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Work in Progress: Labor and the Press in 1908

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CHAPTER 8

Work in Progress

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The Progressives Rally

Seen within the context of the Progressive Era, this chapter frames the year 1908 through a focus on the rise of labor and the coverage of labor-related issues by muckraking reporters in the United States. The Progressive Era of American history is an era of reform that began with the ascension of Theodore Roosevelt to president after William McKinley was assassinated in September 1901 and lasted until the beginning of American involvement in World War I in 1917. The stage was set, however, in April 1901, when United States Steel became the first American business incorporated with more than $1 billion in capital stock. This incorporation of U.S. Steel had been preceded by the unprecedented growth of giant industries at the end of the nineteenth century.¹ In response to record-breaking industrial growth and to the

concentration of wealth and power in a small percentage of the population, the Progressive movement became, in the words of social historians Keith Bryant, Jr., and Kate Barnard, a “heterogeneous mass reform movement without geographical or class boundaries” that fought to reduce the political power of corporate interests through government regulation.²

Progressives incorporated some elements of the earlier Populist movement, which radical historian Howard Zinn notes had sparked “the greatest movement of agrarian rebellion” and created an independent radicalized culture for U.S. farmers in the 1890s that questioned dominant power relations.³ Yet Progressives primarily focused on urban problems and issues challenging the prevailing capitalist structure and order.⁴ Concerned that business interests were corrupting the political process, Progressives fought to reduce the political power wielded by special interests by making the government more responsive to U.S. citizens.

The Growth of Labor

By the turn of the twentieth century, industrialization, urbanization, immigration, and the resulting growth of corporations and mass-produced goods fueled the development of modern cities throughout the United States. Scientific and engineering developments aided the growth of machines that mass-produced goods rapidly, cheaply, and uniformly, sparking a revolution in industry that greatly changed the work process as well as the relationship between individuals and their work.

In his research on the origins of working-class radicalism, historian Melvin Dubofsky found that “Technological innovations increased productivity, but in so doing diluted labor skills and disrupted traditional patterns of work.”⁵ Whereas earlier a craftsperson would construct an entire product, with the age of industrialization came the division of the production process into a series of small steps aided by a variety of machines. People became appendages to machines, working at the machines’ pace, and increasingly they felt alienated not only from their work but also from others and even from themselves. As psychoanalytic theorist Eric Fromm

5. Ibid., 236–37.
explains, although individuals developed a variety of technological machines and products, they stood apart from these creations, feeling powerless and estranged, and in a sense becoming slaves to the very machines that their own hands had built.6

Urbanization was also a significant trend in the development of modern society. In 1880, the United States was still an agrarian society with less than one-fourth of the population living in cities of 2,500 inhabitants or more. By 1908, nearly half of the population lived in cities, many of which now had in excess of 100,000 inhabitants. In his book Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers, sociologist Michael Schudson notes that as cities grew and individuals went from “self-sufficient family economies to market-based commercial and manufacturing economies, people came unstuck from the cake of custom” and felt free to challenge existing social relationships and traditions. Individuals began to question core values, take issue with the existing social order, and envision society as having a material existence apart from their own lives. Urban life quickly became detached, “a spectacle of watching strangers in the streets, reading about them in newspapers, dealing with them in shops and factories and offices.”7

Immigration was an additional labor-related factor in the transition to modern American society. Nearly ten million Europeans emigrated to the United States during the 1880s and 1890s, providing a glut of cheap labor for factories and corporations. As Zinn maintains in his book A People’s History of the United States, the culturally displaced immigrants increased competition for jobs, and employers often opted to use immigrant labor because they considered the newcomers “more controllable, more helpless than native workers.”8

Coupled with industrialization, immigration, and urbanization was the development of the mass media. Media critic Alfred McClung Lee found that as cities continued to grow, individuals faced a sense of “urban anonymity and craved news and information about their communities”;9 small-town gossip evolved into sensational news stories, feature articles, and gossip columns that could be found increasingly in newspapers and magazines. The media also provided urban dwellers with useful information on political, economic, religious, and educational matters, which sometimes called into question traditional ways of thinking about family and lifestyle choices, ethical values, and cultural norms.

In response to the challenges of industrialization, immigration, and urbanization, workers began strengthening existing national labor unions, including the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the Knights of Labor, and started organizing local unions, political parties, and labor organizations throughout the country. By the turn of the twentieth century, two million Americans were members of labor unions; about 80 percent of unionized workers were members of the AFL, a union composed primarily of white, male, skilled workers. A “Protest Conference” was organized by the AFL and held on March 18, 1908, in response to the Supreme Court’s ruling in the Danbury Hatter’s case in which the court ruled that the union’s boycott of industry restricted trade and was illegal under the 1890 Sherman Anti-Trust Act. Although the act had first been used by the U.S. government to quash the 1894 Pullman strike, the decision was unexpected and set off fears that labor unions would soon be bankrupted due to lawsuits challenging violations under the Sherman act.10

In 1908 there were more than half a million female office workers, and women represented nearly one-fifth of the labor force, but only one in a hundred women were members of a labor union.11 The founding, in 1900, of the International Ladies’ Garment Workers Union, and of the Women’s Trade Union League in 1904, were particularly significant to the women’s labor movement, especially as they began their sustained campaigns for better working conditions and higher wages for women working in sweatshops. As the labor movement continued to grow, hundreds of daily and weekly newspapers were published in a variety of languages. In working-class communities, these newspapers not only covered local news and labor activities but also provided editorial space for readers to debate contemporary economic, political, and social issues.12

Labor and Journalism

At the turn of the twentieth century, reporters provided an important link between the coverage of business and economic news and the creation of public information on labor issues. Reporters worked long hours for low

11. Ibid., 320.
wages, and their positions were often tenuous. While top-paid New York reporters earned from $40 to $60 each week, in many cities with fewer than a hundred thousand people, reporters received only $5 to $20 per week.\(^\text{13}\) Journalists were often conflicted by the disparity between the mythology of journalism and the material realities of urban reporting. The myth stressed the romance of journalism, with its rugged individualism and supposition that the excitement of journalism more than compensated for the low pay and poor working conditions.\(^\text{14}\) On the other hand, reporters from this era confronted the reality of long hours, poor wages, and limited job security. Despite these harsh truths, most journalists remained wary of organized labor and did not wish to affiliate with mechanical workers, preferring instead to identify with management’s perspectives.\(^\text{15}\)

Journalists’ romantic vision of journalism also conflicted with the influence of new technologies on their own work in the newsroom. In her study of editorial workers, media historian Marianne Salcetti found that the mechanization of the news process created a division of labor that devalued the work of reporters though “it produced commercial credibility as part of a newspaper’s selling point.”\(^\text{16}\) The use of these new technologies also encouraged notions of progress that created conditions for newsworkers which communication theorist Hanno Hardt suggests “defined their role as producers of specific images and appeals rather than as independent sources of cultural and political enlightenment.”\(^\text{17}\)

By the turn of the twentieth century, issues of consolidation became key in the newspaper industry. As newspapers grew into, in Lee’s words, “large and complicated segments in a vast communication system,”\(^\text{18}\) they began to feel financial pressures similar to other businesses; concerns regarding increased costs, improved efficiency, and greater market shares resulted in

newspaper consolidations throughout the United States. Although adver­tisers found the larger-circulation newspapers a more efficient way to reach potential customers, critics warned that newspaper mergers fueled the standardiza­tion of the news and resulted in the decreased availability of space to express conflicting viewpoints. During this era, Frank A. Munsey's treatment of newspapers as mere business commodities was the target of lively editorial attacks by newspaper editors and served as a cautionary tale for the newspaper industry. Extending to newspapers the same economic principles that he used on his other commercial endeavors, Munsey considered multiple competitors inefficient, and he began to reduce the number of urban newspapers. With his purchase of the Philadelphia Times and the Baltimore News, Munsey, dubbed the Grand Executioner of Newspapers, was by 1908 well on his way of buying, reorganizing, and consolidating newspapers and then killing them.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the newspaper industry, which previously had been aligned with readers' interests, underwent major social changes. As Lee explains:

The huge newspaper units, once subject to popular whims, reared higher and higher above the tides of mass fancies and needs. Readers began to learn that newspaper publishers mostly aligned themselves with other large employers of labor and capital. They found that mounting costs led publishers to adopt the methods of "big business" to maintain profits: monopolies, horizontal expansions of holdings into chains, vertical expansions to include papermills and power plants, lockouts, shipments of "scabs" to open closed shops, strike injunctions, high pressure deals with labor unions, lobbying for special privileges, and many more.

In 1891, the International Typographical Union (ITU) began to authorize local charters for editors' and reporters' unions; by 1893, the ITU began exempting reporters from its four-year apprenticeship rule; and between the years 1891 and 1908, thirty-five charters had been granted to journalists' unions. Certainly, Henry Clay Frick's brutal handling of the July 1892

20. Bleyer, Main Currents in the History of American Journalism, 413.
Homestead Steel Strike, which ultimately resulted in thirty-one deaths, may have provided an impetus for the early development of reporters' unions.  

However, only five of the unions established in this era remained in existence for more than five years, and most of the newsworkers' unions had a limited number of members and lasted only a year or two. The ITU's authorization of reporters' unions may be seen primarily as an act of self-preservation. During labor disputes between publishers and printers, reporters had routinely acted as strikebreakers, working in backshops with editors to make sure that the newspapers were published on time. In addition, ITU leaders may have hoped to garner more positive publicity from unionized reporters, and they also considered journalists yet another profession to organize. By 1908, the majority of the efforts to organize newspaper reporters and editors on the local, state, and national levels were not successful, in part due to the lack of interest of newsworkers but also because newspaper publishers were hostile to journalists' unions.  

One notable exception was the creation of the Scranton Newswriters' Union Number Three, chartered by the ITU on March 11, 1907, after an earlier attempt to unionize in 1904 had failed. The Scranton Newswriters' Union was composed of reporters, city editors, copy editors, and telegraph

and correspondence editors who worked on the four Scranton newspapers. The Scranton Newswriters' Union successfully negotiated with the local publishers and set minimum wages and top salaries for its members, as well as negotiating paid vacations and remuneration for overtime work.28

Although sustained efforts to organize reporters were mostly unsuccessful until the 1930s, the charter of the National Press Club in 1908 marked the development of a national social institution that was recognized and respected by journalists, editors, and publishers alike, and that catered to the specific needs of working journalists. The prototype for the National Press Club was the New York Press Club, which had begun on December 4, 1872, according to Lee, as "an organization for mutual help, sympathy and culture" for professional journalists of "good moral character."29 With an initial membership of two hundred, the National Press Club reinforced the romanticism of journalism while providing correspondents, reporters, and visiting editors with club rooms that served as their own social headquarters. Missourians would have to wait until 1915 for the development of the Missouri Writers' Guild. Sara Lockwood wrote in her history of the Missouri School of Journalism that Walter Williams, with the support of faculty and alumni, instigated the Missouri Writers' Guild during Journalism Week in 1915. Lockwood noted, "Pride in the literary history of a state that produced Mark Twain and Eugene Field and scores of other well-known writers, an ambition to perpetuate the tradition of the present and future, and a desire for inspirational and social intercourse were the motives back of the organization."30

Muckraking Reporters

Although the mythology of journalism kept most newsworkers from envisioning themselves as workers, at the beginning of the twentieth century, reporters wrote extensively on labor and class issues within American society. Muckraking reporters who sought to educate and inform the public about important social issues penned some of the most important labor investigations at this time. President Theodore Roosevelt initially used "muckraker" as a pejorative term to demean journalists who he felt lacked optimism about the United States. Yet reporters embraced the name. "Muckraker" soon became the preferred title of investigative journalists working on popular newspapers and magazines during the Progressive

29. Ibid., 666–67, 669.
30. Sara Lockwood Williams, Twenty Years of Education, 284.
Despite reporters' long hours for low wages and limited job security among other pressures, they identified with the management perspective. Cartoon from the 1914 Savitar, courtesy of the University of Missouri Archives.

Era. Muckrakers focused on sensitive social, political, and economic issues that evoked strong, even visceral, reactions from the public. Their words and images reached about three million urban, middle-class readers, targeted public ignorance and apathy, and were intended to rouse citizens to speak out against abuses of power in American society. In his study of the muckrakers, historian Richard Brown found that through books, inexpensive large-circulation magazines, and newspapers, muckrakers presented their investigations "as verifiable facts, usually based on months of their own painstaking investigations." 31

Inexpensive large-circulation national magazines provided an excellent venue for the muckrakers' investigations. The magazines encouraged a more fully developed presentation of material than was often possible on daily newspapers. Many of the muckraking articles focused on broad social patterns transcending a single city or state or on national institutions and problems that required extensive documentation. In addition, it was easier to break local scandals in national publications rather than in individual communities where special-interest groups might pressure local newspapers to remain silent. Muckraking journalists were often college educated, and their expertise lent "taste and talent to the mass circulation magazines."32

The development of general-audience magazines was tied to manufacturing and distribution changes within the U.S. economy. In The Commercialization of News in the Nineteenth Century, media historian Gerald Baldasty writes that by the turn of the twentieth century, "the main attributes of an industrialized economy were in place: large scale factory production, an urban workforce, strategic centers of investment capital, and expensive marketing of standardized products."33 The rise of mass-produced and mass-marketed goods depended upon advertising for the large volume of sales needed to sustain significant capital investments. By the end of the nineteenth century, advertisers were seeking out national markets for their goods, and general-circulation magazines were an inexpensive vehicle to carry their advertisements. In 1890, advertisers spent $360 million to advertise their products. In 1900, that figure increased to $542 million, and by 1910, more than $1 billion was being spent on advertising each year.34 Journalism historians William David Sloan and James D. Startt in The Media in America: A History explain that:

Ironically, this economic transformation produced both the social problems that the muckrakers critiqued as well as the means for the investigative reporters to investigate them. In a further irony, the muckrakers' exposés often appeared alongside the advertisements for products created by the very system they were attacking.35

During the first part of the twentieth century, approximately two thousand investigative reports, based on the careful examination of public documents, informed readers of strong alliances between business and

32. Ibid., 54.
35. Sloan and Startt, The Media in America, 368–69.
government, provided evidence of deception and corruption, and exposed economic inequities between the wealthy elite and the working class. Although muckrakers considered the corruption of politicians and business leaders a major problem in American society, they maintained that members of the middle class, if educated about the current inequities, had the power to force change in social, economic, and political relationships between capitalists and workers.

In one sense, the muckrakers may be seen as press agents for the Progressive movement, spotlighting social and economic problems and, in Arthur and Lila Weinberg’s words, “arousing a lethargic public to righteous indignation.” As a result of their investigations, the public was awakened to social, economic, and political abuses, and legislative reforms at the local, state, and federal levels were enacted. Early muckraking investigations primarily focused on powerful trusts, questionable business practices, and political corruption. For example, Ida Tarbell’s eighteen-part history of the Standard Oil Company relied on public documents and congressional investigations to uncover illegal practices used by the corporation to destroy its competitors. Lincoln Steffens’s series “The Shame of the Cities” investigated corruption in the Minneapolis city government and placed corrupt city politics on the national agenda, while David Graham Phillips’s article “The Treason of the Senate” exposed the influence of special interests on the U.S. Senate.

**Labor and Class Issues**

Upton Sinclair’s 1904 muckraking novel on the meat-packing industry, *The Jungle*, alerted citizens to the plight of exploited workers and helped bring issues of labor to the forefront of the American social agenda. The book, first serialized in several urban newspapers, provided the impetus for the passage of the Meat Inspection Act of 1906. By 1908, several key muckraking investigations addressed issues of race, class, and labor.

Historian Herbert Shapiro, in his article “The Muckrakers and Negroes,” maintains that though some historians have considered muckraking “a journalism of white experts writing for an overwhelmingly white audience,” William English Walling’s investigation into the Springfield, Illinois, race riot in the summer of 1908 is an important example of the

muckrakers’ examination of labor and race relations in the United States. In “The Race War in the North,” published in the September 1908 edition of the Independent, Walling chronicled the two-day riot in which several thousand white citizens destroyed African American stores and houses; wounded black men, women, and children; lynched and killed black workers; and ultimately forced six thousand African Americans to leave Springfield.

In his analysis of the riot, Walling found “race hatred” at the center of the “fanatical, blind and almost insane hatred” illustrated by the mob during the conflict.38 Shocked that such hatred and violence was alive and well in Abraham Lincoln’s hometown, where African Americans constituted merely one-tenth of the city’s population, Walling called for the revival of “the spirit of the abolitionists, of Lincoln and of Lovejoy” to extend social and political equality to all African Americans.39 He warned that if white public opinion continued to insist on its need for “supremacy” and continued to treat blacks as second-class citizens, the race war would soon be transferred to the North. As a result of Walling’s article and his call for absolute social and political equality, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was born. In his eulogy of Walling, fellow muckraker Charles Edward Russell referred to him as the creator of the NAACP and said, “It was Walling that saw what shape such a movement might take and called it into being and motion.”40

In “The Tenements of Trinity Church,” which ran in the July 1908 edition of Everybody’s magazine, Charles Edward Russell described the terrible conditions of tenements owned by Trinity Church and questioned if the good brought by the church’s charitable and philanthropic activities justified the squalor and filth of the tenements, housing thousands of workers, that financed their charities. Generally considered the worst housing units in New York, the Trinity tenements were little more than disease-ridden sheds. As Russell observed:

The halls are narrow, dark, dirty, and smell abominably. The stairs are narrow, wooden and insecure. On the second and third floors are interior bedrooms that have no natural light or ventilation, and must therefore, according to the Board of Health, be a prolific breeding place for the germs of tuberculosis. A horrible, mephitic odor and the dampness that clings

about old cellars and sunless courts seem to strike against you with a physical impact. You know that in this heavy and sickly air is no place to rear men and women.

The only sanitation for the families dwelling in this dreadful house is to be found in wooden sheds in the back yard... The back yard is a horror into which you set your foot with an uncontrollable physical revulsion against the loathsome contamination. It has much rubbish, it is vilely unkempt, it seems to exude vileness.*

This 1908 article was one in a series penned by Russell regarding tenements owned by Trinity Church, which Weinberg and Weinberg named the wealthiest church corporation in the country. As a result of his investigations, Trinity Church first criticized Russell and Everybody's magazine for the sensational coverage of its tenements and attempted to sway public opinion on the matter. Later, the church tore down approximately four blocks of its New York City tenements and began improving the other tenement properties that they owned.

Russell also focused on unfair labor conditions in his June 1908 article in Everybody's, "A Burglar in the Making." Russell detailed the inhumane prison conditions and the state of Georgia's policy of "leasing" prisoners to contractors to serve on chain gangs. In response to an increase in crime and inadequate penitentiary facilities to house convicted felons, in 1879 Georgia began a convict-leasing program. Contractors paid a minimum of one hundred dollars per year for desirable convicts who had been given sentences in excess of five years, while less-desirable convicts went to the highest bidder. Russell determined that for the year ending May 31, 1907, Georgia had leased 1,890 convicts to contractors, resulting in state revenues of $353,455.55 "from a system that multiplies criminals, breeds brutality, encourages crime, and puts upon one of the fairest states in the Union a hideous blot."

Russell's investigation found deplorable living conditions for leased convicts and contractors who treated the inmates as slaves. Three times each day, the inmates received a maggot-infested piece of boiled salt pork and a piece of greasy cornbread. There was disease throughout the work camps,

42. Ibid., 310.
43. Sloan and S statt, The Media in America, 374.
45. Ibid., 337.
and inmates were routinely whipped if their work pace slowed. As Russell writes:

Some of the men got pneumonia and died of it. Sometimes they stood for hours to their knees in icy water while they worked in the swamp. Always they were ill clad, ill nourished, and in no state to withstand the cold. The contractor furnished shoes as well as clothes, and the shoes were rotten and worthless even when they were new, and went quickly to pieces, so that in winter men with bare protruding toes walked in the slush. Some had no underclothes, some had no socks.

Response to Russell’s article was immediate. The Georgia legislature held hearings that quickly became front-page news. Newspapers throughout the state editorialized against the convict-leasing program. The Atlanta Constitution warned that the state should immediately end the “iniquitous and barbaric lease system,” while the Americus Times Recorder opined that Georgia’s reputation was being sullied because of this barbaric practice. The Cordele Rambler noted that the state has “been advertised to the world as allowing all kinds of cruelty, graft and corruption, and nothing short of an investigation will place us in good standing again.” On March 3, 1909, the Georgia legislature passed a convict bill that was signed by the governor, which began to rectify the situation.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, approximately one million children worked in factories, mines, tenement workshops, and textile mills. According to historians Keith Bryant, Jr., and Kate Barnard, Progressives who wanted “to save the children from neglect, overwork, and ignorance” made ending child labor one of their primary social platforms.

Labor unions also supported limiting child labor because low-paid children were competition to their workers, expanding the labor force and contributing to the increasing problem of joblessness. William Hard’s article “De Kid Wot Works at Night,” published in the January 1908 issue of Everybody’s, detailed the plight of newsboys selling papers on the street each night. In his muckraking investigation, Hard explains the pay structure for newsboys:

The newsboy deals, generally speaking, with the corner-man. The corner-man pays the Daily News sixty cents for every hundred copies. He then hands out these hundred copies in “bunches” of, say, ten or fifteen or

46. Ibid.
47. Ibid., 323.
48. Bryant, Jr., “Kate Barnard,” 150.
49. Zinn, A People’s History, 261.
twenty to the newsboys who come to him for supplies. Each newsboy receives, as a commission, a certain number of cents for every hundred copies he can manage to sell. This commission varies from five to twenty cents. The profit of the corner-man varies therefore with the commission that he pays the newsboy. The public pays one hundred cents for one hundred copies of the News. The News itself gets sixty cents; the newsboy gets from five to twenty cents; the corner-man gets what is left, namely, from thirty-five down to twenty cents in net profit. 50

The issue with such a pay structure, according to Hard, was that because newsboys bought their papers from “corner men” and then resold the papers on the street, newspapers considered them merchants rather than employees. As merchants, they had the status of independent contractors, and therefore child-labor laws did not apply to them. Although the Illinois legislature had previously rejected child-labor laws because many employers had labeled them “socialism,” 51 in response to Hard’s article, new child-labor legislation was successfully passed in Illinois.

As the range of previous examples illustrates, within the Progressive Era, issues of race, class, and labor were a part of muckraking reporters’ national agenda. Journalists covered all types of labor issues, including management and labor conflicts, child-labor issues, racial discrimination, and unfair labor practices. Although in 1908 newsworkers had yet to forge a collective identity as a group of workers with common interests and needs, in their reportage of labor issues and conflicts, journalists began to create a sense of class consciousness that by the 1930s would result in the development of the American Newspaper Guild. 52

51. Ibid., 360.
52. Brennen, “The Emergence of Class Consciousness,” 233–47.