

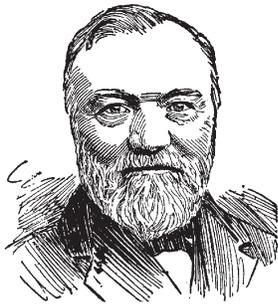
BIG INDUSTRY AND LABOR UNIONS

These selections highlight some of the issues in the debates about big industry and labor unions in the Gilded Age.

Carnegie Defends the Millionaires

These excerpts are condensed from a famous article by Andrew Carnegie titled “Wealth.” Its message later became known as “The Gospel of Wealth.”

The conditions of human life have not only been changed, but revolutionized, within the past few hundred years. The contrast between the palace of the millionaire and the cottage of the laborer with us today measures the change which has come with civilization. This change, however, is not to be deplored, but welcomed as highly beneficial.



The “good old times” were not good old times.

Formerly articles were manufactured at the domestic hearth [in the home] or in small shops which formed part of the household. But the

inevitable result of such a mode of manufacture was crude articles at high prices.

Today the world obtains commodities of excellent quality at prices which even the generation preceding this would have deemed incredibly low. The poor enjoy what the rich could not before afford. What were luxuries have become the necessities of life.

The price we pay for this change is great. We assemble thousands of operatives [workers] in the factory and in the mine. Under the law of competition, the employer is forced into the strictest economies, among which are the rates paid to laborers, and often there is

friction between employer and the employed, between capital and labor, between rich and poor.

The price which society pays for the law of competition is great. But the advantages of this law are greater still, for it is to this law that we owe our wonderful material development, which brings improved conditions.

While the law of competition may be sometimes hard for the individual, it is best for the race, because it insures the survival of the fittest. We accept and welcome, therefore, great inequality of living conditions and the concentration of business in the hands of a few. The law of competition between these is not only beneficial, but essential for the future progress of the race.

Ida Tarbell Criticizes Business Practices

Journalist Ida Tarbell exposed the way John D. Rockefeller organized the Standard Oil Company to control the oil refining industry. She showed that often, business in the Gilded Age involved practices that were far from fair competition. These condensed excerpts are from her famous book on the Standard Oil Company.

Every great campaign against rival interests which the Standard Oil Company has carried on has been inaugurated [started], not to save its life, but to build up and sustain a monopoly in the oil industry.

Very often people who admit the facts, who are willing to see that Mr. Rockefeller has employed force and fraud to secure his ends, justify him by declaring, “It’s business.” That is, “it’s business” has come to be a legitimate excuse for hard dealing, sly tricks, special privileges. It is a common enough thing to hear men arguing that the

ordinary laws of morality do not apply in business.

Now, if the Standard Oil Company were the only concern [business] in the country guilty of the practices which have given it monopolistic power, this story would never have been written. Were it alone in these methods, public scorn would long ago have made short work of the Standard Oil Company. But it is simply the most conspicuous type of what can be done by these practices.

One of the most depressing features of the ethical side of the matter is that instead of such methods arousing contempt they are more or less openly admired.

Samuel Gompers Defends Labor Unions

Samuel Gompers rose to fame as the president of the American Federation of Labor. These lines are condensed from an 1894 letter to a judge who was critical of the strategy of collective action (such as strikes) by workers.

You know, or ought to know, that the introduction of machinery is turning into idleness [unemployment] thousands faster than new industries are founded. The laborer is a man, he is made warm by the same sun and made cold – yes, colder – by the same winter as you. He has a heart and brain, and feels and knows the human and paternal instinct for those depending on him as keenly as you.

What shall the workers do? Sit idly by and see the vast resources of nature and the human mind be utilized and monopolized for the benefit of the comparative few?

No. The laborers must learn to think and act, and soon, too, that only by the power of organization and common action can their manhood be maintained, their rights to work be recognized, and liberty and rights secured.

I am not one of those who regards the entire past as a failure. I recognize the progress made and the improved conditions of which nearly the entire civilized world are the beneficiaries.

I ask you to explain, however, how it is that thousands of able-bodied, willing, earnest men and women are suffering the pangs of hunger? We may boast of our wealth and civilization, but to the hungry man and woman and child our progress is a hollow mockery, our civilization a sham, and our “national wealth” a chimera [fantasy].

You recognize that the industrial forces set in motion by steam and electricity have materially changed the structure of our civilization. You evidently have observed the growth of corporate wealth and influence.



You recognize that wealth, in order to become more highly productive, is concentrated into fewer hands, and yet you sing the old siren song that the workingman should depend entirely upon his own “individual effort.”

If, as you say, the success of commercial society depends on the full play of competition, why do not you turn your attention and your attacks against the trusts and corporations?

In conclusion, let me assure you that labor will organize, and despite relentless antagonism, achieve for humanity a nobler manhood, a more beautiful womanhood, and a happier childhood.

Group Discussion: *Summarize briefly each writer’s main points. On what point do Andrew Carnegie and Samuel Gompers agree? In what ways do their views differ?*