The Industrial Revolution and the Factory Operative in Pennsylvania

INDUSTRIAL processes, revolutionized by the harnessing of water and steam, wrought transformations in our society whose ends are not yet in sight. Inexorably, with the advent of the factory system the geography of America was altered, and American life in its moods and its ideals underwent a profound change. Drab factories with their clusters of squalid tenements destroyed the serenity of the American countryside; shattered, too, was Jefferson's idyllic agrarian dream.

The promise of America—advancement and riches—was there for those of enterprise and ambition who would seize it. Especially was this true in Pennsylvania in the first half of the nineteenth century. Capital flowed ceaselessly and in ever-increasing quantities into the mills and factories of the Keystone State. Artisans, mechanics, and laborers of all kinds were in great demand throughout most of this period.

For the ambitious and thrifty American workingman, success appeared inevitable. Man could be the master of his own fate. If fortune smiled upon him, it was of his own making; if he failed, the responsibility was his alone. An article reprinted in Hazard's Register of Pennsylvania gave credence to this idea when it asserted that "as a general rule, with few exceptions, frugal industrious journeymen,

1 According to estimates gleaned from the Fourth and the Sixth Censuses of the United States, capital invested in manufacturing enterprises in Pennsylvania more than quadrupled in twenty years.

2 Pennsylvania newspapers carried innumerable "men wanted" advertisements, and featured articles on the chronic labor shortage, which affected most of the industries of the state. See Miner's Journal (Pottsville, Pa.), July 21, 1827; Niles' Weekly Register, Vol. 34, 376 (Aug. 2, 1828); United States Gazette, Apr. 18, 1835; Aurora and Pennsylvania Gazette, June 16, 1828; Lycoming Gazette, May 20, 1829; Pennsylvania Inquirer, Sept. 18, 1831; Juniata Telegraph, Oct. 19, 1831; Public Ledger, June 1, 1837.
unencumbered with families, may save so much of their wages, as in a few years, to be enabled to commence business on their own account on a moderate scale."

There is often a large gap between appearances and realities. And although there were apparent signs of opportunity for the working-man to improve his status (and in many instances the opportunities were real), in actuality he shared but slightly in the general business progress of the first half of the nineteenth century. By the thousands workers flocked to the cities to meet the demands of new industries, and these urban manufacturing centers teemed with masses of landless, job-hunting wage earners.

Factory operatives absorbed the first shocks and suffered most grievously from the dislocations brought on by the industrial revolution. Cheerless, unventilated dwellings did little to brighten their monotonous existence. The deplorable circumstances in which large numbers of the factory population lived almost defies description. In the summer of 1832, a citizens committee of Philadelphia, determined to awaken the social consciences of the City Fathers, investigated and made the following report of the living conditions which prevailed among large segments of the working class in Upper Delaware Ward:

The result of this investigation shows, that the whole number of tenements is sixty-four; total number of inhabitants, four hundred and seventy-three. Of these, there are thirty tenements containing fifty-five families, and two hundred and fifty-three individuals, that have not the accommodation of a privy for their use! They are compelled to make use of vessels of various descriptions; the contents of which are daily thrown into the neighbouring docks or into the streets! It will be observed, that the buildings in this block (with one or two exceptions) occupy the whole ground belonging to the premises. The privies [of 34] are situated either in the cellars, or in the vaults under the streets. Of the thirty tenements above mentioned, there are four with three, two with four, and two with six families in each.

Nor was the situation any better in Pittsburgh.\(^6\) Poverty, wretchedness, and squalor went hand in hand with the growth of industries.

If his home surroundings were depressing, the conditions under which the factory operative labored were infinitely worse. The introduction of power machinery and the spread of the factory system had imposed upon the American worker a regimentation and a discipline which were both foreign and repugnant to him. In those mills propelled by steam, the engineer “regulates the speed of the machinery, and all the operatives, adults and children must keep pace with it.”\(^6\) The operative was merely another machine in this vast and complex system. The *New York American* declared that “the ‘personel’ of a large factory is a machine. . . . A strict and almost superstitious discipline is necessary to keep this vast instrument going for a single day.”\(^7\)

Much of the ill will which developed among factory hands grew out of the regulations and methods adopted to enforce and maintain this discipline and ensure the smooth operation of the plant. One mill owner, Charles V. Hagner, confirmed this. He related that “a frequent bone of contention between the employer and the employed in manufactories, is certain rules, in the nature of a contract, established in all well-regulated mills, and which are chiefly indispensable for their good management.”\(^8\)

Arbitrary labor contracts, usually verbal in form but understood by all, enabled the entrepreneurs and the managers of the factories to maintain a rigid control over their employees. The operatives had no voice either in the adoption or in the enforcement of the rules and regulations under which they worked. Acceptance of employment was assent to the rules. Typical were these general rules which prevailed at the Silesia factory\(^9\):

\(^5\) 1837–1838 a Pennsylvania Senate committee undertook to investigate factory conditions in the state, particularly with reference to the employment of children. Dr. L. Callaghan of Pittsburgh, testifying before that committee, presented a distressing tale of the circumstances in which too many of the factory operatives lived. *Journal of the Senate of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, Session of 1837–38. . .* (Harrisburg, 1837–1838), II, 348–350, hereafter cited as *Pa. Senate Journal*.

\(^6\) *Ibid.*, I, 324.

\(^7\) Quoted in *Niles' Weekly Register*, Vol. 52, 393 (Aug. 19, 1837).

\(^8\) *Pa. Senate Journal*, II, 326.

1. The hours of work shall be from sunrise to sunset, from the 21st of March to the 20th of September inclusively; and from sunrise until eight o'clock, P.M., during the remainder of the year. One hour shall be allowed for dinner, and half an hour for breakfast, during the first mentioned six months; and one hour for dinner during the other half year; On Saturdays, the mill shall be stopped one hour before sunset, for the purpose of cleaning the machinery.

2. Every hand coming to work a quarter of an hour after the mill has been started, shall be docked a quarter of a day; and every hand absenting him or herself, without absolute necessity, shall be docked in a sum double in amount of the wages such hand shall have earned during the time of such absence. No more than one hand is allowed to leave any one of the rooms at the same time,—a quarter of a day shall be deducted for every breach of this rule.

3. No smoking or spirituous liquors shall be allowed in the factory, under any pretence whatsoever. It is also forbidden to carry into the factory, nuts, fruits, &c.: books or papers, during the hours of work.

7. Every hand (excepting those who rent a tenement belonging to this concern,) shall give at least two weeks' notice of his or her intention to depart from or cease working in this factory, and the said hand shall continue to work in it, if required so to do, during and until the expiration of the said two weeks. In case of failure herein, the said hand shall forfeit all the wages which may be due to him or her at the time of leaving the mill.

Adam Smith was the prophet of the new order. In the laissez-faire ideal which he so brilliantly postulated, the emergent princes of industry found sustenance for their cherished belief of freedom of contract. To them, freedom of contract was one of those simple, ineluctable natural laws, which, if observed, would ensure progress and happiness for all mankind. And when in 1837 the industrial peace of Philadelphia was threatened, the Public Ledger, one of the early penny newspapers, observed that recognition by labor and management of the contractual nature of their ties would go far toward eliminating friction and strife:

The relation between . . . proprietor or overseer and the operatives, whether minors or of full age, is strictly one of contract, in which nothing beyond the terms of the contract can be required by either party. The one agrees to perform labor, the other to pay money; and so far they are on perfectly equal terms. If the operative agrees to labor for a certain price, and to conform to certain rules, the employer has no right to alter these

10 Public Ledger, June 1, 1837.
rules without the consent of the other. If he does so alter them, the laborer is absolved from his part of the contract, and may depart immediately, with the right to payment for labor already performed, according to the price stipulated. This is the legal ground on which such contracts rest, and if it were generally understood, both by employers and operatives, many disputes, contentions, strikes and other proceedings mischievous to both parties, would be avoided.

This idyllic interpretation of freedom of contract had little relation to the facts, for capital was hardly prepared to accept labor as its equal.

The mill hands resented the lopsided nature of the labor contract. Occasionally, their smoldering anger flared into open rebellion. Especially critical were they of the rule requiring them to give their employers two weeks' notice when leaving, but imposing no similar obligation upon the latter. "In some factories," complained one operative, "one of these rules is, that if any of the hands leave the factories, the proprietors retain from one to two weeks' of their wages, under the pretence that the hands must give two weeks' notice before leaving; but the proprietors discharge the hands without notice."11 Some factory owners affirmed the charge. Others asserted that if any of their hands were discharged without notice "they are entitled to a week's wages in advance," and several employees who had been summarily dismissed corroborated this.12

The blacklist was one of the most effective weapons which the employers possessed in disciplining their hands, and they were not reluctant to use it. Obviously not a part of the wage contract, it was a tacit agreement among various mill owners not to hire any workers who could not produce a certificate of discharge from their previous employers.13 William Blackstock, a Pittsburgh manufacturer, explained that the "reason for the establishment of this rule, [was] to prevent hands from leaving without notice, and to prevent tampering with hands, by the employers themselves."14 Not only was a certificate of discharge made a prerequisite for securing another position, but the employers also made it a general practice to inform "all the

11 Pa. Senate Journal, II, 296, 297; see also Allegheny Democrat and Workingman's Advocate, Oct. 21 and Dec. 9, 1836.
employers in the vicinity, whenever a hand [had] been discharged.’\textsuperscript{15} So oppressive were these practices that the state Senate committee investigating factory conditions in the Pennsylvania textile mills concluded that “these regulations, taken together, leave scarcely an alternative to the operative, but unconditional submission.”\textsuperscript{16}

Collective bargaining, although not unknown, was hardly the accepted mode for formulating a wage contract. Management determined the wages, the hours, and the general working conditions. Wage negotiations were carried on between the individual wage earner and the boss, leaving the worker free to accept the conditions proffered or to move on.\textsuperscript{17}

But he was beginning to resent the arbitrary character of these labor negotiations. The surge of democracy which swept America in this first half of the nineteenth century was partially an expression of the unrest and dissatisfaction which permeated the laboring masses. The “weavers . . . in America pay very little deference to their employers in general,” noted one visitor from England.\textsuperscript{18} Even more important, the men were organizing into trade unions and collectively voicing their protests. Strikes were becoming common, and factory hands were appointing committees to make their wishes known to employers.

The employers met this threat with customary harshness. Two employees of William Blackstock’s factory who had been delegated to voice a demand for a ten-hour day were discharged without notice and proscribed. Mr. Blackstock explained that these two employees “had taken rather too efficient a part in the business.”\textsuperscript{19} At Samuel McBride’s factory in Philadelphia, where a serious difficulty had arisen between labor and management because of the careless manner in which the warps had been handled, “three of his best hands” were dismissed “for taking an active part in favor of their fellow workers.”\textsuperscript{20} Thus, with these two formidable weapons—the right of arbitrary dismissal and the blacklist—employers were able to hold the initiative in their relations with their hired hands.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., I, 325.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} Germantown Telegraph, Oct. 30 and Sept. 4, 1833.
\textsuperscript{18} Peter Neilson, A Six Years’ Residence (Glasgow, 1830), 155.
\textsuperscript{19} Pa. Senate Journal, II, 344, 345.
\textsuperscript{20} National Laborer (Philadelphia), Oct. 1, 1836.
Indicative of the one-sided nature of the labor contract was the system of fines and punishments devised by the mill owners to maintain factory discipline. Heavy fines were meted out for a variety of reasons, most commonly for lateness. The accepted practice among most of the factories was to deduct as much as one quarter of a day's earnings for those who failed to report within five minutes of the opening of the plant. This issue played a prominent part in the protest of the citizens of Pittsburgh which led to an investigation of factory conditions throughout the state. "The [cotton mill owners] have been uniformly in the practice of deducting one quarter from each day's labour, when they were but five minutes late," complained the factory hands of that city. Matthew M'Candless, an operative, charged that "if the hands come in more than five minutes after the bell, they are docked." Dismissal was the penalty for a repetition of this offense.

Physical punishment as a disciplinary measure was confined almost solely to children, both male and female, but occasionally grown women felt the sting of the lash. A factory girl from one of the Pittsburgh mills swore that she had "seen poor innocent females not only 'docked' of a half day's wages for going to work a few minutes after set time, but beat over the shoulder by a rope with knots on the end, until their backs were black and blue; and if they left on that account they would be docked a week's wages." One of the witnesses before the Senate committee testified that "those superintendents who are severe are preferred by employers." It was the children who suffered most from this form of maltreatment by their employers. George Low, a thirteen-year-old factory hand, stated that he "was frequently punished by having [his] ears pulled; at one time the foreman pulled them until they bled." This punishment, the boy explained, was "because I could not take the laps off." In the Northern Liberties, a suburb of Philadelphia, a

22 Allegheny Democrat and Workingman's Advocate, Oct. 21, 1836.
25 Allegheny Democrat and Workingman's Advocate, Dec. 9, 1836.
26 Ibid., II, 330.
27 Ibid., 346.
superintendent of one of the cotton mills was haled into court and convicted for having unmercifully beaten a boy for arriving "a few minutes too late in the morning."  

Fines and punishments, debasing and burdensome as they were, paled into insignificance when compared with the questions of hours and wages. Trending lower wages and interminably long hours convinced the factory operative of the degradation of his status in society. Seldom, if ever, were these wage and hour contracts in writing, and the employer's voice was as arbitrary and final in these matters as in all the other factors affecting the conditions of employment.

The actual wage and hours records extant for the cotton factories are few and fragmentary, but those that are available tell the distressing story of the factory operative. The accounts of William Whitaker's cotton mill in the northeastern section of Philadelphia, if typical, disclose an actual decline in wages and an increase in the hours of labor. In 1820, the weavers at this mill received one dollar per cut making tickings. The price, by 1832, had been reduced to seventy-five cents per cut, and in the following year was seventy cents. Late in the summer of 1837, the mill hands were out on strike to restore a wage cut, but without success. By 1840, the price per cut had been reduced to sixty cents, and the hours of work had been increased. The hands weaving cords suffered similar wage setbacks. In 1830, these mill hands had been paid sixty cents per cut, and ten years later the records reveal that they were being paid only fifty cents for the same work.

Wage reductions throughout the 1830's were the source of considerable friction between the weavers and their employers. At the Schuylkill Cotton Factory in 1834, the operatives, whose wages averaged only three dollars a week, were threatened with a twenty-five per cent reduction in their wages. The handloom weavers of Corlies' mill in 1839, faced with a twenty per cent reduction in their wages, appealed to the public in an effort to stay the action of their

28 Public Ledger, June 1, 1837.
29 A one-quarter cut was fifty yards long and thirty-six inches wide; a seven-eighths cut was fifty yards long and thirty-one and one-half inches wide.
31 Man, May 3, 1834; Pennsylvanian, May 9, 1834. Compare with Neilson, 152, 153, 157.
employers. They disclosed the pittance which was their wage prior
to this proposed reduction:

. . . —18 yards of Superfine Check is considered a day's work, which, at
4½ cents per yard, amounts to 81 cents per day, or $4.86 per week—out of
which is to be deducted 75 cents per week for winding, leaving a balance of
$4.11; for house rent, fuel, light, loom and tackling repairs, &c. $1.37½ per
week—leaving a balance of $2.73½ for finding food and raiment for a family
of four or five members. The proposed reduction being $1.08 per week, in
exact ratio to the above, would reduce the amount for finding food and
raiment for the family to $1.65 per week.

Nor did the decade of the 1840's reveal any improvement in the
status of the weavers. "God knows," caustically wrote one journal,
"some of the poor fellows had great cause to feel rebellious. Empty
stomachs and empty purses are not the best advocates of good order.
At the prices paid, some of them, we are told, a man and his wife,
with constant and close application sixteen hours per day, could not
earn over $2.50 per week."

Declining wages and a longer workday were the lot not only of the
handloom weavers, but of the other operatives in the mills. The mule
spinners at Whitaker's mill were, in 1820, paid at the rate of thirty
cents per one hundred hanks, and the highest wages of the best
hands amounted to twenty-two dollars per month. Niles, in 1828,
reported that the mule spinners in the neighborhood of Philadelphia
received about two dollars per day, which, if true, would have meant
a considerable advance in their wages. But in that same year, the
spinners of that city went on strike against a proposed reduction of
their wages. They complained that even at the old prices a spinner
could make only "from $7.50 to $8.50 per week for himself by work-
ing the full period of twelve hours daily." James Montgomery, a
Britisher who had a wide familiarity with the American textile indus-
try, wrote in 1840 that "the rate at which the mule spinners are paid
in this country [the United States] would average from eight to ten

32 Public Ledger, Aug. 30, 1839.
33 Annual Report of the Secretary of Internal Affairs of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania:
34 Whitaker Account Book, May 26, 1821.
35 Niles' Weekly Register, Vol. 34, 281 (June 28, 1828).
36 Hazard's Register of Pennsylvania, Jan. 17, 1829, as quoted in John R. Commons, et al.,
History of Labour in the United States (New York, 1918), I, 418.
cents per one hundred hanks.” If this assertion is correct, it would indicate a substantial reduction in their pay rates.

Widespread exploitation in the textile mills of women and children, who made up almost two thirds of the labor force, added to their burdens. In their dependent status they not only drove wages down, but kept them at low levels. The legislative committee investigating factory conditions in Pennsylvania concluded that one third of the employees in the cotton mills were men and two thirds were women. As Edith Abbott has pointed out in her study of the employment of women as mill hands, there was no initial displacement of men by women, nor any great prejudice against women in the mills. Until the introduction of the power loom, the early factories were spinning mills, and spinning had always been “women’s work.” More women, Tench Coxe reported in his Statement of the Arts & Manufactures of the United States, prepared in 1814, were turning to the “operations of the weaver . . . while the male weavers [employed] themselves in superintendence.” They worked the same long hours, but their wages fell considerably below those of their male coworkers. According to the information supplied by various mill owners throughout Pennsylvania in 1832, the wages of the female workers ranged from fifty cents per week to two dollars and sixty-two and one-half cents per week. Other sources indicate that these estimates of the earning power of the women employed in the mills were in all probability correct. In the late 1830’s, the women at Whitaker’s mill were averaging between one dollar and two dollars per week.

Although many indignities had been inflicted upon men and women mill hands, and although their losses had been both material and psychological, it was the children, who made up a large part of the labor force in the textile mills, who suffered most from the factory

37 James Montgomery, Practical Detail of the Cotton Manufacture of the United States of America (Glasgow, 1840), 75.
40 Tench Coxe, A Statement of the Arts & Manufactures of the United States of America (Philadelphia, 1814), xxiv.
42 Whitaker Account Books, October, 1838, January, 1839, and January, 1840.
system. According to one estimate, one fifth of all the factory workers in Pennsylvania were children under twelve years of age.\textsuperscript{43} “There can be no doubt,” remarked an early student of the labor movement, “that the introduction of machinery was at first extremely injurious to those whose means of living were affected.”\textsuperscript{44} This was especially true for the many young boys and girls who daily made their dreary way to take positions alongside grown men and women.

They came to add their meager pittance to the family income. The mill owners often contended that they made no profit out of the children, and that the children were forced on them by the poor, and, in many instances, by worthless parents. Mill owner Joseph Ripka declared: “I employ twenty-five children under twelve years of age, and they are pressed on me by widows, or by mothers of dissipated husbands; and when I do employ them, it is for mere charity than any thing else.”\textsuperscript{45} Other mill owners made substantially the same assertions.\textsuperscript{46} Undoubtedly it was true that needy and greedy parents did send their children to the mills at an early age; nonetheless, the fact that many mill owners solicited for children would lead one to believe that their claim of not profiting from the employment of children was disingenuous.

Occasionally, advertisements for factory help announced that “a family that could furnish 4 or 5 hands, would be preferred.”\textsuperscript{47} The same Joseph Ripka who had stated that he hired children only out of charity advertised in the \textit{Public Ledger}: “Men with families, who can work either as Power Loom Weavers or Card Room Hands, will be preferred.”\textsuperscript{48} Many of the witnesses before the Senate committee investigating factory conditions pointed out that if the labor of children under a certain age were prohibited, “it would cost the employers more for larger hands, who could not be had without larger wages.”\textsuperscript{49} Robert Kerr, a factory hand, contended that the employment of children more than twelve years of age “would increase the

\textsuperscript{43} \textit{Pa. State Journal}, I, 323.
\textsuperscript{44} William Trant, \textit{Trade Unions, Their Origin and Objects} (Washington, 1915), 10.
\textsuperscript{45} \textit{Pa. Senate Journal}, II, 358.
\textsuperscript{46} \textit{Ibid.}, 302; Barnard, 14, 15.
\textsuperscript{47} \textit{Mechanic's Free Press}, Aug. 7, 1830; \textit{Union Times and Republican Herald} (New Berlin, Pa.), July 1, 1831; \textit{Huntingdon Journal}, May 8, 1839.
\textsuperscript{48} \textit{Public Ledger}, July 19, 1839.
wages paid by the factory—as children over twelve could not be had for wages as low as those under."\textsuperscript{50}

It was the long hours of work and the pitifully low wages which drew the attention of the public to the miserable status of children in factories. One of the great humanitarian drives characteristic of the Jackson era was the movement for free public education. Great concern was voiced for the factory children who could not enjoy the benefits of education, free or otherwise, because of the long hours of work.

Sunrise to sunset had been the traditional workday in America, and the practice in the 1830's of illuminating the factories with lamps enabled the owners to increase the working hours. At the Whitaker factory during the late thirties, the men began to work at 5:30 in the morning and remained at the job until 7:30 in the evening. The machines were stopped at seven in the morning, allowing thirty minutes for breakfast, and again at noon, allowing thirty minutes for lunch.\textsuperscript{51} In 1839, the \textit{Public Ledger} disclosed that the hours of labor in the factories at Norristown were nearly fifteen in the summer months. Although twelve hours was considered the usual workday, it was not unusual for factory operatives to work thirteen and fourteen hours daily.\textsuperscript{52} The working people of Manayunk, very much aggrieved by the conditions under which they labored, complained that they were "obliged by [their] employers to labor at this season of the year, from 5 o'clock in the morning until sunset, being fourteen and a half, with an intermission of half an hour for breakfast, and an hour for dinner, leaving thirteen hours of hard labor."\textsuperscript{53} Seventy-two hours was considered to be the average work week in most of the mills throughout the state. In its report concerning the time of labor in the factories of Pennsylvania the committee stated that there is nothing which deserves the name of a system in the time of labor, in the factories in Pennsylvania, so far as the investigation of the committee

\textsuperscript{50} \textit{Ibid.}, 287.
\textsuperscript{51} Whitaker Account Books, October, 1838, September, 1839, and October, 1840.
\textsuperscript{53} \textit{Pennsylvanian}, Aug. 28, 1833; see also the report on manufactures in Hazard's \textit{Register of Pennsylvania}, I, 157-158 (Mar. 8, 1828).
extended. In the vicinity of Philadelphia, for instance, where the cotton mills are numerous, eleven hours of labor, per day, are exacted in some establishments; twelve in others, and in one, at least, it has exceeded fourteen hours per day; the humanity, or cupidity of employers, being the only motive by which it is regulated.\(^54\)

One employer, when queried by the committee as to the evils of the factory system as it prevailed in Pennsylvania, replied, "I know of no evil worth notice, except that which arises from the refractory, factious spirit of some of the men, and they are mostly foreigners."\(^55\) The same man, when asked if he thought that the hours of work were too long and the labor of children excessive, blandly answered, "Far from it—it approaches nearer to amusement."\(^56\)

Such myopia was not characteristic of all mill owners. It was generally agreed even among many of the manufacturers that one of the greatest evils of the factory system was the long hours of work. Most of the ills associated with the textile industry, especially as they affected the children, stemmed from the long workday.

Although many of the mill owners frowned upon the employment of children under twelve, they were at the same time apprehensive of any reduction in the hours of labor or of the prohibition of child labor. John P. Crozer, a manufacturer, testified that "small operatives have often been scarce, and employers were therefore desirous to retain the children in the factories."\(^57\) The Senate committee, sifting through the testimony of both factory hands and mill owners, concluded that "the labor of children under twelve years of age, in factories, is not desirable or profitable; and that no injury would result to employers, by the enactment of a law to prohibit the employment of all children under that age."\(^58\)

What should have made life particularly wretched for these infants, who labored through an intolerably long workday in a dirty and dusty atmosphere, was the pittance they received in return for their labors. Their wages varied according to age, and some of them received only twelve and one-half cents a day or seventy-five cents a

\(^{54}\) Pa. Senate Journal, I, 322.  
\(^{55}\) Ibid., II, 354.  
\(^{56}\) Ibid., 355.  
\(^{57}\) Ibid., 305.  
\(^{58}\) Ibid., I, 324.
Wages of the older children generally averaged from one dollar to two dollars per week. While the more highly paid workers, that is, the mule spinners and those employed in the cardroom of the Whitaker mill, had suffered from a reduction in their wages, the records reveal no similar decline in the earnings of the children and lesser-paid workers.

From all that has been written, it would appear that the position of the factory operative was an unenviable one. Not only were his oppressions many and his wages low, but what proved particularly irksome to him was the difficulty he often experienced in collecting the earnings due him. It was a practice of many mill owners to combine a store with their mill operations, and the wage contract occasionally stipulated that a portion of the wages was to be paid in store orders. One contemporary observed that "in general, the conductors of the factories keep a shop or store; and it is stipulated that one half of the wages shall be paid in groceries, &c." A mill owner at Morrisville, Pennsylvania, paid his hands in store orders, and his profit was reported to be from ten to fifteen per cent. Others paid their hands in depreciated bank notes, which meant, at times, a loss of at least ten per cent of their wages. In addition, the general practice of paying the factory hands only once in every four weeks, and at the same time withholding a portion of their wages, left the operatives in a continual state of financial insecurity.

The American operative could derive scant satisfaction from the fact that his wages were better than those of his fellow workers in England and on the Continent, for it was generally recognized that he worked harder and faster than did his brethren across the sea. Harriet Martineau, who had been favorably impressed by the congenial atmosphere which prevailed in the American mills, emphatically asserted that "there seems to be no doubt among those who know both England and America that the mechanics of the New

---

60 Whitaker Account Books, 1834–1837.
62 Pennsylvania Reporter, June 20, 1834; Mechanic's Free Press, Oct. 9, 1830; Germantown Telegraph, Apr. 15, 1835; Public Ledger, June 8, 1837, and Feb. 23, 1839.
World work harder than those of the old.” James Montgomery, thoroughly familiar with the operations of cotton factories in both countries, noted that “the manufacturers here can afford to pay higher wages than the British, because they run their factories longer hours, and drive their machinery at a higher speed from which they produce a much greater quantity of work.” An operative who had worked in both England and America stated: “I consider the operation of the factory system upon persons employed, is more oppressive in this country than in England.”

The Public Ledger concurred:

The great evil which laborers are subject to in this country, is the amount of work they have to perform. Though receiving a higher rate of wages than those of Europe, and better paid for their services, yet the length of the time they are obliged to keep at their work, to receive this compensation, makes the task they have to perform fall heavier upon them.

Operations which in England required the services of two and three individuals were performed in the United States by a single adult worker. A conviction was beginning to pervade a large number of the factory hands that their situation was no better than that of the depressed workers abroad.

That the grievances of these artisans who worked in the mills and factories were real is obvious. But far more serious was that overpowering sense of degradation which was beginning to be felt by large masses of these working people. “The losses of the individual worker in the first half of the century,” wrote an astute student of the labor movement, “were not comfort losses solely, but losses, as he conceived it, of status and independence and no comfort gains could cancel this debt.”

This theme was aired again and again at meetings of wage earners. “What,” they were asked, “is the cause of [their] degeneracy?” And

---

64 Harriet Martineau, Society and Manners in America (New York, 1837), II, 251-252; Montgomery, 126.
65 Ibid., 128.
67 Public Ledger, June 7, 1839.
68 Pennsylvanian, Aug. 28, 1833; National Trades' Union, Dec. 19, 1835.
69 Norman Ware, The Industrial Worker (New York, 1924), i, xi, xiv. See Sidney and Beatrice Webb, The History of Trade Unionism (London, 1911), 47, for a discussion of the situation of factory workers in Great Britain at this time.
why should it be “more degrading to turn a spinning wheel in a factory, than a spinning wheel at home?” A growing pessimism permeated the minds of many—a feeling of frustration, a loss of hope, a conviction that there was no escape. “Those who are toiling day after day, spending their strength, and wasting their health in the production of wealth are doomed not only to poverty with all its attendant inconvenience, but even to contempt,” gloomily predicted a mechanic of Philadelphia.  

Nor was this a matter of concern to the wage earners alone. When the rumblings of protest and discontent over hours and wages and all the other attendant evils of the factory system began to be heard throughout Pennsylvania, one of the conservative Philadelphia papers pointedly reminded its readers that although “labouring in the field or in a workshop cannot confer any distinction ... it ought not to be a degradation.” This editorial struck close to the heart of the issue, since the problems of the working classes were social as well as economic, and transcended the comparatively narrow struggle for better wages and shorter hours.

Long hours of work combined with the constant fear of unemployment and the depreciation in the value of human labor had a demoralizing effect upon the wage earner. It was the artisans who suffered most from the dislocations and adjustments which beset American business in the early stages of the industrial revolution. During the great panic of 1819 unemployment reached epidemic proportions. Various estimates placed the unemployment in Philadelphia from 5,000 to 20,000. In Pittsburgh, the number of employed had fallen from 1,960 in 1815 to 672 in 1819. No enumeration of the unemployed, no calculation of the pecuniary loss to the nation could adequately reveal the heart-rending tragedy inherent in this great panic. The story of the stirrings, the doubts, the fears, which gripped the hearts and minds of men, was left untold. A citizens

70 Philadelphia Mercury, Dec. 29, 1827.
71 Poulson’s Daily American Advertiser, Aug. 18, 1830.
72 Aurora and General Advertiser, July 22 and 29, and Oct. 5, 1819; Mathew Carey, Address Before the Philadelphia Society for Promoting Agriculture, 25, 26, 30; Hazard’s Register of Pennsylvania, IV, 169 (Sept. 12, 1829).
73 Ibid., VII, 280 (Apr. 30, 1831); Erasmus Wilson, Standard History of Pittsburg (Chicago, 1898), 217.
committee of Philadelphia, investigating the effects of the great crisis, suggested that the losses were not material losses alone:74

But who can calculate the injuries of another description that flow from it? The demoralization that necessarily results from want of employment, and its attendant dissipation: the heart rending pangs felt by parents, whose prospects of supporting their families are blighted and blasted? the numerous estimable females accustomed to earn a subsistence by spinning, and other employments adapted to their sex, and whose wants and distresses may force them to a life of guilt and wretchedness.

Insecurity and fear were the lot of the factory operative. One business recession followed closely upon another—1824, 1829, 1833.75 The business recession of 1833 was but a prelude to the great debacle of 1837. Barely had the laboring classes recovered from the economic dislocation of the previous layoff than they once again had to endure the misery of unemployment, privation, and want.76

Probably never before had the complacency of thinking Americans been so rudely shattered. What is to be done? queried the Ledger. "The pecuniary difficulties which have for some time afflicted our community continue in almost undiminished severity." What were its effects upon the poor man, who in his "daily struggle with want and penury . . . [knows] that even when he sleeps to gain strength for the toil of to-morrow; that the enemy he contends against is sleepless and never rests"?77 Some, like the Ledger, felt that the nation's economy had reached the peak of its expansive possibilities and saw little hope for improvement in the future:78

There begins to prevail, among the more reflecting of our citizens, an apprehension that the present troubles are not temporary in their nature—are not the eruptions of high health, but the settled symptoms of a cankered and cureless disease—are not mere ripples on the advancing tide of our national prosperity, but the agitations of a certain and rapid ebb.

74 *Aurora and General Advertiser*, Oct. 15, 1819.
75 *Poulson's Daily American Advertiser*, Jan. 7, 1824; *United States Gazette*, Feb. 12, 1824; *Free Trade Advocate* (June 20, 1829), 399; *Niles' Weekly Register*, Vol. 36, 281 (June 27, 1829).
77 *Public Ledger*, Sept. 20, 1839.
There can be no doubt that recurrent crises, bringing widespread unemployment and declining living standards, caused many men seriously to doubt the efficacy of the factory system. According to some workers, it was merely an efficient means of robbing them of the fruits of their labor. One mechanic complained that

The factory system is that system by which, with the aid of machinery, a small company of men, possessing a large stock of money and sometimes aided by legislative enactments, are enabled to avail themselves of the labor of hundreds and frequently thousands of men, women, and children, to increase the wealth of the company, while the men, women, and children are generally worked to the utmost possible number of hours a day and paid for their work the smallest possible compensation which will enable them to keep life in the body and sufficient strength to return to their daily task.\(^79\)

The factory system, more than any other single factor, convinced the workers of the degradation of their social status. They resented the willingness of some mill owners to equate human labor with that of the machine, and in the machines they found a cause for their oppression and degeneration. When one statistically minded individual estimated that “Philadelphia loses $1000 every time the mechanics quit to go to dinner,” the *Public Ledger* denounced him as belonging to “that hard hearted school which considers man a mere laboring machine, whose value is to be estimated by the amount of labor which can be forced from him.”\(^80\)

Man and machine were becoming indistinguishable, and it was the conviction of one who purported to speak for the working classes that the effect of the establishment of manufactories was “to sink and degrade the actual manufacturer into a necessary piece of machinery.” This same individual argued that “in a great manufactory the laborer is qualified to be what he is—a part of the machinery.”\(^81\)

It was difficult to convince the workingman of the beneficial aspects of machinery when he was experiencing greater hardships than ever before. He was not yet willing to listen dispassionately to the argument that machinery would greatly reduce the costs of manufacture and spread its benefits to all. “We see,” protested a critic of laborsaving machinery, “that the more assistance our Mechanics and

---

\(^79\) *Working Man’s Advocate*, Mar. 24, 1832.

\(^80\) *Public Ledger*, Jan. 23, 1837.

\(^81\) *National Laborer*, Apr. 23, 1836.
Working Men derive from machinery, and consequently, the *more* rich and comfortable they *ought to be*, the *less* rich and comfortable they *are*.\(^82\)

The factory operative, along with most of the other wage earners of Pennsylvania, was deeply disturbed. He had seen the machine make threatening inroads into his way of life. His hours of work had increased, but his wages had not increased proportionately, and more and more he saw women and children entering into occupations which formerly had been monopolized by men. No slide rule could calculate the human misery and suffering which had accompanied the new industry. The operative searched frantically for a solution to his dilemma, but in vain. Recurrent crises swept away the few gains which he had won through stubborn struggle and left him to flounder among the forces which were transforming America into a great industrial nation.

\(^{82}\) *Mechanic's Free Press*, May 8, 1830.