

Sources on Working Conditions

1. Excerpt from Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1905), chapter 9.

<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5727.html>

Upton Sinclair Hits His Readers in the Stomach [HM annotation—cite source]

*In 1904, in the midst of a bitter stockyard strike, socialist writer Upton Sinclair's two-month visit to Chicago's "Packingtown" area provided him with a wealth of material that he turned into his best-selling novel, *The Jungle*. The book is best known for revealing the unsanitary process by which animals became meat products. Yet Sinclair's primary concern was not with the goods that were produced, but with the workers who produced them. Throughout the book, as in this chapter, he described with great accuracy the horrifying physical conditions under which immigrant packing plant workers and their families worked and lived. Sinclair's graphic descriptions of how meat products were manufactured were an important factor in the subsequent passage of the federal Pure Food and Drug and Meat Inspection Act in 1906. Sinclair later commented about the effect of his novel: "I aimed at the public's heart and by accident hit its stomach."*

There were the men in the pickle-rooms, for instance, where old Antanas had gotten his death; scarce a one of these that had not some spot of horror on his person. Let a man so much as scrape his finger pushing a truck in the pickle-rooms, and he might have a sore that would put him out of the world; all the joints in his fingers might be eaten by the acid, one by one. Of the butchers and floorsmen, the beef-boners and trimmers, and all those who used knives, you could scarcely find a person who had the use of his thumb; time and time again the base of it had been slashed, till it was a mere lump of flesh against which the man pressed the knife to hold it. The hands of these men would be criss-crossed with cuts, until you could no longer pretend to count them or to trace them. They would have no nails,—they had worn them off pulling hides; their knuckles were swollen so that their fingers spread out like a fan. There were men who worked in the cooking-rooms, in the midst of steam and sickening odors, by artificial light; in these rooms the germs of tuberculosis might live for two years, but the supply was renewed every hour. There were the beef-luggers, who carried two-hundred-pound quarters into the refrigerator-cars; a fearful kind of work, that began at four o'clock in the morning, and that wore out the most powerful men in a few years. There were those who worked in the chilling-rooms, and whose special disease was rheumatism; the time-limit that a man could work in the chilling-rooms was said to be five years. There were the woolpluckers, whose hands went to pieces even sooner than the hands of the pickle-men; for the pelts of the sheep had to be painted with acid to loosen the wool, and then the pluckers had to pull out this wool with their bare hands, till the acid had eaten their fingers off. There were those who made the tins for the canned-meat; and their hands, too, were a maze of cuts, and each cut represented a chance for blood-poisoning. Some worked at the stamping-machines, and it was very seldom that one could work long there at the pace that was set, and not give out and forget himself, and have a part of his hand chopped off. There were the "hoisters," as they were called, whose task it was to press the lever which lifted the dead cattle off the floor. They ran along upon a rafter, peering down through the damp

and the steam; and as old Durham's architects had not built the killing-room for the convenience of the hoisters, at every few feet they would have to stoop under a beam, say four feet above the one they ran on; which got them into the habit of stooping, so that in a few years they would be walking like chimpanzees. Worst of any, however, were the fertilizer-men, and those who served in the cooking-rooms. These people could not be shown to the visitor,—for the odor of a fertilizer-man would scare any ordinary visitor at a hundred yards, and as for the other men, who worked in tank-rooms full of steam, and in some of which there were open vats near the level of the floor, their peculiar trouble was that they fell into the vats; and when they were fished out, there was never enough of them left to be worth exhibiting,—sometimes they would be overlooked for days, till all but the bones of them had gone out to the world as Durham's Pure Leaf Lard!

Source: Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle* (1905), Chapter Nine.

2. Annie Daniel excerpt on work done in tenements from “The Wreck of the Home: How Wearing Apparel is Fashioned in the Tenements” (1905).
<http://acad.smumn.edu/History/contents.html>

This excerpt is from a speech to the National Consumer's League, a women's organization that became national and pushed for improved working conditions.

“... The new law relating to manufacturing in tenement-houses, provides that thirty-three distinct industries may be carried on in the living rooms of the workers – manufacturing all of which requires hand work or simple machinery. Every garment worn by a woman is found being manufactured in tenement rooms. The coarsest home-wrappers to the daintiest lace gown for a fine evening function are manufactured in these rooms. Corsets and shoes are the most uncommon. The adornments of woman's dress, the flowers and feathers for her hats, the hats themselves – these I have seen being made in the presence of small-pox, on the lounge with the patient. In this case the hats belonged to a Broadway firm. All clothing worn by infants and young children – dainty little dresses – I have seen on the same bed with children sick of contagious diseases and into these little garments is sewed some of the contagion. ...”

3. Florence Kelley on women workers from “Strength in Numbers: Kelley on Women, Labor, and the Power of the Ballot” (1898).
<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5314.html>

Florence Kelley, a Chicago-born labor reformer, socialist, and woman suffrage advocate, employed pragmatic arguments in support of women's right to vote. In this selection from a speech to the 1898 NAWSA convention, Kelly argued that working women, particularly factory workers, needed the ballot to protect themselves from exploitation at the hands of their powerful employers. She also argued that working men needed their feminine counterparts to vote in order to strengthen labor's presence at the polls.

“The wages paid any body of working people are determined by many influences, chief among which is the position of the particular body of workers in question. Thus the printers, by their intelligence, their powerful organization, their solidarity and united action, keep up their wages in spite of the invasion of their domain by new and improved machinery. On the other hand, the garment-workers, the sweaters’ victims, poor, unorganized, unintelligent, despised, remain forever on the verge of pauperism, irrespective of their endless toil. If, now, by some untoward fate the printers should suddenly find themselves disfranchised, placed in a position in which their members were politically inferior to the members of other trades, no effort of their own short of complete enfranchisement could restore to them that prestige, that good standing in the esteem of their fellow-craftsmen and the public at large which they now enjoy, and which contributes materially in support of their demand for high wages.”

4. See Triangle Fire website for photos (?), cartoon (?) and excerpt from documents:
<http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire/narrative1.html>

The fire at the Triangle Waist Company in New York City, which claimed the lives of 146 young immigrant workers, is one of the worst disasters since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. This incident has had great significance to this day because it highlights the inhumane working conditions to which industrial workers can be subjected. To many, its horrors epitomize the extremes of industrialism. The tragedy still dwells in the collective memory of the nation and of the international labor movement. The victims of the tragedy are still celebrated as martyrs at the hands of industrial greed.

See this website for “My First Job” by Rose Cohen, a sweatshop worker and a survivor of the Triangle Factory Fire.

Under “Fire!” see whole article from the *New York Times*, March 26, 1911, p. 1.

141 Men and Girls Die in Waist Factory Fire; Trapped High Up in Washington Place Building; Street Strewn with Bodies; Piles of Dead Inside

Also see Political Cartoons particularly “Inspector of Buildings”

INSPECTOR OF BUILDINGS!



REYNOLDS
1911