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## Chapter 4

# “The strong arm of the government”: The Progressive Era

The election of William McKinley in 1896 marked the end of post-Civil War America and the beginning of the Progressive Era. McKinley was the last Civil War veteran to reach the presidency; he had been an officer in the Union army. During his one full term in office, he established political and social stability that had been largely lacking in the previous three decades. McKinley was a solid middle-class American from a small Ohio town, and Progressives, who were largely middle-class people themselves, identified with the president and his politics.

### Roosevelt and Conservation

McKinley's assassination by an anarchist in 1901 brought Theodore Roosevelt to the presidency. A member of a prominent New York family, Roosevelt supported the Progressive movement in many ways, and as early as

1895 he was calling for extensive civil service reform. He advocated for laws to protect workers from the abuses of employers, for protection of public health, and for employment protection for women and children.

In his first term, Roosevelt's main policy objective was conservation. He supported the creation of reserves of land for public use and initiated the United States Forest Service. Through his promotion of Newlands Reclamation Act (1902), 230 million acres of land was brought under the umbrella of federal management. In 1906, the Antiquities Act gave Roosevelt the power to create national monuments. Additionally, he oversaw the launching of the Inland Waterways Commission and the National Conservation Commission. All of these conservation activities expanded federal power and served as a model for the activist government of the Progressive Era.

## The Pure Food and Drug Act, The Food and Drug Administration, and Muckrakers

Roosevelt's activism did not stop with conservation policies, and by the start of his second term, he led social causes that also advanced federal power. *The Jungle* (1906), which author Upton Sinclair intended to be a socialist tract, was instead taken as a critique of the meatpacking industry in Chicago. Out of the public outcry over Sinclair's exposé of the industry's filthy habits came the Pure Food and Drug Act (1906) and the creation of the Food and Drug Administration. When Roosevelt ran as an independent candidate in 1912, his Progressive Party platform incorporated many different progressive ideas, including campaign finance reforms and the institution of the eight-hour workday.

Sinclair was one of many earnest writers who wanted to change American life for the better. Muckrakers, such as Lincoln Steffens and Ida Tarbell, made careers out of the exposure of corruption in American life. Steffens's specialty was dirty politics; his series of articles on corruption in urban governments, "The Shame of the Cities," was published in 1904. Ida Tarbell's investigations of the Standard Oil Company and John D. Rockefeller's monopolization of the oil industry, published as *The History of the Standard Oil Company* (1904), helped break up Rockefeller's monopoly and led to the establishment of the Federal Trade Commission.

## Labor Conditions for Women and Children

Writers and photographers were both involved in exposing the exploitation of women's and children's labor in factories. Florence Kelley, who had been trained at Chicago's Hull-House, served as both the general secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and as an advocate for regulating the employment of children, as she wrote about in her 1905 article "The Child Breadwinner and the Dependent Parent." Kelley also advocated for the Keating-Owen Child Labor Act (1916), and the National Maternity and Infant Protection Act (1921). Lewis Wickes Hine documented the work life of a young spinner in the Whitnel Cotton Manufacturing

Company of North Carolina in December of 1908. During the same year he also showed Sadie Pfeifer, a young girl only four feet tall, working as a spinner in Lancaster, South Carolina. Jane Addams also entered the child labor conversation in 1914, when she published "Who Is to Blame for Child Labor?"

Women's and children's health and safety concerns came to the forefront after the disastrous fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist Manufacturing Company on March 25, 1911, one of the greatest industrial tragedies of the early twentieth century. A factory building housing hundreds of young female workers went up in flames and 146 died as a result of inadequate fire escapes and locked exit doors. The shirtwaist was an enormously popular and versatile garment for women at the time. However, for many women and girls it represented the stifling and suppressive atmosphere in which they labored. Clara Lemlich's "Life in the Shop" (1909) called for a general strike to protest the horrible conditions under which girls and women worked in the shirtwaist industry in New York.

## Progressive Writers and Activists

Other aspects of the social advances of the Progressive Era emerged through the works of writers and activists. Novelist Jack London gave an eyewitness account of the great San Francisco earthquake that nearly leveled his native city in "The Story of an Eyewitness" (1906). In "Why Women Should Vote" (1910), reformer Jane Addams called for extending the franchise to women so that they could perform their traditional nurturing roles in society more effectively. By the end of the second decade of the twentieth century Margaret Sanger, in "Birth Control and Racial Betterment" (1919), had begun to call for the right of women to control their own reproductive cycles.

## Blacks in the Progressive Era

Although Progressives aimed their reforms at the public, in race relations they fell far short of their own idealism. Since the Civil War, Black Americans regularly had their civil rights violated by whites who

wanted to continue exploiting their labor. Blacks also suffered disproportionately from political and social violence, especially lynching. In “Lynching: Our National Crime” (1909), journalist Ida B. Wells pointed out that extralegal executions targeted Black men and that this nation-wide problem required a national response. Racial violence reached a boiling point in the summer of 1919, when race-based riots erupted in Chicago and Omaha. Black scholar W. E. B. Du Bois, in “Jesus Christ in Texas” (1920), made

the rhetorical point that even self-proclaimed Christians would refuse to recognize a brown-skinned Jesus if he came to the early twentieth-century American South. The low point of the Progressive Era’s failed racial policies came in 1921, when white mobs destroyed the middle-class Black business district in Tulsa, Oklahoma. If Progressivism had helped bring prosperity through Christian principles to many working-class white Americans, it failed their Black counterparts.

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# Clara Lemlich: “Life in the Shop”

**Author**

Clara Lemlich

**Date**

1909

**Type**

Essays, Reports, Manifestos

**Significance**

Described the abysmal working conditions in which garment workers toiled that helped justify the New York shirtwaist strike of 1909

## Overview

Clara Lemlich, a Ukranian Jewish immigrant, at twenty-three years old, was largely responsible for igniting the 1909 walkout of shirtwaist makers in New York City with her call for a general strike. The walkout came to be known as the Uprising of the Twenty Thousand and lasted more than two months. In this article published in the *New York Evening Journal* on November 28, 1909, she describes the working conditions in a shirtwaist factory. Lemlich later married an activist for a printer's union and continued to act on behalf of labor and other causes.

## Document Text

First let me tell you something about the way we work and what we are paid. There are two kinds of work—regular, that is salary work, and piecework. The regular work pays about \$6 a week and the girls have to be at their machines at 7 o'clock in the morning and they stay at them until 8 o'clock at night, with just one-half hour for lunch in that time.

The work is all divided up. No girl ever makes a whole waist. There are examiners and finishers. They all get different pay for their work, but it runs only from \$3 or \$4 a week; the finishers make [it] to the \$6 or sometimes \$7 a week the cutters and some others make.



*Portrait of Clara Lemlich* (Kheel Center)

The shops. Well, there is just one row of machines that the daylight ever gets to—that is the front row, nearest the window. The girls at all the other rows of machines back in the shops have to work by gaslight, by day as well as by night. Oh, yes, the shops keep the work going at night, too.

The bosses in the shops are hardly what you would call educated men, and the girls to them are part of the machines they are running. They yell at the girls and they “call them down” even worse than I imagine the Negro slaves were in the South. They don’t use very nice language. They swear at us and sometimes do worse—they call us names that are not pretty to hear.

There are no dressing rooms for the girls in the shops. They have to hang up their hats and

coats—such as they are—on hooks along the walls. Sometimes a girl has a new hat. It never is much to look at because it never costs more than 50 cents, but it’s pretty sure to be spoiled after it’s been at the shop.

We’re human, all of us girls, and we’re young. We like new hats as well as any other young women. Why shouldn’t we? And if one of us gets a new one, even if it hasn’t cost more than fifty cents, that means that we have gone for weeks on two-cent lunches—dry cake and nothing else.

I have known many girls who were never able to buy a hat at all. Lots of them don’t wear any, Winter or Summer. They are the ones who earn \$3 a week. They take the clothes of the girls better off—those who earn \$6 or \$7 a week—after they have really been worn out. That’s how they manage to get along. They never buy any clothes of their own.

Seventy-five cents is the most a girl can pay for a pair of shoes. And she has to wear them a long time—and she does. Some girls can buy only one, perhaps two shirtwaists a year—while they help to make thousands of them. They make their own dresses after they have worked thirteen or fourteen hours a day, made with remnants that cost altogether \$1 or \$1.50.

The shops are unsanitary—that’s the word that is generally used, but there ought to be a worse one used. Whenever we tear or damage any of the goods we sew on, or whenever it is found damaged after we are through with it, whether we have done it or not, we are charged for the piece and sometimes for a whole yard of the material—perhaps \$1 or \$1.50.

At the beginning of every slow season, \$2 is deducted from our salaries. We have never been able to find out what this is for.

## Glossary

**shirtwaist:** a tailored blouse for women that resembles a men's shirt in terms of its collar and buttons

## Short-Answer Questions

1. What is the nature of the work Lemlich describes? How might those performing the jobs be impacted physically and emotionally over time?
2. Besides the low wage, what aspects of the jobs in the shirtwaist factories prevented workers from escaping poverty?
3. How might readers of this piece in 1909 have been particularly enraged about the fact that the workers were women? What does this reveal about notions of gender in the early twentieth century?