

feared the implications of this new era of global economic expansion. Political and ideological violence may have been rare, but when violence broke out, it both stigmatized and divided labor groups, even as it brought swift reactions from local police, private detective firms, and state and federal officials.¹ More broadly, a general fear of the revolutionary changes taking shape in everyday life inspired both a broad-based progressive reform impulse, shared by many American workers, and a renewed American radicalism, as well as the forces of reactionary repression and business conservatism that sought to stamp out what many saw as the real possibility of mob action and socialist insurgency.

The labor violence and economic upheavals of the late 19th century had been horrific enough to convince many powerful Americans that reform was necessary. In 1898, Republican president William McKinley, who would be assassinated in 1901 by the anarchist Leon Czolgosz, appointed the United States Industrial Commission to study the causes of labor violence. At the same time, a broad group of largely middle-class and elite Americans, soon to be known as Progressives, set out to document and then ameliorate the worst forms of corruption in the economy and politics, and to soften the edges of the new industrial system by making workplaces, consumer products, and neighborhoods safer and healthier. There was no single Progressive Era social movement; rather, reformers sought everything from antitrust legislation, shorter working hours, and safer workplaces to bans on child labor, protective legislation for female workers, and reforms that would clean up manufacturing and the political process.

These top-down reform efforts—efforts that emphasized the need for greater efficiency and order in the economy and at the workplace—would be deeply ambiguous for workers. But they reflected an important move away from the commitments to Social Darwinism and laissez-faire principles that had defined the Gilded Age. Progressive reform itself could become a form of social control. Workers were subjected to intense moral campaigns, the Americanization efforts of both well-intentioned settlement house workers and less salutary anti-immigrant vigilantes, and the institution of “scientific management” regimes fostered by Frederick Winslow Taylor, Elton Mayo, and Frank and Lillian Gilbreth. One reformer’s vision of order and efficiency often became a reality of social control for workers.

For most workers, the greatest fears derived from the accelerating changes at the workplace that were well underway by the turn of the century. The mechanization of industry and employers’ drive for efficiency had long been forcing workers to do more specialized task work and robbing them of the control over their work many had enjoyed in systems of craft production. There were benefits as production skyrocketed across the economy. Whereas the pick miner in a coal shaft produced 2.5 tons per day on average, the fully mechanized open pit mines of the 1930s produced 16.2 tons per worker per day. In 1919, Henry Ford’s assembly line produced four times the output per worker per hour than the industry had produced in 1910. Simultaneously, the kinds of occupations Americans held and their experiences at work changed dramatically, not always for the worse. Gangs of day laborers were transformed into legions of semi-skilled workers running transportation and equipment handling machines. Skilled, independent workers in iron and steel production became semiskilled machinists and repair technicians. These mechanized factories also required the development of a whole new set of tool-and-die makers. Overall, there was an upward leveling effect of mechanization. Between 1910 and 1930, the proportion of unskilled workers in industrial work fell from 36 to 30.5 percent, the semiskilled rose from 36 to 39 percent, and the skilled increased from 28 to 30.5 percent.² Not everyone benefited, of course. Black men, when they were not stuck in sharecropping or tenant farming, were generally relegated to the hot, heavy, hard jobs, and most black women were forced to accept the long hours and lack of independence in domestic service.