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Effect of the Industrial Revolution on Factory Workers

The Industrial Revolution and the great economic success that accompanied it had a wide variety of victims. Factories began to replace small “cottage” industries. As the population grew so did wants and needs. Manufacturers realized that bulk production was cheaper, more efficient and provided the quantity of items needed. As a result, more and more factories sprang up.

Factory work is very different from other types of labor. The introduction of the factory system had a negative effect on living conditions. Factory owners who believed in Social Darwinism and Rugged Individualism did not care much about those who worked in their factories. They believed that if the workers wanted to improve their lives, they had to do it on their own. Also, because no particular strength or skill was required to operate many of the new factory machines, the workers were considered unskilled. This meant that they were easily replaced.

The owners of the early factories were often most interested in hiring a worker cheaply. Thus, they employed many women and children. These workers could be hired for lower wages than men. These low-paid employees had to work as long as 16 hours a day, and were subjected to pressure and physical punishment in an effort to make them speed up production. Since neither the machines no the methods of work were designed for safety, many fatal and maiming accidents resulted.

Factory owners, especially those involved in the steel and coal mining industries, often built **company towns**. Workers were given cheap rent in these towns to go along with their low wages. In essence, the worker was trapped. The company town gave the worker a place to live, and without the job, he couldn’t leave.

Those in the garment industry worked in **sweatshops**. Sweatshops were poorly ventilated and poorly lit rooms where seamstresses sat side by side doing **piece work** (specializing only on one piece of the work, never making their own finished product). The cloth would be piled high and workers were not allowed to talk. Often, sweatshop employees were forced to work late into the night so that the job was completed, or they would not get paid.

One of the most influential events in the labor history was a direct result of sweatshop conditions. **The Triangle Shirt Factory Fire**killed 114 workers because the fabric caught on fire and tore through the building. There were no fire escapes and doors opened into the hall. These doors were blocked, locking the workers in. As a result, stricter building codes and fire regulations were passed.

Coal miners also faced difficult work conditions. Mine owners often hired children whose small hands could fit into narrow openings to scrape coal from the mine walls. Working 16 hour days with poor ventilation and frequent cave-ins, many of these children were lucky to be paid one dollar for a day’s work.

Questions

1. What was one of the many victims of the Industrial Revolution?
2. Why is factory work different from other types of labor?
3. Why were workers considered unskilled?
4. What are company towns?
5. What are sweatshops?
6. How is piece work like division of labor?
7. What was the Triangle Shirt Factory Fire?