Not everyone in the new nation benefited from the industrial revolution. While Eli Whitney’s cotton gin gave impetus to the growth of the cotton textile industry, slave labor in the South remained critical for the southern economy. And in the industrial north, men, women, and children, although free, fared little better than the southern slaves as they labored in the textile mills and factories, and in the iron industries and coal mines.

The American Dream may have been alive and well for the wealthy, but it eluded most citizens. Early immigrants discovered that American streets were not paved with gold and that a very meager paycheck was in the pot at the end of Uncle Sam’s rainbow.

Many new entrepreneurs sought to mass-produce goods quickly and get those goods to a public eager to accept and pay for new products. Iron foundries, rolling mills, and textile factories depended entirely on human hands to get the work done. However, in the early nineteenth century no watchdog—government agency or otherwise—existed to oversee working conditions or safeguard workers. Entrepreneurs thought themselves benevolent and parental in creating factory towns that in reality kept workers in debt and dependent upon the mill or mine. Sadly, few gave little thought to the workers’ needs or their working conditions.

**Teacher Directions**

1. Share information with the students concerning the early industrial revolution in America. In that discussion include how the factory system developed and changed the lives of Americans and the working conditions in the factories and mills.

Not everyone in the new United States of America enjoyed personal freedoms, especially those men, women, and children who lived in factory towns and worked a twelve to fourteen hour day, six days a week at minimal pay. While the factory system of mass production introduced by men like Samuel Slater, Eli Whitney, and Francis Lowell provided much-desired products and goods for many citizens, the people who were employed to produce those goods often lived lives of “quiet desperation,” to borrow the words of Henry David Thoreau. Both Slater and Lowell produced mill towns, probably believing that they were doing favors for their employees. Nonetheless, both men demanded long, hard hours from their employees, men, women, and children alike.

2. Students imagine themselves in the following nineteenth century working condition.

Posted schedules in mills and factories required men, women, and children to work twelve or more hours a day, six days a week. Adult overseers spanked children who lagged behind.

3. Students discuss the following questions.

- What do you think about that work schedule? Can you imagine anyone working such a schedule?
- How would you have survived working under these conditions? Remember that quitting was not an option because your family needed the money you could earn.
- What would you learn from working under these conditions? How would these experiences have changed your life?
- What family chore do you dislike most? How would you feel if you had to do that chore for twelve hours a day?

4. Students, in small teams, discuss the following questions.

- Why would entire families settle in mill villages working twelve or more hours a day for little pay?
- What might keep these families from traveling west in Conestoga wagons to start new lives on the Western frontier?
- Why didn’t these hard working Americans protest their working conditions?
- Why did parents allow their children to go to work in the factories?

**Note to the Teacher:** Several of the above questions are sensitive. Be sure students realize that the work ethic of the early 1800s accepted that children would work alongside adults in all enterprises. Most people—laborers, farmers, and domestics—worked long, hard hours with no sick or vacation leave. Just because parents permitted child labor did not mean that they were necessarily poor parents.

5. After the teams share their responses to the questions in a class discussion, the students analyze the following quotation of Lewis Hine (1908).

*There is work that profits children, and there is work that brings profit only to employers. The object of employing children is not to train them, but to get high profits from their work.*
Teacher Directions

1. Share the following background information with students.

   When the Lowell mills opened in the mid-1800s, child labor was an accepted practice and an economic necessity for many families. At his mill, Lowell hired young farm women, most of whom were between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five. Lowell mill girls worked six days a week, twelve hours a day.

   By the early 1900s, many Americans recognized the exploitation of child labor, which condemned children to a future of illiteracy, poverty, and unremitting factory labor. In 1904, reformers founded the National Child Labor Committee to abolish child labor. Among those hired by the committee to investigate the harsh conditions under which children worked was Lewis Hine, a New York City schoolteacher and photographer.

   Over the next decade, Hine traveled the country, documenting child labor in mines, mills, meatpacking houses, on street corners, and in factories. He sometimes resorted to stealth or subterfuge to document working conditions that factory owners did not want the public to see.

   In 1916, Congress passed a law that set the minimum age of fourteen for workers in manufacturing and sixteen for miners; a maximum workday of eight hours, and other protections. While this law was later struck down as unconstitutional, reformers did succeed in passing legislation at the state level.

   Although Hine died in poverty, his photographs stirred the nation’s conscience and dramatically affected American labor. He is recognized as one of America’s most important photographers.

2. Distribute one set of the Student Sheets: Child Labor to each team. Make sure students understand that Hine took his photographs approximately sixty years after the opening of the Lowell mills. However, many of the working conditions for children and young women had not changed.

3. Students examine and discuss the primary source photographs using the following questions, written on the chalkboard or on a transparency.

   • What does this photograph tell you about child labor at the turn of the century?
   • What questions does this photograph raise in your mind?

4. Remind students that positive action on the part of individuals and groups can help solve social problems. In fact, public outcry (stimulated to a great extent by Lewis Hine’s photography and the work of muckraking journalists around the turn of the century) resulted in passage of numerous labor laws protecting workers.

5. Students discuss the following questions.

   • Is child labor still a problem in America today?
• What can be done about child labor (and even slavery) in other countries, such as Sudan?

6. Each team designs an action plan to eliminate child labor. Working with teammates, students brainstorm possible solutions and decide on one or two actions to address the problem. (Examples include petitions, letters to government officials, pamphlets, posters, boycotts, informing the public, and lobbying)

7. Each team briefly shares its action plans with the class. Encourage the students to assess the effectiveness of the various action plans and strategies.

**Teacher Directions**

1. Explain to students that child labor wasn’t eliminated until 1938 when Congress passed the Fair Labor Standards Act. Nevertheless, these laws are broken every day, sometimes purposefully and sometimes unknowingly. Migrant workers often take their children into the fields with them. Children in families often care for their brothers and sisters.

2. Choose one or more of the following problems or identify another child welfare related problem to research with your students. Use the Internet to collect information about the problem and what is being done to help solve it. Use local newspapers and local news shows on television to determine if the problem exists in your area or community. If possible, invite local agencies to speak with your class about their work to solve the problem.

   - What can and should be done to help homeless families with children? Who should be responsible for eliminating this problem? Welfare agencies? Private citizens? Shelters?
   - What can be done to eliminate neighborhood crime, such as street gangs and drug-related violence, from hurting children? Who should be responsible for eliminating this problem? Police? Juvenile justice system? Health officials? Parents?
   - What can and should be done to help migrant families with children? Who should be responsible for eliminating this problem? Illegal immigration authorities? Welfare agencies? Health care workers?

3. Hold an open “What Do You Think” forum for your students to express their opinions about the problem and how to publicize it in their school or community.

**Teacher Directions**

1. Share the following information with the students.

Today in the United States, many dedicated persons work hard to improve the quality of life for others who face serious problems. The same was true in the nineteenth century. Whether called activists, reformers, or muckrakers, such individuals believe it is possible to right wrongs and fight injustice.

But all nineteenth century activists were not cut from the same cloth. Some were noisier and more ardent than others! Rebecca Harding Davis (1831-1910), although a rather shy woman, believed that the pen was mightier than the sword. Rebecca not only used her pen to lash out against conditions in the iron mills in the United States, but she also worked to improve the lives of blacks, women, Native Americans, immigrants, and the working class. She was a remarkably talented writer and a devoted feminist whose writing clearly publicized the plight of many American citizens. Rebecca Harding wrote about the major issues and campaigned for reform.

2. Read Harding’s excerpt from *Life in the Iron Mills*, published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in the 1860s, to the students. Tell students that Harding begins by describing the area around an iron mill.

*The air is thick and clammy with the breath of crowded human beings. It stifles me…smoke…It rolls sullenly in slow folds from the great chimneys of the iron-founneries, and settles down in black, slimy pools on the muddy streets…smoke…clinging in a coating of greasy soot to the house fronts…the faces of the passers-by…. I look on the slow stream of human life creeping past, night and morning…masses of men with dull besotted faces bent to the ground…skin and muscle and flesh begrimed with smoke and ashes; stooping all at night boiling cauldrons of metal…. I want you to hide your disgust…and come right down here with me…. I want you to hear this story…. I want to make it a real thing to you.*

3. Discuss the following with the students.

- What words (adjectives) help you see the scene that Harding describes?
- If necessary, define and discuss difficult terms such as *sullenly*, *besotted*, and *cauldrons*.
- What are the effects of the smoke surrounding the mill? Help students with comparisons such as fog; dirt and sweat covering bodies after working in a garden or playing; soot and ashes from a fireplace or campfire; engine grease. Ask: How difficult is it to remove dirt, soot, and grease from clothing?
- Why does Harding describe the ironworkers as a “slow stream of human life creeping past”? Why are they walking slowly? Creeping?
- What are Harding’s reasons for telling the reader, “I want you to hide your disgust…and come right down here with me.”? Would many readers have ever seen an iron mill? Would they have wanted to? Would they have cared?

Harding concludes by saying, “I want you to hear this story... I want to make it a real thing for you.” Discuss with students the terms motivation and persuasion. Do students see the lines as a persuasive challenge or argument? What does Harding want the reader to do?

Would the students be persuaded to take action after reading her writing? Why or why not?

**Teacher Directions**

Use the following activities with your students.

**Language Arts** — Students read the following song lyrics written by women workers protesting conditions at the Lowell Textile Mills in 1836.

> Oh! isn’t it a pity, such a pretty girl as I
> Should be sent to the factory to pine away and die?
> Oh! I cannot be a slave, I will not be a slave
> For I’m so fond of liberty
> That I cannot be a slave.

Students read Rebecca Harding’s description of life in the iron mills and write a poem or song lyrics that reflect the lives of the male ironworkers. Encourage the students to use descriptive words and interesting adjectives.

**Music** — Students sing “We Shall Overcome,” and discuss the lyrics and identify groups of Americans today who might sing the song. Students locate other protest songs of the 1960s. Students listen to those songs, discuss the lyrics, and examine the impact those songs may have had on changing public opinion.

**Language Arts** — Students imagine they are either an ironworker or a female textile worker in the 1830s. As such, they write letters home to their parents describing a typical day. Most workers had twelve-hour shifts. They were given brief breaks to eat meals at the factory. Students consider how workers found time to wash clothing, socialize, write letters, clean their homes, or visit relatives.

**Language Arts** — Each student selects one of the Lewis Hine photographs and creates a diary entry for a person depicted. Students describe the person’s workday, his or her reasons for working, and feelings about the job.

**Government** — Students discuss and research the role of the government in regulating child labor. What labor regulations govern child labor today? When were they established?

Lewis Hine, Photo Journalist

Lewis Hine used photography to show the poor working conditions of children and immigrants. From 1911-1916 he toured the United States as official photographer for the National Labor Committee.

Many factory managers and employers did not want people to see the conditions under which children worked. Hine often hid his camera so that he could take photographs. Sometimes he was banned from the premises, and on other occasions the children were hidden from view when he arrived. Hine even posed as a fire inspector or insurance agent in order to gain access to the some workplaces!

Hine discovered and exposed some appalling conditions, such as children aged six or seven having to work as many as twelve hours a day. He carefully wrote descriptions of each photograph, sometimes by writing on a pad held in his pocket.

"I wanted to show things that had to be corrected," Hine declared. He produced several thousand pictures. It was not until the 1930s that his work bore fruit, and child labor was regulated.

Newsboy New York City, 1908, Getty Museum

Hine referred to this photograph as a "self-portrait." The image reflects his philosophy that the photograph's subject is more important than the photographer.
Five Mill Workers

National Archives
Shucking Oysters

All but the smallest babies work, from 3:30 a.m. till 5:00 p.m.
Working at 9 p.m. in an Indiana Glass Works

National Archives
Boys Changing Spools in a Mill

National Archives

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For more information, visit Freedom: A History of US Online at http://www.pbs.org/historyofus
A Young Driver at a Mine in Brown, West Virginia

National Archives
Young Boys Working For Hickok Lumber Company

National Archives

For more information, visit Freedom: A History of US Online at http://www.pbs.org/historyofus
Some Young Knitters in a Hosiery Mill

National Archives