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

If you've never heard the expression "to put the squeeze on someone," it's about financial pressure. This political cartoon shows how low wages and high rent force George Pullman's employee to cough up what little money he has left. The infamous Pullman Company made railway cars during the railroad boom in the United States. The company was the target of a major nationwide workers' strike in the late nineteenth century after cutting workers' pay. The strike began south of Chicago in a town called Pullman, because the company owned it. (Yes, companies can own whole towns.) So in Pullman, Illinois, the Pullman Company set the price of rent. The wages workers earned went right back to the company's owners in the form of rent. The owners got wealthier while workers struggled to make ends meet.

Workers had little control over the cost of living, their work hours, wages or conditions. While a lot of wealth was being generated, wages for laborers stayed low. Under this system, called *industrial capitalism*, workers had little power because labor was the only way for them to make money. Pullman and business owners like him got much richer because they owned the *means of production*—that is, the tools and materials used to create goods. Someone who privately owns the raw materials, factories, machinery and other equipment needed to produce goods and provide services is a *capitalist*. Simply put, a capitalist holds *capital*. In this context, capital includes the means of production and all other resources (money, property, etc.) needed to produce whatever it is you're selling.

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 the dominant global system of production and distribution for two centuries. It still is, although now it has been modified by the actions of workers and reformers, as you will read below.

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

Factory owners and people who invested in their factories often got rich. As capitalists, they owned the means of production, so they got 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 rapid pace of production, industries needed a lot of laborers. Fortunately for them, this was also a period when populations were booming and many rural people, especially in Europe, were losing access to their land. Rural farmers flooded into cities to work in factories. That still did not meet the high demand for labor, so many women and children also went to work. For some women, it was liberating to gain independent wages, mobility and a better standard of living. For most, however, industrial work in the nineteenth and early twentieth century resulted in a life of hardship. Most women had no political, social or economic rights outside the home. That meant they usually got stuck with low-skilled, low-paying jobs in domestic service, 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 even after long hours of work outside the home. It is also important to remember that women's unpaid labor in the home made it possible for the men to go out and work.
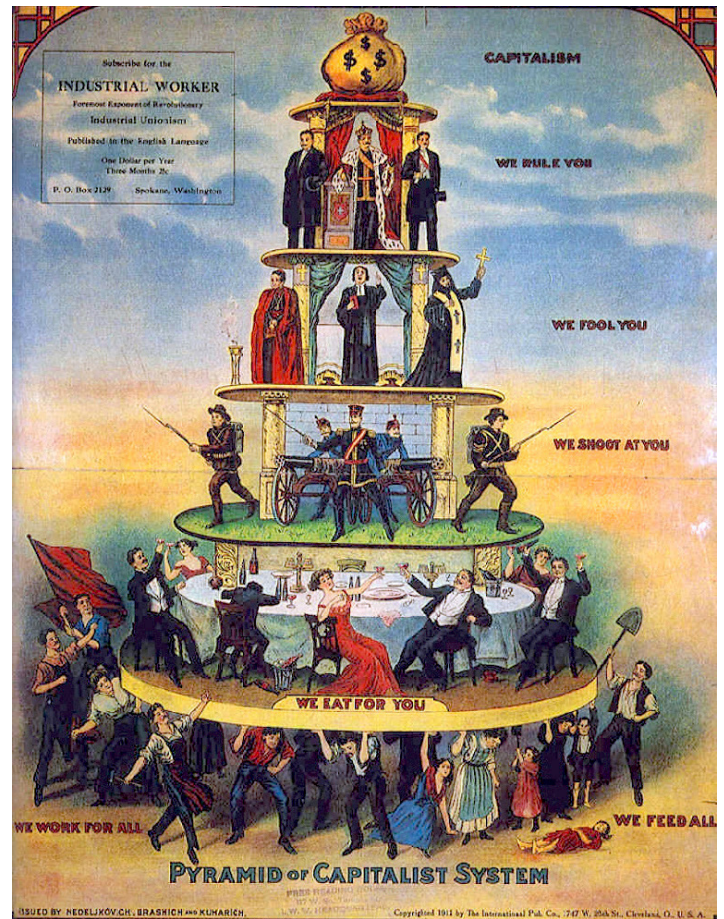

1911 American political cartoon criticizing capitalism. Public domain.

Illustration of female coal worker from 1842. Public domain.

Though women had a particularly difficult situation, men and women both endured extremely harsh work conditions. There wasn't a minimum wage, and workers could be fired at any time for any reason. They typically worked 12 to 16 hours a day, six days a week, with only 30 minutes for lunch and dinner. Workplace injuries and deaths were common. But because accidents rarely cost the employers very much, there was little concern for workers' safety. Dead or injured workers were simply replaced.

As industrial capitalism grew, so did the number of workers. German social scientist Karl Marx described industrial capitalism in great detail. He provided his understanding of the means of production, capital and wage labor. He also coined the term *proletariat* to describe the entire class of wage workers who can only earn money by selling their labor. Over time, workers in many places came to identify themselves as part of the proletariat. Workers' new self-awareness as a part of a social class with shared difficulties brought them a step closer to the labor movements that would demand improvements to this system.
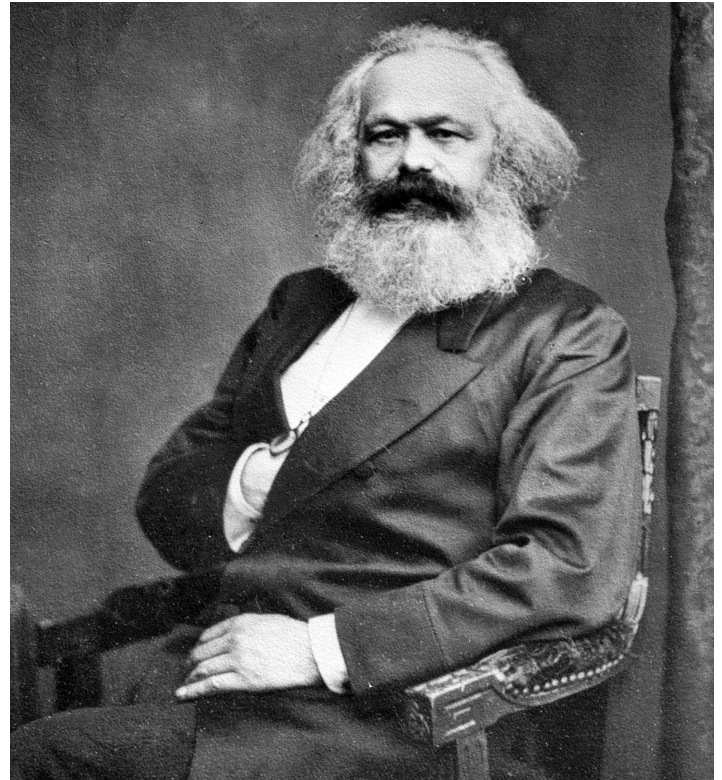
German social scientist Karl Marx. John Jabez Edwin Mayal, International Institute of Social History, public domain.

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"? When did people understand they were in a common struggle? Industrial labor created new economic opportunities while changing social life in unexpected ways. Workers who used to spend the day outside in agricultural settings were now crammed inside crowded mills, factories and mines. This made it easier for people to talk to each other, share their experiences, and organize themselves into alliances. One type of alliance is a union, a group of workers with common interests. In the United States, for example, these common interests were better work conditions, shorter hours and better pay. A nineteenth-century individual who went to her boss with these demands would have been laughed at or fired. Unions, however, used collective bargaining, meaning a large number of workers make the same demands at the same time. Employers couldn't fire and replace everyone at the same time without disrupting production and hurting 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 and they often expressed their demands for better working conditions through strikes and protests. Strike rates increased steadily in the nineteenth century as workers became more organized. A global economic slump that lasted from the 1870s to 1900 meant that many workers were either laid off or had their wages cut, causing even more unrest.

There were many unions, strikes and protests across the globe during the long nineteenth century, but their beliefs were not the same. Some labor movements pushed for reforms while others demanded revolution. Reformers wanted improvements like better pay, safer conditions and generally humane treatment, while revolutionists wanted to end the capitalist system and replace it with something else.

Industrial capitalism on a global scale

Now that goods could be mass produced cheaply and quickly in factories, huge markets for these new items opened up worldwide. Specifically, the lands that European powers were conquering and colonizing overseas were full of potential consumers. 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, but so were the labor movements. The British government placed restrictions on some Indian industries like textile manufacturing because they wanted 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 rapidly and Indian workers were forced to work even longer hours than their British counterparts—for even lower pay. The British government was instrumental in creating protections for Indian laborers. It sounds nice at first, but why exactly did they do it? The British knew full well that these labor protections made Indian labor costlier, making the textiles costlier. That gave a competitive advantage to British textile manufacturers.

In some parts of Africa, wage labor emerged but colonial rulers helped companies keep wages low and stop labor organizing through laws and force. In general, however, 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 unions[1] played a critical role in post-World War II African independence movements.

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

Newly arrived indentured laborers from British colonial India in the British West Indies. Public domain.

It's also important to remember that many workers were not confined to one country. Labor moved across the globe in the form of enslaved peoples, migrant workers and indentured laborers. For example, Indian laborers often migrated to Africa or the West Indies. East African porters traveled across large territories, transporting goods by caravan. Chinese workers also migrated widely, from North America to South Africa. These transnational movements made it difficult to organize labor.

So, organized unions were an important part of many systems of labor, though certainly not all. Geographical, political, economic and social barriers made it hard for workers to come together, communicate and organize themselves into labor movements. The labor movements that did take flight had different characteristics in different industrial settings, but the common trends were significant. Generally, workers owned only their labor, sold their labor for a wage, had little to do with profits, and increasingly sought alliances to improve their situations.

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