Name: _____   Class: _____

The Life of a U.S. Industrial Worker

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The Industrial Revolution was a period of great change from about 1760 until 1840, when many new machines were invented and introduced into factories. This progress often came at the cost of workers' rights. This text asks students to imagine what it would be a child worker in the U.S. Industrial Revolution. As you read, take notes on the way the text is written — such as point of view, tone, and word choice — and how this affects the overall meaning.

[1]   Imagine you're ten years old. How do you spend your day? Playing? Watching TV? Going to school? Now imagine you're ten years old after the Industrial Revolution in the late 1800's with factories booming all around you. Now how do you spend your day? A LOT differently. You probably have a job. You work in a factory between ten and fourteen hours a day. The air is filled with dust and smoke. Your fingers bleed from working so much. What do you get for all of this hard work? About fifty cents a day.

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The Industrial Revolution was really good for some people. Poor children were not some of them. A factory-owner's job was to make as much stuff as quickly and cheaply as possible and then sell it as quickly and for as much money as possible. Even though you're ten, it's your job to make things go quickly. Here. Stand in this same place for twelve hours and screw tops onto as many bottles as you can. Yes, it's cold. Yes, the bottle caps hurt your hands. Yes, you're standing in a puddle with holes in your shoes. Also, you need to crawl into this giant machine when it breaks. Your boss doesn't want to hear any complaining, and if you do you might get whipped. **Child labor** is when young children work in places that are unsafe and are paid less than adults. This was a way for businesses to find small workers with lots of energy and quick fingers without paying them much... if at all. This was legal for over a hundred years, until people decided it was not right to let young children work until they were older.[1]

After a long, tiring day, your fingers are sore and you can barely feel your feet. You walk home. It's very close, but it isn't much more comfortable than your work. In fact, it's so close that you can still taste the smoke that comes out of the factory. This is because the person who owns the factory also owns your home. **Company towns** were small, towns built by factory owners for families who worked at the factories to live in. It may seem nice of your boss to build a place for you and your family, but he isn't doing it for you. The houses are dirty, cold, and filled with many other families and you pay rent to your boss to live there. Also, you have no choice. You must live there if you work at the factory. You sleep in a room with your mom, older brother, and younger sister. This means you and your family are stuck in tough, low-paying jobs.

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1.   In the United States, it is illegal for anyone under 14 to work a paying job. It took many years of protest and reform before this became a law.

A few minutes after you get home, your mom walks through the door. She works in the laundry down the street, burning her hands with soap and breathing in bad chemicals all day. She is paid less than half of what the men earn... just because she's a woman.[2] She works even longer hours than you because your dad has been gone so long you don't remember what he looks like. At least your family gets to eat a little. **Minimum wage** is the lowest amount of money a boss can legally pay each employee, but this wasn't a law until over a hundred years after the first factories.[3] Too bad it hasn't come along yet to help you and your family. Before minimum wage, when you live, factory owners could pay what they wanted. And they want to pay you and your mom just enough to keep you alive. The little money you have goes to food and rent. Even though your jobs are awful, it's better than nothing. So you and your family hold on to your jobs... and you struggle to stay healthy and alive.

[5] Just as you and your mother are sitting down to stale bread and thin soup, your brother BURSTS through the door! "We're going on strike!"[4] he cries. He holds up his hand in a fist and you can see he's missing three fingers from the work accident a few months ago. There's a light in his eyes you've never seen before. "We're going to start a union!" he says. Your mom tells you that a **union** is a collection of workers who get together to protect their rights and demand better pay or better ways to work. "Until they give us higher pay, all of the workers are going to walk out of their factories tomorrow! We will not go back to work until they give us better pay!" At the thought of not working, your fingers start to tingle...

If you were a child in the Industrial Revolution, you could have worked eighteen hour days in a very hard job. Business owners used child labor because they didn't have to pay them much and kids had quick fingers. Women were not much better off, being paid much less than men. Before minimum wage came along, giving families enough to feed and house themselves, people often lived in communal[5] homes, which were dirty and cold and might have many families living in them. The only thing workers could do was strike and make unions, working as a group for better pay and better treatment. Tomorrow you get to walk out of your job with everyone else in order to ask your boss for better pay... What will your boss do?

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2. In the U.S., a woman typically earns less money than a man for the same job
3. The current national minimum wage in the U.S. is $7.25 per hour.
4. **Strike** *(noun)* a period of time when workers stop work in order to force an employer to agree to their demands
5. **Communal** *(adjective)* shared by all members of a community; for common use