

COMPARING PRIMARY SOURCES

On Labor Unions

When American workers began to organize in the latter half of the 1800s, they encountered great opposition, even among many laborers themselves. The viewpoints below, presented in testimony in 1883 before the Senate Committee on Education and Labor, reflect the controversy surrounding the responsibilities of labor, business, and government in an industrial America.

As you read, compare and contrast the viewpoints and then answer the questions that follow.

TESTIMONY OF A FACTORY MANAGER

Thomas L. Livermore was the manager of the Amoskeag Manufacturing Company in Manchester, New Hampshire. Here is his view of industry and labor.

I think that . . . in a free country like this, with thousands of miles of land to be taken up in a vast area of country which is inhabited by people occupied in industrial pursuits and the great variety of employments to be found in this country, it is perfectly safe for at least the lifetime of this generation to leave the question of how a man shall work, and how long he shall work, and where he shall work, and what wages he shall get to himself. It is as certain that wages in a country situated as ours is will adjust themselves to the level required by the demand and the market as it is that water will seek its level. I do not believe that anyone has ever yet seen in this country a time when distress on the part of the laboring people was universal. It has occurred in certain industries and in certain places without any question, but every time the tremendous field which is afforded to the laboring man in which to find employment has come to his relief, and, with a little foresight, a little forehandedness, and a little energy, he has been able to find some employment in which he could earn his living and a little more.

TESTIMONY OF A PHYSICIAN

Timothy D. Stow, a physician from Fall River, Massachusetts, testified on the physical and mental health of laborers in his mill town.

With regard to the effect of the present industrial system upon their physical and moral welfare, I should say it was of such a character as to need mending, to say the least. It needs some radical remedy. Our laboring population is made up very largely of foreigners, men, women, and children, who have either voluntarily come to Fall River or who have been induced to come there by the manufacturers. . . .

They are dwarfed, in my estimation, sir, as the majority of men and women who are brought up in factories must be dwarfed under the present industrial system; because by their long hours of indoor labor and their hard work they are cut off from the benefit of breathing fresh air and from the sights that surround a workman outside a mill. Being shut up all day long in the noise and in the high temperature of these mills they become physically weak. . . .

I think all that capital gets, it gets from labor, and it is for the interest, even of capitalists, that they should first, above all things, see that the laboring classes of the country are well paid, well clothed, well housed, and made comfortable in their work; that they should have access to public libraries and to parks and public improvements of every kind. I think this necessary for the improvement of the individual, physically, morally, and mentally.