

A Critical Review
of
Labour and Capital in the Gilded Age
Edited by John A. Garraty [Testimony of the Times]

Introduction.

In the United States, the “Gilded Age” is defined as a period of economic growth in the second half of the 19th Century. Indeed, the United States went from an agricultural system, to a mainly industrial one. From 1850 to 1900, this evolution had lots of consequences on workingmen, but also on capitalist owners. It seemed that the Industrial Revolution profited everybody – at least, it is what we have in mind when we read the introduction of the book. However, as the industrial expansion went on, companies grew bigger and bigger to eventually maintain a monopoly over smaller industries. It led to negative consequences for working people.

Moreover, because the population was growing faster than before, workers gathered in urban cities of the United States, sometimes overcrowded in slums because there was not enough space for everybody. The rush of workers in America (whether they were immigrants or American workers) created unemployment as there was not a job for everyone and it led to miserable conditions of living in the slums, accumulating diseases and poverty, where struggle for life was the main goal of each person. The more workers in a factory, the less wage they would earn at the end of the month to feed their family.

Industrialization went over the heads of both the capitalist man – who always wants to have more – and the ordinary working man – who must work to death to earn a living. It became a powerful instrument which could not be really controlled by anyone. What can human beings do when they do not earn the necessary amount of money to support their family’s needs? They can go on strikes. Why? Because going on strike is a way to be heard. So when for the first time in American History, the views of industrial workers and ordinary citizens were collected in order to talk about the industrial problems, it is more than interesting to see how the relations between “Labour and Capital” were actually conducted. It

is exactly what this book is about: testimonies collected by the Committee on Education and Labour; in which many different people give us their views of the Industrial world they live in. We can compare it to an investigation into the lives of ordinary working people opposed to fervent capitalists such as Jay Gould for example. Conducted by the Senator Henry W. Blair, a man who was a lieutenant colonel in the Civil War (in the Union Army), he became senator in 1879. He was helped by Senator James Z. George of Mississippi whose concern for workingmen's lives was very important.

Putting 'Labour' and 'Capital' in the same title for a book and just coordinated with 'and' might seem quite ambitious. However, it perfectly reflects what this book is about: the investigation of both sides during a period of economic growth in the United States – the 'Gilded Age' – and we really feel as if we were an investigator while reading this book full of testimonies, one more interesting than the other. Through the questions asked by the Senators, we must bear in mind the context, and the social status of the witnesses in order to understand fully the conditions of workers, but also of capitalists.

1°) Looking at the working conditions...

The book is really striking as it really transcribes the feelings of some men and women regarding the working conditions they had to face during the period of the 'Gilded Age'. Right from the beginning of the book, there is a testimony from **Robert D. Layton** (*Union official at the 'Knights of Labour'*) who expresses all the distress and the hardship of both coal miners and iron-mills workers. There is a clear distinction that has to be made between skilled labourers and unskilled labourers because it has an impact on their lives. Layton explains with real facts the wages that coal miners earned at the end of the day: from \$ 2.00 to \$2.50; the rent of their house was of \$4.00 to \$8.00. Consequently, we really see that even though you were considered to be a 'skilled labourer' (as coal miners had to work all day long in darkness, in dangerous conditions, they were considered to be skilled workers), you were not destined to have a great wage that would allow you to feed your family. It is even more striking that, in the book, Layton presents unskilled workers such as iron-mills labourers who only earned \$1.75 (in the better cases). As a consequence, we can wonder: what enticed men to work in coal mines? Both Senator Blair and George think it might be because of the higher wages; and we can then criticise their views because, of course, they did not earn a high wage at all. The only response of Layton is quite scary as he says that they were "*born to it*" and that it was passed from generations on generations. We see that there is this economic growth in America with industrialization and we can then understand that there were not really new opportunities for workers to change their conditions. They lived as they had lived in the past, they had to follow the steps of their father, grand-father... It is what we can call a 'fatality', they were destined to be coal miners and there was no hope of even climbing the social ladder. One of the solutions proposed by Layton is questionable: he said that the prosperity of the employees should increase as the prosperity of the employers. Actually, he was definitely right. How can you accept that a man who is "superior" to you (because he controls your wage, your employment and then your life) can take some holidays with his family while you have to stay at home every week-end because you are too tired to do anything? This discrepancy is extremely well-reflected in this testimony and we perfectly see this duality: the life of the employers who get richer and richer is far better than the life of the employees. However, without the workers, the employer could not do anything! Their lives depend on one another and this is the root of the problems: they live separate lives and do not mix; but for an improvement to appear, they should change their habits and try living together instead of living apart.

Another testimony is quite different as it is very short, but it can really raise some questions. It is the testimony of **Addie Priscilla Jones** who was obviously a textile worker. It is important to see that she is the only woman who testified, there are no other women in the book. If we try to focus on what she is saying, we understand that she loved her job, that she would not change it for any other job and that she – and so as the other girls – was happy to do it. The problem is that their working conditions were quite horrible as they had to work for hours in the factories because the more they worked, the more they would earn at the end of the month. We can reproach the Senators in charge of the investigation that they did not focus at all on the working conditions of these millions of women who worked in the factories since they were fifteen years old. And we really feel that Jones answered the Senator but did not reveal much about how she felt deep inside, summing it up by saying that she had a good health and liked what she was doing. Was she restrained in her answers? Why would she speak about this idealistic job in which you enjoyed what you did? Maybe because she was afraid of the consequences it would have on her? What if she said too much of her real conditions and was then fired by her employers? It would have been the end of her life and she would have had to find another job, much more complicated and maybe harder physically speaking than being a textile worker. If we compare her testimony with the one of **Thomas O'Donnell**, another textile worker in charge of mule-spinning in Fall River, we see that there were lots of discriminations in the employment of textile industries targeted to men. Indeed, as silly as it might sound, if you had a son, you would be more eligible to this kind of job than the man who had no offspring. Ring-spinning was a job assigned to the sons of men who were employed because “*small help*” was needed to achieve such a task. As a consequence, we see that the capitalists who wanted to have more and more money, because private profit motive was the only thing that did matter to their eyes, were clever enough to discriminate workers between one another in order to be more profitable. The use of children to achieve delicate work was something common and because children were not protected by the Unions (women as well), they were an easy target. They would enter the system that way and they would be at the mercy of the capitalist only interested in becoming richer and crushing the others. When learning that O'Connell earned \$150 a year, the two Senators seemed completely disturbed and asked him why he did not go away. O'Connell simply answered that he did not have the means for it as he never saw \$ 20 in his life. We can gather that capitalist owners controlled the life of their workers by giving them poor wages that would forbid them to go away and that forced them to stay there.

Basically, we can say that many things are quite recurrent in this part of the book about Working Conditions. Indeed, we see that workers, whether they were skilled or unskilled, lived with the minimum necessary, they had not many clothes at all (they had two, no really more than three to wear), children did not go to school as they would work with their fathers to earn a little bit of money that would allow them to eat at the end of the month. The different testimonies always underline the hardship of their lives and their miserable wages (\$2.00 a day) and it just leads us to understand the precariousness of their lives; as they could be fired whenever the employers decided it. As **R. Hebert Newton** (*Episcopal clergyman*) depicts in his testimony, the introduction of machinery introduced a lot of changes in the workers' lives and could lead to unemployment. The subdivision of labour makes the worker focus on only one element of the work process, he "*makes nothing*" and he just contributes to the final product without having the pleasure to see what it will be at the end. Men are then turned into machines whose brains have been taken out of their body and who just need to respect the rules, and accept everything if they do not want to be fired. I personally regret the fact that no black workers were asked to testify on their working conditions, as we all know the ambiguity that exists when we talk about them.

2°) Living Standards and the possibility of improving them.

Let's continue this critic by looking at the diversity of testimonies that is presented to us: we have a Printer, a Governor, a Financier or even a Piano Manufacturer. Diversity is what allows us to do comparisons between the different social classes exposed in this chapter. If we look at **Frank F. Forster** (*the printer*), an important point must be dealt with: the fact that workers did not extend to other social or working classes than theirs. It means that the printers would not be friend and talk to the miners; or to the mills labourers. We can find a certain tactic from the dominant capitalist man to divide workers into groups and to "forbid" them, in a certain way, to talk to each other and to make alliance. It is the ideology of 'Diviser Gouverner': if you are divided (even if you share some common points such as low wages or bad conditions of working), you would not rebel against the capitalists because you think that you are not strong enough on your own. Moreover, to support this idea, Forster says that social intercourses between labourers, capitalists and non-labourers are "*an exception, not the rule*". We can then gather that their relations with one another were quite inexistent though their lives were deeply intertwined with one another (as the capitalist needs the worker; and the worker needs the capitalist for his wage). This kind of intercourse is all the more important as it really defines the bond that one had toward the other: they did not mix, and we

can compare them to animals. The wolf will eat the ewe (the wolf being the capitalist, and the ewe being the worker). And this metaphor can still be used today as the social intercourse does not seem to improve between the different social classes.

If we completely move to **Jay Gould**, a man that climbed the social ladder and became rich before being thirty, it is striking and appalling to see that this capitalist man thought that there was actually no real problems between the employers and his employees. He thought that society “*magnified*” the tensions and created “*evils which do not exist*”. He was basically uninterested in the matter as he believed the situation was not worth fighting for. We can then say that being rich, such as Jay Gould, completely changes your point of view on the world and disconnects you from the reality of it. The hardship of the workers’ lives, the sufferings they had to face are just vanished into the air when we read the testimony of Jay Gould as he seems to believe that things are exaggerated. By the way, he also thinks that as the economy went up, workers evolved positively in their jobs the same way: for him, the labourer “*worked his own way along up*”. Consequently, we witness the fact that Jay Gould only focused on one part of the workers: those who evolved positively speaking, and he forgot to talk about all the suffering that typical workers had to face because of industrialisation and the ‘Gilded Age’. We may criticise the way the Senators decided not to involve too much the questions of other workers, those who suffered; and decided to create this interview following Jay Gould’s answers (It resulted in the hiding of the real hardship of the workers’ lives).

Eventually, the question of improvement, of social mobility is presented through another capitalist man whose name is **John. W. Britton** (*a banker*). He spoke about the phenomenon of the self-made men which was possible thanks to industrialisation and thanks to the fact that it opened new job opportunities in America. He said that everyone could change his way of living and improve his conditions: “*If a man is oppressed in one occupation, this whole wide country is opened to him and he can change his occupation*”. When reading this, we may think that it is usual and easy to change your life completely (by moving away, by changing your job...). However, what Britton does not tell us is the means to do it. Yes, it is possible to climb the social ladder and to improve your conditions: but how can we improve them, if it is possible? Being evasive at this point only discredits him as we all know that the poorest of the poorest could not improve; that the mill-labourer could not work in the mines or vice versa for many reasons. You could not pass from an unskilled job to a skilled job (better paid) as easily as snapping your fingers. As a consequence, social mobility was not something that was given to everybody. If you wanted to profit from it, you

had to become someone else, and enter the world of capitalism. If it was that easy, why would workers, who suffered from their jobs, stayed in their position? Maybe because there was no way out. Because expansion and industrialisation was a positive event for industrialists, for capitalist owners and for rich men; not for workers who still had to submit. When we think about it, we really see that workers were needed more than ever, that is why they could not all become capitalists for example...

3°) A look at the strikes.

This book does really deal with different themes and different people. It is something that I did really enjoy while reading it because we understand that it is not all black nor white. Workers and Capitalists have different points of view, and what matters is really to understand their deepest thoughts. It is what this book is about and it makes all the richness of its content. I cannot do a critical review if I do not dedicate a part to the points of view of different types of workers concerning the strikes. Though there is a predominance of capitalist points of view (*Jay Gould, Norvin Green, John W. Britton*), I will first focus on three **Iron Workers** that decided to answer the questions of the Senators. **L. G. Pettyjohn** points out an interesting fact by underlying the reason of the strike he launched: it was in the behalf of trade unions. Indeed, because the workers of Birmingham Rolling-Mill's scales usually started on June, 1st and ended on May, the 31st, they went on strike because they did not get their scale signed at this particular date. When Mr. Caldwell refused again and again to sign the scale, even after the sending of a committee to him, they remained on strike. Because of the depression in trade, we see that the employers are always taking advantage of the workers who fight back by going on strike. The strikes are a way to go against the employers in order to avoid further restrictions, reduction of wages for the workers. If they did not go on strike, they would be "eaten" by the "capitalist wolves". If they did not resist, the pitiless employers would destroy the workers over and over.

Now let's turn to the views of **Jay Gould** regarding the strikes. What is surprising is that Jay Gould believed that the strikes only concerned the poorest part of workers, those who only complained and who were dissatisfied. He classified workers in two different parts: on the one hand those who complained, and on the other hand "*the best men*" who did not complain about their hours and who were just looking to climb the social ladder, have a business of their own and control other human beings. Jay Gould was a capitalist predator and we can witness his broad answers and idealistic views. He said that the workers were better paid in America rather than somewhere else, and as a consequence, he did not see the point of

going on a strike. He completely forgot to talk about the hardship of the workers' lives and the fact that they struggled all day long in order to get paid a misery. He also maintained the idea that "*capital and labour, if let alone, generally come together and mutually regulate their relations to each other*". He believed that the capitalist men would always want to find cheaper labour elsewhere; that is why labour could not be "*put up too high here*". If we try to understand this point, we see that he gathers that workers should be grateful to have a job and stop complaining because, at least, they had a job. If their conditions were bettered, capitalists would go somewhere else in order to find cheaper labour; then workers of the US would find themselves in a worse situation because they would be left without a job. Finally, a last interesting point concerning Jay Gould is the fact that he talks about "*surplus of labour*" when it comes to unemployment. Indeed, when railroads were built, they needed a lot of workers and thanks to immigration, it was not a problem. However, when there is no need for workers anymore, there is a problem because many workmen were unemployed. Jay Gould only answers this question by saying that it is the fault of the reducing production that created this surplus labour (the fact that they stopped the construction of railroads).

Conclusion.

As a conclusion, we can say that although employers and workers are living worlds apart, one cannot live without the other. When workers disagree with the owners of capital, they do not wait to be crushed but they fight back by going on strike. This book is a great collection of testimonies of capitalists and workers as it really goes deep into their lives and thoughts. However, we can all regret the “almost-non-existing” testimonies of women and the “completely-absent” testimonies of black workers. It would have been even more interesting to read more testimonies in order to include all the population. This book is very powerful as we can relate it to our actual world. The relation between employers and employees got better than in the period of the ‘Gilded Age’ but it is still not perfect. We can then wonder: what differentiates those workers from the workers of today? Have our conditions really improved or is this just an impression? Capitalism will always be a problem. It is why we should all remember the problems (and the solutions) of the past; and it is something we can definitely do with this authentic book.