

WORKING NINE TO FIVE

During the Industrial Revolution, American workers traded in farm work for the factory.



At the turn of the century, steel tycoon Andrew Carnegie had some doubts about the industrial world he had helped to create. “We assemble thousands of operatives in the factory,” he said, “of whom the employers can know little or nothing. Rigid castes [social classes] are formed, and mutual ignorance breeds mutual distrust.” Then, Carnegie proceeded to sell his empire for \$250 million and retire to his castle in Scotland, where 85 servants helped him enjoy his 90-foot pool and private golf course.

Carnegie left behind a nation that was almost unrecognizable from the one he saw when he first arrived in 1847. In the 1840s, two thirds of Americans were farmers who lived off the land. Most of the rest were artisans, who practiced crafts like shoemaking or blacksmithing. These people had a few things in common: most worked in their own homes, set their own hours, and owned the tools of their trades.

As industry grew, life changed. The tools of the new trades—blast furnaces for forging steel, automated looms for weaving textiles—were too expensive for most artisans to own. Poorer folk therefore went to work for those who had the money to start a factory. Self-employment began to seem like a dream. According to Joe Buchanan, a Colorado labor leader in the 1880s, “Twenty years ago, the [worker] could raise himself from the days-pay condition to a little business of his own. Today, the opportunity has been thrust from him by the greedy hand of the great manufacturers.”

Indeed, as the factories grew, so did the gap between owner and worker. While Carnegie and his fellow industrialists made a mint, workers toiled up to 14 hours a day in dangerous conditions. In 1900, their pay averaged \$500 a year, enough for a small family to put away \$30 or so.

Faced with a loss of control over their lives, many workers decided to band together to form trade unions. According to the constitution of the Knights of Labor, an early union group, “The recent development and aggression of wealth” made it necessary to unite in order to “secure to the laborer the fruits of his toil.”



The main weapon in this struggle was the strike. And in the last half of the 19th century, workers wielded it often in order to force employers to offer shorter hours and decent wages.

Carnegie himself was hit by one of the most violent strikes when workers took over a steel plant in Homestead, Pennsylvania, in 1892. Like others who witnessed the upheavals of the industrial revolution, Carnegie hoped that “the ties of brotherhood may still bind together the rich and the poor.” But, if such a time existed at all, it seemed to have passed.