How did grassroots progressives attack the problems of urban industrial America?

Much of progressive reform began at the grassroots level and percolated upward into local, state, and eventually national politics as reformers attacked the social problems fostered by urban industrialism. Although **progressivism** flourished in many different settings across the country, urban problems inspired the progressives' greatest efforts. In their zeal to "civilize the city," reformers founded settlement houses, professed a new Christian social gospel, and campaigned against vice and crime in the name of "social purity." Allying with the working class, women progressives sought to better the lot of sweatshop garment workers and to end child labor. These local reform efforts often ended up being debated in state legislatures and in the U.S. Congress.

Civilizing the City

Progressives attacked the problems of the city on many fronts. **Settlement houses**, which began in England, spread in the United States. By 1893, the needs of poor urban neighborhoods that had motivated reformer Jane Addams to open Hull House in Chicago in 1889 led Lillian

Wald to recruit several other nurses to move to New York City's Lower East Side "to live in the neighborhood as nurses, identify ourselves with it socially, and … contribute to it our citizenship." Wald's Henry Street settlement pioneered public health nursing.

Women, particularly college-educated women like Addams and Wald, formed the backbone of the settlement house movement. Settlement houses gave college-educated women eager to use their knowledge a place to put their skills to work in the service of society and to champion progressive reform. Such reformers believed that only by living among the poor could they help bridge the growing class divide. Settlements like Hull House grew in number from six in 1891 to more than four hundred in 1911. In the process, settlement house women created a new profession — social work.

For their part, churches confronted urban social problems by enunciating a new **social gospel**, one that saw its mission as not simply to save individuals but to reform society. The social gospel offered a powerful corrective to social Darwinism and Andrew Carnegie's gospel of wealth, which fostered the belief that riches somehow signaled divine favor. The social gospel produced a stream of popular books. Willliam Stead asked what might happen *If Christ Came to Chicago* (1893), and Charles M. Sheldon's *In His*

Steps (1898) called on men and women to Christianize capitalism by asking, “What would Jesus do?”

Ministers also played an active role in the social purity movement, the campaign to attack vice. To end the “social evil,” as reformers delicately referred to prostitution, social purity brought together ministers who wished to stamp out sin, doctors concerned about the spread of venereal disease, and women reformers. Together, they waged a campaign to close red-light districts in cities across the country and lobbied to raise the age of consent for girls.

Attacks on alcohol went hand in hand with the push for social purity. The Anti-Saloon League, formed in 1895 under the leadership of Protestant clergy, added to the efforts of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union in campaigning to end the sale of liquor. Reformers pointed to links between drinking, prostitution, wife and child abuse, unemployment, and industrial accidents. The powerful liquor lobby fought back, spending liberally in election campaigns, fueling the charge that liquor corrupted the political process.

An element of nativism (dislike of foreigners) ran through the movement for prohibition, as it did in a number of progressive reforms. The Irish, the Italians, and the Germans were among the groups stigmatized by temperance reformers for their drinking. Progressives often failed to see

that the tavern played an important role in many ethnic communities. Unlike the American saloon, an almost exclusively male space, the German beer garden was a family retreat, where workers socialized on Sunday after church. Nevertheless, progressives campaigned to enforce the Sunday closing of taverns, stores, and other commercial establishments and pushed for state legislation to outlaw the sale of liquor. By 1912, seven states were “dry.”

Progressives’ efforts to civilize the city demonstrated their willingness to take action; their belief that environment, not heredity alone, determined human behavior; and their optimism that conditions could be corrected through government action without radically altering America’s economy or institutions. All of these attitudes characterized the progressive movement.

Progressives and the Working Class

Day-to-day contact with their neighbors made settlement house workers particularly sympathetic to labor. When Mary Kenney O’Sullivan complained that her bookbinders’ union met in a dirty, noisy saloon, Jane Addams invited them to meet at Hull House. And during the Pullman strike in 1894, Hull House residents organized strike relief. “Hull-House has been so unionized,” grumbled one Chicago businessman,

“that it has lost its usefulness and become a detriment and harm to the community.” But to the working class, the support of middle-class reformers marked a significant gain.

Attempts to forge a cross-class alliance became institutionalized in 1903 with the creation of the Women’s Trade Union League (WTUL). The WTUL brought together women workers and middle-class “allies.” Its goal was to organize working women into unions under the auspices of the American Federation of Labor (AFL). However, the AFL provided little more than lip service to women workers. Given the union’s attitude, it was not surprising that the money and leadership to organize women came largely from the wealthy allies in the WTUL. Although the alliance between working women, primarily immigrants and daughters of immigrants, and their middle-class allies was not without tension, the WTUL helped working women achieve significant gains.

The WTUL’s most notable success came in 1909 in the “uprising of the twenty thousand,” when hundreds of women employees of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company in New York City went on strike to protest low wages, dangerous working conditions, and management’s refusal to recognize their union, the International Ladies’ Garment Workers Union. In support, an estimated twenty thousand garment workers, most of them teenaged girls and many of

them Jewish and Italian immigrants, stayed out on strike through the winter, picketing in the bitter cold. Police and hired thugs harassed the picketing strikers, beating them up and arresting more than six hundred of them for “street walking” (prostitution). When WTUL allies, including J. P. Morgan’s daughter Anne, joined the picket line, the harassment quickly stopped.

By the time the strike ended in February 1910, the workers had won important demands in many shops. The solidarity shown by the women workers proved to be the strike’s greatest achievement. As Clara Lemlich, one of the strike’s leaders, exclaimed, “They used to say that you couldn’t even organize women. They wouldn’t come to union meetings. They were ‘temporary’ workers. Well we showed them!”

Library of Congress, LC-DIG-ggbain-04505.

Garment Workers on Strike These two young women, both probably immigrants, walked the picket line during the successful “uprising of the twenty thousand” garment workers in 1909. The women’s hats and dresses display their needlework skills and their respectability. The glowering men in the background suggest the conventional middle-class opposition to the working women’s strike.

The WTUL made enormous contributions to the strike. The league provided volunteers for the picket lines, posted more than $29,000 in bail, protested and publicized police brutality, organized a parade of 10,000 strikers, took part in

the arbitration conference, arranged mass meetings, appealed for funds, and generated publicity for the strike. Under the leadership of the WTUL women from every class of society, from Madison Avenue socialites to socialists on New York's Lower East Side, found common cause in supporting the striking garment workers.

But for all its success, the uprising of the twenty thousand failed fundamentally to change conditions for women workers, as the tragic Triangle fire dramatized in 1911. A little over a year after the shirtwaist makers' strike ended, fire alarms sounded at the Triangle Shirtwaist factory. The ramshackle building, full of lint and combustible cloth, burned to rubble in half an hour. A WTUL member described the scene on the street: "Two young girls whom I knew to be working in the vicinity came rushing toward me, tears were running from their eyes and they were white and shaking as they caught me by the arm. 'Oh,' shrieked one of them, 'they are jumping. Jumping from ten stories up! They are going through the air like bundles of clothes.' "

The terrified Triangle workers had little choice but to jump. Flames blocked one exit, and the other door had been locked to prevent workers from pilfering. The flimsy, rusted fire escape collapsed under the weight of fleeing workers, killing dozens. The lucky ones made it out on the elevator or by climbing to the roof where they escaped to a neighboring

building. For the rest, the building became a deathtrap. Fifty-four workers jumped from the ninth-floor windows only to crash to their deaths on the sidewalks. Of 500 workers, 146 died and scores of others were injured. The owners of the Triangle, who had managed to escape the fire, went to trial for negligence, but they avoided conviction when authorities determined that a careless smoker had started the blaze. The Triangle Shirtwaist Company reopened in another firetrap within a matter of weeks.

Outrage and a sense of futility overwhelmed Rose Schneiderman, a leading WTUL organizer, who made a bitter speech at the memorial service for the dead Triangle workers. “I would be a traitor to those poor burned bodies if I came here to talk good fellowship,” she told her audience. “We have tried you good people of the public and we have found you wanting…. I know from my experience it is up to the working people to save themselves … by a strong working class movement.” The Triangle fire severely tested the bonds of the cross-class alliance. Schneiderman and other WTUL leaders determined that organizing and striking were no longer enough. Increasingly, the WTUL turned its efforts to lobbying for protective legislation — laws that would limit hours and regulate women’s working conditions.

The National Consumers League (NCL) also fostered cross-class alliance and advocated for protective legislation. When

Hull House's Florence Kelley took over the leadership of the NCL in 1899, she urged middle-class women to boycott stores and exert pressure for decent wages and working conditions for women employees. Frustrated by the reluctance of the private sector to reform, the NCL promoted protective legislation to better working conditions for women.

Advocates of protective legislation had won a major victory in 1908 when the U.S. Supreme Court, in *Muller v. Oregon*, reversed its previous rulings and upheld an Oregon law that limited the number of hours women could work in a day to ten. A mass of sociological evidence put together by Florence Kelley of the NCL and Josephine Goldmark of the WTUL convinced the Court that long hours endangered women and therefore the entire human race. The Court's ruling set a precedent, but one that separated the well-being of women workers from that of men by arguing that women's reproductive role justified special treatment. Later generations of women fighting for equality would question the effectiveness of this strategy and argue that it ultimately closed good jobs to women. The WTUL, however, greeted protective legislation as a first step in the attempt to ensure the safety of all workers.

Reform also fueled the fight for woman suffrage. For women like Jane Addams, involvement in social reform led inevitably

to support for woman suffrage. These new suffragists emphasized the reforms that could be accomplished if women had the vote. Addams insisted that in an urban, industrial society, a good housekeeper could not be sure the food she fed her family, or the water and milk they drank, were pure unless she could vote. She needed the ballot as well as the broom to keep her home clean.

REVIEW

What types of people were drawn to the progressive movement, and why?

What were the key tenets of progressive theory?

Progressivism emphasized action and experimentation. Dismissing the view that humans should leave progress to the dictates of natural selection, a new group of reform Darwinists argued that evolution could be advanced more rapidly if men and women used their intellects to improve society. In their zeal for action, progressives often showed an unchecked admiration for speed and efficiency that promoted scientific management, a new cult to improve productivity. These varied strands of progressive theory found practical application in state and local politics, where reformers challenged traditional laissez-faire government.

Reform Darwinism and Social Engineering

The active, interventionist approach of the progressives directly challenged social Darwinism, with its insistence on survival of the fittest. A new group of sociologists argued that progress could be advanced more rapidly if people used their intellects to alter their environment. The best statement of this **reform Darwinism** came from sociologist Lester Frank Ward in his book *Dynamic Sociology* (1883). Ward insisted the “blind natural forces in society must give way to human foresight.” This theory condemned the

laissez-faire approach, insisting that the liberal state should play a more active role in solving social problems.

Efficiency and *expertise* became progressives' watchwords. In *Drift and Mastery* (1914), journalist and critic Walter Lippmann called for skilled "technocrats" to use scientific techniques to control social change. Unlike the Populists, who advocated a greater voice for the masses, progressives, for all their interest in social justice, insisted that experts be put in charge. At its extreme, the application of expertise and social engineering took the form of scientific management.

Progressive Government: City and State

Progressivism burst forth at every level of government in 1900, but nowhere more forcefully than in Cleveland with the election of Democrat Thomas Loftin Johnson as mayor. A self-made millionaire by age forty, Johnson moved to Cleveland in 1899, where he began his career in politics. During his mayoral campaign, he pledged to reduce the streetcar fare from five cents to three cents. His election touched off a seven-year war between Johnson and the streetcar magnates. To get his three-cent fare, Johnson had Cleveland buy the streetcar system, a tactic of municipal ownership progressives called "gas and water socialism."

Under Johnson’s administration, Cleveland became, in the words of journalist Lincoln Steffens, the “best governed city in America.”

In Wisconsin, Republican Robert M. La Follette converted to the progressive cause early in the 1900s. La Follette capitalized on the grassroots movement for reform to launch his long political career as governor (1901–1905) and U.S. senator (1906–1925). La Follette brought scientists and professors into his administration and used the university, just down the street from the statehouse in Madison, as a resource. As governor, La Follette lowered railroad rates, raised railroad taxes, improved education, preached conservation, established factory regulation and workers’ compensation, instituted the first direct primary in the country, and inaugurated the first state income tax. Under his leadership, Wisconsin earned the title “laboratory of democracy.”

West of the Rockies, progressivism arrived somewhat later and found a champion in Republican Hiram Johnson, who served as governor of California from 1911 to 1917 and later as U.S. senator. The Southern Pacific Railroad had dominated California politics since the 1870s. As governor, Johnson promised to “kick the Southern Pacific out of politics” and “return the government to the people,” winning support from progressive voters. During Johnson’s

governorship, California adopted the direct primary; supported initiative, referendum, and recall; strengthened the state’s railroad commission; and enacted an employer’s liability law.

REVIEW

How did progressives justify their demand for more activist government?