

AP European

Mr. Trombetta

Robert Owen Demands Reform

The abuses of early industrialization led to a demand for reform. Robert Owen (1771-1858), a successful textile manufacturer, urged legislation to limit child labor and to aid unemployed workers. Owen wanted to show that better living and employment conditions for workers meant increased prosperity for business. In the factory he managed at New Lanark, Scotland, Owen improved working conditions, built a model village, and made provisions for educating workers' children.

In the following passage, Owen urges a program for the unemployed.

The poor and unemployed . . . must not be abandoned. . . .

The immediate cause of the present distress is the [decreased value] of human labor, . . . which has been occasioned by the general introduction of mechanism into the manufactures of Europe and America, but principally into those of Britain, where the change was greatly accelerated by the inventions of Arkwright and Watt.¹ . . .

A little reflection will show that the working classes have now no adequate means of [competing] with mechanical power. One of three results must therefore ensue:

1. The use of mechanism must be greatly diminished; or,
2. Millions of human beings must be starved, to permit its existence to the present extent; or
3. Advantageous occupation must be found for poor and unemployed working classes. . . . It would . . . be a . . . sign of barbarism, and an act of gross tyranny, were any government to permit mechanical power to starve millions of human beings. The thought will not admit of one moment's contemplation; it would inevitably create unheard-of misery to all ranks. . . .

Under the existing laws,² the unemployed working classes are maintained by, and consume part of the property and produce of, the wealthy and industrious, while their powers of body and mind remain unproductive. They frequently acquire the bad habits which ignorance and idleness never fail to produce; they [merge] with the regular poor and become a nuisance to society.

Most of the poor have received bad . . . habits from their parents; and so long as the present treatment continues, those bad . . . habits will be transmitted to their children. . . .

Under this view of the subject, any plan for [improving the lot] of the poor should combine means to prevent their children from acquiring bad habits and to give them good ones — to provide useful training and instruction for them; to provide proper labor for the

adults. . . . The [present] state of society [urgently] requires the adoption of some measures to relieve the . . . poor from their increasing misery. . . .

The system, or rather want of system, which exists with regard to the management of the poor, has been emphatically condemned. . . .

¹ Arkwright invented the spinning frame; Watt improved the steam engine.

² Owen is referring to the fact that the cost of keeping the unemployed in the poorhouse was met from tax funds.

The immense sums annually raised for their relief are lavished in utter disregard of every principle of public justice or economy. They offer greater reward for idleness and vice than for industry and virtue; and thus directly operate to increase the degradation and misery of the classes whom they are designed to serve. No sum, however enormous, administered after this manner, could be productive of any other result; rather will pauperism and wretchedness increase along with the increase of an expenditure thus applied.

The poor and unemployed working classes, however, cannot, must not, be abandoned to their fate. . . . Instead of being left . . . to the dominion of ignorance and to the influence of circumstances which are fatal to their industry and morals, . . . they should . . . be afforded the means of procuring a certain . . . [means of support] by their labor, under a system which will not only direct that labor and its earning to the best advantage, but, at the same time, place them under circumstances the most favorable to the growth of morals and of happiness.