

The Progressive Spirit of Reform

Section 2



MAIN IDEAS

1. Reformers attempted to improve conditions for child laborers.
2. Unions and reformers took steps to improve safety in the workplace and to limit working hours.

Key Terms and People

Triangle Shirtwaist Fire tragic fire that killed 146 workers

workers' compensation laws laws that guarantee a portion of lost wages to workers injured on the job

capitalism system in which private businesses run most industries and competition determines how much goods cost

socialism system in which government owns and operates a country's industry

William "Big Bill" Haywood union leader of the Industrial Workers of the World

Industrial Workers of the World labor union founded in 1905 on socialist beliefs

Section Summary

IMPROVING CONDITIONS FOR CHILDREN

Reformers also focused on child labor. Children worked in a variety of jobs. Some sold newspapers. Some took care of boarders at their homes. Some sewed clothing. Many worked in industry. Sometimes children as young as seven were sent to work in factories and mills.

Florence Kelley was a reformer who got involved in child labor. She was a board member of the National Consumers' League. The league spoke out on labor issues involving women and children. In 1912 Massachusetts became the first state to pass a minimum wage law. Congress, too, tried to pass laws protecting working children. However, the Supreme Court ruled many of these laws unconstitutional.

How do you think a minimum wage law helped protect children?

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SAFETY AND WORKING CONDITIONS

Progressives also fought to ensure workers’ safety, limit working hours, and protect workers’ rights. It took several terrible accidents before laws ensuring workers’ safety were passed. One of the worst was the **Triangle Shirtwaist Fire** in New York City. When the factory caught fire, many workers died because factory owners had locked the exit doors.

Reformers also concentrated on getting **workers’ compensation laws** passed. These laws guarantee a portion of lost wages to employees who are injured on the job. Some business leaders believed that the economy should operate without government influence. In *Lochner v. New York*, the Supreme Court ruled that states could not restrict the types of labor agreements between employers and employees. The Supreme Court did, however, put limits on the number of hours women and children could work.

Labor unions also tried to improve working conditions. Some wanted to take drastic measures, such as changing the economic system of the country to socialism. In **capitalism**, private businesses run most industries and competition determines how much goods cost and how much workers are paid. Under **socialism**, the government owns all the means of production. A new union, based on socialist ideas, was founded in 1905. Under its leader, **William “Big Bill” Haywood**, the **Industrial Workers of the World** hoped to overthrow capitalism. It was not successful and had declined by 1920.

What finally motivated leaders to pass laws ensuring workers’ safety?

What is the purpose of workers’ compensation laws?

How was the Industrial Workers of the World different from other labor unions?

CHALLENGE ACTIVITY

Critical Thinking: Write to Make Judgments Make a list of the different ways your life would be changed if the reforms discussed here had not happened. Use this list to decide whether or not you agree with the reforms.