miners gained enough force to complain about their conditions. After awhile, enough people became interested in their problems to press their government to support the workers' cause. Then, at last, Parliament began to investigate and to take action.

The following shows how badly factory workers and coal miners were treated in Great Britain during the early stages of the Industrial Revolution. It also shows what the government, businessmen, and the workers themselves eventually did to improve conditions.

HARD LABOUR

England was not the only place for poor working conditions. In the second half of the 19th Century, working conditions in Canada were terrible.

Increasing industrialization provided jobs in factories, but it also led to the exploitation of workers. Children as young as eight worked around dangerous machinery from six in the morning to six at night. Many factories hired mainly women and children because they could pay less money. Typical pay in textile factories was 25 cents a day for children and 75 cents a day for women; a man might expect to make \$7.75 for a 59 hour week. Men often worked 35 hours at a stretch in New Brunswick's shipping industry.

In some factories, fines were imposed for poor quality work. Often this left the employee owing money to the employer after working a 50 hour week. Beatings of employees were common. In 1889, a Royal Commission revealed many horror stories. A cigar manufacturer in Montreal imprisoned apprentices in a "black hole" for hours at a time, even after the work day was over. A special constable was maintained to frighten the young workers.

Many poor, uneducated immigrants were exploited by landowners, railway and factory owners. An example were the Chinese coolies who were hired for \$1.00 a day to work on the building of the railways in the West. A condition of employment was that they shop at company stores for their necessities, where prices of course, were higher. They were paid only 80 cents if they shopped elsewhere.

Adapted from: Sevvit, Carol. Canada and the World. Vol. 44, No. 3, p. 12.

Review Questions: "Hard Labour"

1. What specific examples can you find which show that the worker was treated unfairly by the employer?

2. What specific benefits did the worker receive despite difficult working conditions?

3. Many workers, and especially the owners of industry believed in the work ethic; i.e., "Hard work is good for a person". In what ways did this belief contribute to industrial growth?

4. Why do you think workers allowed their employers to treat them the way they did?

Working Conditions During the Industrial Revolution

Some early factories were well-built, light, and airy. But others were located in basements or old barns. They were often crowded with loud, noisy machines, which might include a hot, smoky steam engine. Ventilation was poor. Sometimes it was just a door that was left open in hot weather. The selections that follow show how bad working conditions sometimes were.

a. **"Such Slavery, Such Cruelty"**

The first selection is part of a newspaper article that aroused public interest workers' problems. The article describes the harsh working conditions of a spinning factory. Such factories were usually kept hot because the high temperature produced a better thread. Can you imagine working under the conditions described below?

Some of the lords of the loom [employers] hire thousands of miserable creatures. In the cotton-spinning trade, these creatures work fourteen hours in each day. They are kept locked up, summer and winter, in a heat of from 80 to 84 degrees.

The poor creatures are doomed to work day after day for 313 days in the year. They slave fourteen hours each day in an average heat of 82 degrees. Can any man with a heart in his body keep from cursing a system that produces such slavery and such cruelty?

These poor creatures have no cool room to retreat to. They do not have a moment to wipe off the sweat, nor a breath of air. The door of the place where they work is locked, except half an hour at teatime. The workers are not allowed to send for water to drink. Even the rainwater is locked up by the master's order. Otherwise, they would be happy to drink even that. If any spinner is found with his window open, he is to pay a fine of a shilling!

There is also the awful stink of gas, which adds to the murderous effects of the heat. In addition to the gas mixed with steam, there are the dust and the cotton-flying, or fuzz. The unfortunate creatures have to inhale these. Men become old and are unable to work at forty years of age. Children become sickly and deformed. Thousands of them are killed by disease before they reach the age of sixteen.

Adapted from E. Royston Pike (ed.), Hard Times: Human Documents of the Industrial Revolution, pp. 660–661.

b. "A Bite and a Run"

The next selection comes from the report of a parliamentary committee that investigated working conditions in the factories in 1833.

Occasionally the work continues without stopping during the whole of meal hours. The engine never stops, except for ten minutes to be oiled. The workers, in their own words, "eat when they can."

"Sometimes the breakfast would stand an hour and a half. Sometimes we would never touch it."

"All in my room would rather stop to eat because the breakfast got so covered with dust [when they ate while working]."

No time was allowed for breakfast or tea. They took it as they could, a bite and a run. Sometimes they were not able to eat it because it was so covered with dust.

Adapted from E. Royston Pike (ed.), Hard Times: Human Documents of the Industrial Revolution, p. 71.

c. "Dreadful Mutilations"

The following selection is from an investigation of factories conducted by Parliament in 1842.

The accidents that occur to the manufacturing population of Birmingham are very severe and numerous. This is shown by the registers of the General Hospital. Many accidents are caused by the lack of proper attention to the fencing of machinery [putting guards around moving parts]. This appears to be seldom thought of in the manufactories. Many accidents occur when loose portions of dress are caught by the machinery. The unfortunate sufferers are dragged into the machine. The shawls of the females, or their long hair, often cause dreadful mutilations [injuries]. So do the aprons and loose sleeves of the boys and men.

Adapted from "Report on the Sanitary Conditions of the Labouring Population," Parliamentary papers, (Vol. 27), 1842, p. 208

d. "The Mother Sets Out First"

This fourth and final passage about bad working conditions describes the work done by "carriers." These were usually women and children in the coal mines, for they could be paid less than men. Besides, men were hired to do the actual mining, which was even more burdensome.

The mother goes down into the pit [coal mine] with her daughters. Each has a basket, and the large coals are rolled into it. Such is the weight carried that it often takes two men to lift the burden upon their backs. The girls are loaded according to their strength. The mother sets out first, carrying a lighted

candle in her teeth and the girls follow. In this manner they go slowly up the stairs, stopping occasionally to draw breath. They arrive at the hill, or pit-top, where the coals are laid down for sale.

In this manner they go for eight or ten hours almost without resting. It is not uncommon to see them, when coming up from the pit, weeping most bitterly from the excessively hard work. But the instant they have laid down their burden on the hill, they are cheerful again and return down the pit singing.

Adapted from Inquiry Into the Conditions of Women Who Carry Coals Under Ground in Scotland, Edinburgh, 1812.

Review Questions

1. The passages describe the bad working conditions in various industries in nineteenth-century Britain.

a) What are these conditions?

b) Which do you consider the worst? Why?

2. The last selection describes carriers in a coal mine.

a) Why did the mother carry a lighted candle in her teeth?

b) Why do you think the girls sang on their way back into the pit?

3. Terrible working conditions were common during the first half of the nineteenth century.

a) Why were people willing to work under such conditions?

b) Do you think such bad working conditions can be found in any countries today? Why or why not?
