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The Perpetuation of the Systematic Exploitation of the Industrial Work Class of the United States of America

American songwriter Bruce Springsteen once said, “I have spent my life judging the distance between American reality and the American Dream”. Springsteen perfectly states that there is a noticeable difference between the idea of prospering in the nation often referred to as the “Land of Dreams” to the idea of actually living that dream of prosperity. Furthermore, looking at the early 1900’s, that dream was much harder to achieve than in today’s society due to the detrimental working conditions which a majority of society faced in industrial working fields. Those conditions included low wages and physical abuse from employers, and one would expect those conditions to majorly improve after more than a 100 years have elapsed. However, those working conditions have only slightly improved today, which is why the working conditions of industrial workers in the early 20th century, to a moderate extent, are different from those of industrial workers of today’s society. Such is demonstrated through the difference in workers protection rights and legislation implemented as a result of adversarial working conditions. However, although there are many more pieces of legislation which have been passed in today’s society, that legislation has not been fully enforced, lessening the beneficial effects of those laws.

To start off, during the 1900’s, immigrant workers from nations all across the world (such as from parts of Southern and Eastern Europe) came to the United States in hopes of working a job which would allow them to bring stability to their lives. They believed that the so-called “American Dream” would be possible and allow them to generate a satisfying income. However,

many of these workers later found out that their labor skills, although were able to get them employed, were valued at a very low price due to the influx of people looking for work. Such led to less than viable wages and caused many workers to “carry home three dollars to [their] family, being [their] pay at the rate of five cents per hour” (Sinclair 61). By translating this income to today’s standard through calculating inflation, workers made only \$1.45 for every hour they had to perform physical labor. Such an amount is nearly six dollars less than the 2020 federal minimum wage (“Minimum Wage”). Additionally, on top of earning a low amount of money, workers had to work “15 to 18 hours a day for six days but be paid for four days of work” (Wagner). It is exemplified how workers faced injustice as they were not not paid for the whole amount of work they performed which further destabilized their lives and disallowed them to advance in society. On top of economical injustice, workers faced hardship in the environment they worked in. Looking at the meatpacking industry, for example, “the packers, also known as the masters, have dealt their brutal will to him from the seat of justice” (Sinclair 134). Workers were physically abused by their employers who faced no consequences for their abusive actions which explains why “half of all worker deaths occurred in two industries—coal mining and meat-packing” (Cornwell). Furthermore, those workers had to “hold [their] temper, and not argue with [their master]” (Sinclair 275), for the number of jobs available to society were very limited. All in all, it is demonstrated how during the early 20th century, there were many injustices workers had to face in the workforce from wage discrimination to physical abuse.

The working conditions of the late early 1900’s, caused many labor unions, which are organizations that advocate for workers' rights and benefits through collective bargaining, to look to the federal government to pass legislation which could help the workforce out. Through

increased activism within unions regarding worker's rights, one of the first major safety and health acts was passed called the *Massachusetts Factory Act of 1877*. Such an act affected many different areas within the industrial field as it "gave inspectors authority to require guarding of machinery, required regulation of ventilation and sanitary conditions, and required reporting of accidents" (MacLaury). The Factory Act was a step in the right direction as it provided workers with protection by disallowing them to work with dangerous machinery. Additionally, it ensured that sanitary conditions in factories would change from "rats being shoveled into carts and the man who did the shoveling not taking it out" (Sinclair 113) to conditions which did not harm the health of the workers. Similarly, workers were often injured at their workplace due to the dangerous conditions which led to workers advocating for legislation to protect them when and if they got injured. These concerns were addressed through the *Federal Employees Compensation Act (FECA)* which "established a base compensation to federal civil service employees for wages lost due to job-related injuries" (MacLaury). Such an act not only ensured that workers were compensated if they were injured on the job but also allowed them a wide access to medical services and rehabilitation to help them get back on their feet. In fact, the FECA provided "\$3.014 billion in benefits to more than 217,000 workers and survivors for work-related injuries or illnesses" (MacLaury). It is exemplified how the FECA had a wide outreach and was able to provide many people with the compensation they needed while they were injured. Furthermore, in the early 1900's, many women and children received very little pay to which labor unions responded by advocating for their workplace rights. These concerns would be addressed through the *Fair Labor Standards Act*, an act which allowed for safer working conditions for young workers and women as it included "provisions designed to protect the educational opportunities

of minors and prohibit their employment in jobs and under conditions detrimental to their health or well-being” (MacLaury). Those specific provisions ensured that oppressive child labor would be banned and “set the minimum hourly wage at 25 cents and maximum workweek at 44 hours” (MacLaury). Through decreasing the number of hours which young workers had to work and increasing their hourly wage by a factor of five times, the *Fair Labor Standards Act* allowed for women and children to experience reform in the right direction towards better working conditions. All in all, it is demonstrated how there were numerous reforms implemented in response to the detrimental working conditions workers faced which allowed for a moderate amount of stability in the lives of industrial workers.

More than 100 years have passed from the early 1900’s to today’s time period, and during such time the working conditions prevalent in industrial workplaces have improved to a moderate extent, however, many conditions from industrial workplaces in the 1900’s still persist. To start, the wages of workers in industrial workfields have tremendously increased. In fact, workers in industrial fields such as meat packing are now earning on average \$13.68 as an hourly wage which allows many workers to have purchasing power and the ability to save/invest money (See Table 1). Such an amount is 13 times greater than the amount of money workers in the meatpacking industry were making in the 1900’s, demonstrating a positive shift for worker empowerment. Additionally, some sectors of the industrial field have improved the safety of their facilities such as the coal mining industry. Looking 50 years ago, “underground mines accounted for three quarters of U.S. coal production” (Christie) which resulted in more than 3,000 miners’ deaths while they were performing their jobs. However, due to legislation which was introduced after these accidents, the number of deaths in the coal mining field have majorly

decreased due to “more than twice as much coal [being] produced by surface mining than from underground mining” (Christie). By switching the location of where the mining is occurring, the number of workers being put at harm has decreased and demonstrates the strides being made for better working conditions. To summarize, it is shown how worker conditions have improved in the sense that they have secured higher wages and some workplaces are starting to practice better safety precautions.

One of the main reasons why there have been some positive reforms in today’s society for industrial workers such as increased pay, is the implementation of some-what effective legislation in recent years. In today’s society, there are many more anti-poverty welfare programs which assist workers earning low to moderate income. One of the main issues which was recently faced by many industrial workers, was that they had to pay large sums of taxes on their income, which lowered their monthly take home pay. In fact, many industrial workers who individually make \$19,760 per year, are taxed \$2,510.25 on their yearly income, which equates to them netting around \$17,000 yearly (Brainerd). That \$2,510.25 which industrial workers pay before deductions is not able to be used by those workers for almost one whole month(the amount of time it takes for them to get their tax returns), such disallowing those workers to utilize their incomes to the maximum potential. However, with the implementation of the *Earned Income Tax Credit*, workers and their families receive a modest tax credit that provides financial assistance. This tax credit allows for the amount of money which many industrial workers have to pay to be directly reduced, unlike a tax deduction which only lowers one’s adjusted gross income, so the amount which is shaved off a worker’s tax bill is directly tied to your tax bracket. Furthermore, individual workers are able to get back up to \$519 in tax credits, while families of

three and up receive up to \$6,000 in tax credits, easing the burden of taxes on them by putting more money into the pockets of industrial workers (Caines). The effects of the Earned Income Tax Credit have been tremendous and it has “lifted about 5.6 million people out of poverty, including about 3 million children” (Caines). Such shows how the EITC improves the well-being of industrial workers through governmental programs. Additionally, there have been laws aimed at improving workers safety in the industrial workfield such as the *Protecting America's Workers Act*. The act “protects occupational safety or health of some or all of the employees within an agency’s regulatory jurisdiction” (United States Congress). Such reform was meant to expand the coverage of safe working conditions to millions of more workers in industrial working fields in an effort to lower the amount of injuries and deaths which occur in such fields. Additionally, the act also protected the employees from abuse as it “increased penalties for violations” made by employers (Courtney). Such demonstrates how the act was meant to fine employers by a large amount of money if they were found to violate their employees physically. One of the main ways it ensured that workers could tell somebody that their employers were abusing them was by “guaranteeing workers and families the right to meet with Department of Labor investigators” to discuss sensitive topics regarding abuse (Courtney). To sum it up, there have been laws and acts such as the *Earned Income Tax Credit* and the *Protecting America’s Workers Act* which are allowing for workers to secure more income in their pockets and laws put in place preventing workers from being physically abused as well.

Although there have been some positive strides in forms of legislation made to help workers and improve the safety of the workplace in the industrial field, most of those laws have not been properly enforced which is why the negatives ,unfortunately, end up outweighing the

positive strides. Such is seen through the continued cycle of workers not being paid for the full amount of work they performed, and conditions within industrial fields still being detrimental. The Human Rights Watch concluded that almost all industrial workers have to “work ten to twelve hours a day, six days a week and have psychological problems along with injuries” (“Blood, Sweat”). Such shows how despite the fact that a lot of time has progressed to lower the stress on workers, the words written in legislation have not translated into the best action, and actions always speak louder than words. Furthermore, those workers who are working those long hours in today's society “experience fatigue and depression. A lot of them feel guilty because they don't think they are taking good care of their children... But they have to live with the mandatory overtime or they get fired” (“Blood, Sweat”). It is shown that companies and large corporations are still able to take advantage of employees in industries such as meatpacking and those employees are mentally harmed. Correspondingly, a demographic shift can be noted of the different group of people who are working in these industries as in the 1900's it was the southern and eastern Europeans who flocked to Chicago's bustling stockyards, who have now been replaced by Mexican and Central American immigrants chasing their own versions of the “American Dream” (Hauslohner). Despite this demographic shift, conditions within factories remain dangerous due to the manner in which speed is encouraged over the health of a worker. Such a mindset is exlaimed to the workers by their managers and is why “many experienced workers said that they were not given time or opportunity to train new colleagues, and that employers do not offer any additional pay for taking responsibility for training new workers” (“Blood, Sweat”). Consequently, due to the low training which workers still receive and the rapid work rate which is expected out of workers “between 2013 and 2017, 8 workers died, on

average, each year because of an incident in their plant” (“Blood, Sweat”). Through such it can be seen how the root cause of workers facing detrimental working conditions has yet to be fixed, and despite the recent trend of new legislation being enacted by Congress, that enforcement mechanism has been lacking, leading to not much progress. Thus, it is demonstrated how although workers have made some positive strides such as securing higher wages for themselves, the conditions in which they work in and the effects of those detrimental conditions have remained relatively stagnant in most industrial fields.

Overall, it can be seen how there have been some positive reforms implemented in response to the detrimental conditions in industrial working fields. Those reforms have even changed some peoples’ lives for the better as compared to the lives of workers from the 1900’s as displayed through programs such as the *Earned Income Tax Credit*. However, those reforms still fail to effect industrial workers on a larger scale in today’s world as proven through the continuous cycle of workers facing injustice. Hence, Springsteen’s observations of the clear difference between living and working towards the “American Dream”, were truly valid for that “American Dream” is made difficult to achieve when the working class of the United States cannot prosper to the maximum extent due to the subordinate working conditions many of them still face. And thus it is concluded that until a safe and fair working environment is truly achieved, the only opportunity that the United States of America offers industrial workers is the opportunity to be exploited.

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| Industry | Employment (1) | Percent of industry employment | Hourly mean wage | Annual mean wage (2) |
|--|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Animal Slaughtering and Processing | 69,810 | 13.48 | \$13.76 | \$28,620 |

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