LESSON 5

FREE TO THINK, TALK, LISTEN, OR SING

In **Paper Airplane,** students "saw" some of the key turn-of-the-century workplace changes, which continue to affect workers. Here they explore some of the historical background. The reading in this lesson recounts how new technologies and workplace structures affected the most intimate aspects of people's lives. Often, workers' demands made in negotiations don't fully reveal the human consequences of work. Even when the call is for higher wages, the underlying grievances may be much deeper.

Goals/Objectives

1. Students will appreciate how changes in work organization affected the working conditions in factories in the United States.

2. Students will recognize how changes in people's work lives have consequences for their home and family lives as well.

Materials Needed

- **Student Handout #5: Free to Think, Talk, Listen, or Sing** (from Milton Meltzer, *Bread and Roses* [New York: Vintage, 1973]).

Time Required

- One class period and homework.

Procedure

1. Depending on the skill level of the class, either assign the reading as homework or read the selection aloud.

2. The writing assignment at the conclusion of **Student Handout #5: Free to Think, Talk, Listen, or Sing** should be given as homework.

   Note: Encourage students to be especially creative in their completion of the homework. In choice #2, you might suggest that they do this as an illustrated poster or a handbill. Urge them to imagine a particular shoe factory in Massachusetts and to make the complaints and demands very specific. We've received wonderfully imaginative and moving pieces of work from this assignment.

3. Some discussion questions could include:

   — One worker stated that the subdivision of labor into smaller and smaller parts had a "very demoralizing effect upon the mind" of the worker. What does the writer mean by "demoralizing"? What are some examples?

   — One mill superintendent described switching from the older technique of mule spinning—requiring highly skilled workers—to the newer method of ring spinning. According to the superintendent, was it just the desire for increased efficiency in production that led to this shift? What motivated this switch in spinning methods?

   — A Mr. Eaton explained that with the new changes in the shoe industry, a worker might

operate a machine that nailed the heels on 4,800 shoes in a single day. Have you ever done repetitive work like that—in fast food, picking in the fields, in a factory? How did it make you feel? How did it affect your thinking? Did you do anything to prevent yourself from feeling like a machine?

— How might the changes in the shoe industry affect someone who had been used to making the whole shoe?

— What happened to the wages of workers as industrial work became increasingly fragmented—divided into narrower tasks?

— According to the quotes from Mr. Eaton and Samuel Gompers, what was it about the older organization of production that made it easier for workers to develop themselves intellectually? In what ways could a more thoughtful and critical working class be threatening to the owners with their new production methods?

— Look at the cost-of-living sheet, taken from the *Printer* of August 1864, for a family of six. The paper points out that the average wage for a printer was $16 a week, with other trades paid as little as $6 or even $3. If you were having to make do on $16 a week, which items would you eliminate from the list of food and other family expenses? What does the list not include that you would want for your family? What choices would your family be faced with?

— Ira Stewart, a machinist writing in *Fincher's Trades' Review,* was upset at more than the low wages of workers. What did he fear was happening to American workers?

STUDENT HANDOUT #5

FREE TO THINK, TALK, LISTEN, OR SING

As industry became bigger and more mechanized, thousands of skilled craftsmen saw the nature of their work change. In 1883, a young mechanic described to a United States Senate committee the shifts taking place in his trade:

The trade has been subdivided and those subdivisions have been again subdivided, so that a man never learns the machinist's trade now. Ten years ago he learned, not the whole trade, but a fair portion of it. Also, there is more machinery used in the business, which again makes machinery. . . . It is merely laborers' work. . . .

One man may make just a particular part of a machine and may not know anything whatever about another part of the same machine. In that way machinery is produced a great deal cheaper than it used to be formerly, and in fact, through this system of work, 100 men are able to do now what it took 300 or 400 men to do fifteen years ago. . . . They so simplify the work that it is made a great deal easier and put together a great deal faster. There is no system of apprenticeship, I may say, in the business. You simply go in and learn whatever branch you are put at, and you stay at that unless you are changed to another. . . .

Did such specialized work have any effect on a man's thinking?

It has a very demoralizing effect upon the mind throughout. The man thinks of nothing else but that particular branch; he knows that he cannot leave that particular branch and go to any other; he has got no chance whatever to learn anything else because he is kept steadily and constantly at that particular thing.

Could a man working in a machine shop hope to rise, to become a boss or a manufacturer himself?

There is no chance. They have lost all desire to become bosses now . . . because the trade has become demoralized. First they earn so small wages; and, next, it takes so much capital to become a boss now that they cannot think of it, because it takes all they can earn to live.

One immigrant from England wrote back to his friends in Sheffield:

They do far more with machinery in all trades than you do. Men never learn to do a knife through, as they do in Sheffield. The knives go through forty or fifty hands.

Shoemakers, tailors, dyers, tanners arriving hopefully from abroad, found work in the United States quite unlike what they knew back home. It was chiefly workers in the building trades who found their craft was not being replaced by machinery. The machine was slow to enter mining and railway construction, too. But in iron, steel, and textiles change was very rapid.

The skilled puddler and boiler saw their jobs disappear when Bessemer and open-hearth furnaces took over production of steel ingots. The output of Bessemer ingots jumped nine times between 1874 and 1882. In the cotton and wool industries, too, a new technique called ring-spinning replaced mule-spinning, a highly skilled occupation. One mill superintendent told a reporter this story:

The mule-spinners are a tough crowd to deal with. A few years ago they were giving trouble at this mill, so one Saturday afternoon, after they had gone home, we started right in and smashed up a room-full of mules with sledgehammers. When the men came back on Monday morning, they were astonished to find that there was no

work for them. That room is now full of ring frames run by girls.

The shoe industry was the classic example of what was happening. Pressed by Civil War demands for huge quantities of shoes, the mill owners introduced automatic machinery. Asked by a Congressional committee in 1899 to describe changes in work and wages in his trade, a leader of the Boot and Shoe Workers' Union said:

Eleven years ago I used to be able to earn myself, lasting shoes, from $18 to $35 in a week, according to how hard I wanted to work; that is, in the city of Lynn. Today, on the same class of work, I would not be able, on any job in the city, to make over $15, and probably my wage would run nearer $12. . . . And another thing: where a man at that time would likely get eight or nine months' good work in a year, at the present time the season is shorter. . . . The manufacturers equip themselves to turn out their product in a shorter time, and the seasons of employment are shorter and more uncertain.

With about one hundred subdivisions of labor in the making of a shoe, the worker became specialized in one simple operation. Asked what effect that had upon him, Mr. Eaton replied:

He becomes a mere machine. . . . Take the proposition of a man operating a machine to nail on 40 to 60 cases of heels in a day. That is 2,400 pairs, 4,800 shoes, in a day. One not accustomed to it would wonder how a man could pick up and lay down 4,800 shoes in a day, to say nothing of putting them on a jack into a machine and having them nailed on. That is the driving method of the manufacture of shoes under these minute subdivisions.

The effect was to multiply production. By 1885 the Massachusetts factories were making four times as many cases of boots and shoes as they had made two decades earlier. The art of shoemaking, as an individual craft, became a thing of the past. The old-time shoe shop, a small room perhaps ten by fourteen, disappeared. Remembering how different the workman's life was then, Mr. Eaton said:

In these old shops, years ago, one man owned the shop; he took in work and three, four, five, or six others, neighbors, came in there and sat down and made shoes right in their laps, and there was no machinery. Everybody was at liberty to talk; they were all politicians. . . . Of course, under these conditions, there was absolute freedom and exchange of ideas, they naturally would become more intelligent than shoe workers can at the present time, when they are driving each man to see how many shoes he can handle, and where he is surrounded by noisy machinery. And another thing, this nervous strain on a man doing just one thing over and over again must necessarily have a wearing effect on him; and his ideals, I believe, must be lowered.

The shoemakers looked back regretfully on their recent past. It had been the usual practice in those days for cobblers to hire a boy to read aloud from books on philosophy or history or science. It was nothing to interrupt a task in order to debate a fine point in the text. But now "the gentle craft of leather" was gone, and the artisan had become nothing more than "a tender to the machine."

Something of the same nostalgia was voiced by the cigarmaker Samuel Gompers in his autobiography:

The craftsmanship of the cigarmaker was shown in his ability to utilize wrappers to the best advantage, to shave off the unusable to a hairbreadth, to roll so as to cover holes in the leaf and to use both hands so as to make a perfectly shaped and rolled product. These things a good cigarmaker learned to do more or less mechanically, which left us free to think, talk, listen, or sing. I loved the freedom of that work, for I had earned the mind-freedom that accompanied skill as a craftsman. I was eager to learn from discussion and reading or to pour out my feeling in song. Often we chose someone to read to us who was a particularly good reader, and in payment the rest of us gave him sufficient of our cigars so he was not the loser. The reading was always followed by discussion, so we learned to know each other pretty thoroughly. We learned who could take a joke in good spirit, who could marshal his thoughts in an orderly way, who

could distinguish clever sophistry from sound reasoning. The fellowship that grew between congenial shopmates was something that lasted a lifetime.

As the brick walls of the factories closed in on them, the workers' sense of personal freedom slipped away. One Massachusetts mechanic in 1879 described the atmosphere in a shop employing 100 to 125 men:

During working hours the men are not allowed to speak to each other, though working close together, on pain of instant discharge. Men are hired to watch and patrol the shop. The workers of Massachusetts have always been law and order men. We loved our country, and respected the laws. For the last five years the times have been growing worse every year, until we have been brought down so far that we have not much further to go. What do the mechanics of Massachusetts say to each other? I will tell you: "We must have a change. Any thing is better than this. We cannot be worse off, no matter what the change is."

The same worker also said:

I work harder now than when my pay was twice as large. Less than five years ago wages were from $12 to $18 a week currency; now they are from $6 to $12, and work not as steady.

Ten years later, in 1889, the payroll for the Lyman cotton mill in Holyoke, Massachusetts, showed wages in the cording room running as low as $.05 an hour. Here are some samples taken from its ledger:

Job	*Total hours*	*Price per hour*	*Weekly amount*
Section hand	60	$ .20	$12.00
Third oiler	60	.10	6.00
Scrubber	60	.05	3.00
Picker man	60	.10	6.00
Stripper	60	.09½	5.70
Lap oiler	60	.08½	5.10
Grinder	60	.15	9.00
Railways & drawing	60	.07	4.20

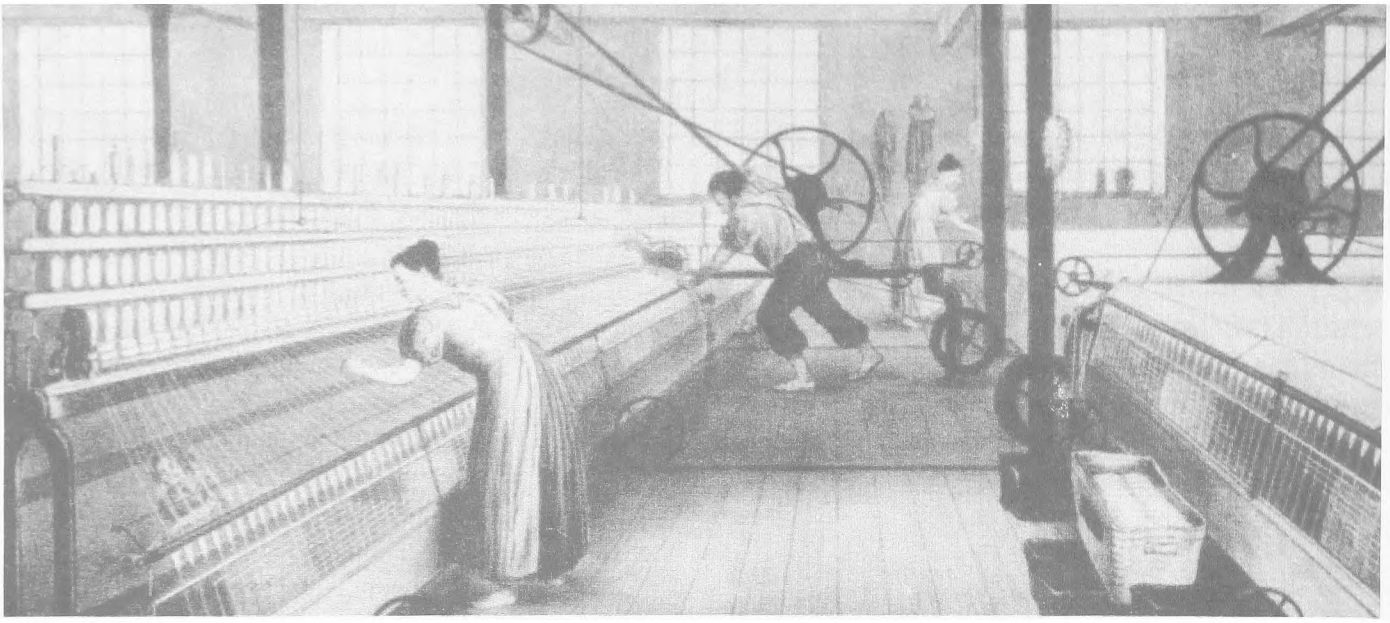
There was a common saying in those days, heard often from housewives: "You go to market with the money in a basket, and carry home the goods in your pocket." To see what a millhand's wages could buy, let's look at these figures on the weekly cost of living taken from a New York labor paper, *The Printer,* of August 1864. These are the actual expenses for a family of six—father, mother, and four children:

Expenditures for the Week

1 bag of flower	$1.80
small measure of potatoes daily at $.17 per day for 7 days	1.19
¼ pound of tea	.38
1 pound coffee (mixed or adulterated, can't afford better)	.35
3½ pounds sugar	1.05
milk	.56
meats for the week (being on ½ ration supply)	3.50
2 bushels of coal	1.36
4 pounds butter	1.60
2 pounds lard	.38
kerosene	.30
soap, starch, pepper, salt, vinegar, etc.	1.00
vegetables	.50
dried apples (to promote health of children)	.25
sundries	.28
rent	4.00
	$18.50

The Printer noted the average wage for all branches of the trade locally was $16 a week. (Workers in other trades got as little as $3, $4, or $6 a week.) This family, then, spent $2.50 more than the father earned, and had nothing left for clothing or entertainment. The paper added, "The fortunate printer that has more than one suit to his back, or whose wife can boast of more than a change of calicoes, can scarcely be found."

Hours of work were as long as wages were short. The men driving the horse-drawn streetcars of New York City in the 1880s worked fourteen to sixteen hours a day in all weather. Their pay was $1.75 a day. What it was like to work a fourteen-hour day is told by Ira Steward, a machinist who devoted his life to the cause of a shorter work week. He wrote in *Fincher's Trades' Review,* October 14, 1865:



Take the average operative or mechanic employed by a corporation fourteen hours a day. His labor commences at half-past four in the morning, and does not cease until half-past seven p.m. How many newspapers or books can he read? What time has he to visit or receive visits? to take baths? to write letters? to cultivate flowers? to walk with his family? Will he not be quite as likely to vote in opposition to his real interests as in favor? What is his opinion good for? Will anyone ask his advice? What will he most enjoy, works of art or rum? Will he go to meeting on Sunday? Does society care whether he is happy or miserable? sick or well? dead or alive? How often are his eyes tempted by the works of art? His home means to him his food and his bed. His life is work, with the apparition, however, of some time being without, for his work means bread! "Only that and nothing more." He is debased by excessive toil! He is almost without hope!

Think how monotonous that path leading from house to factory, and from factory to house again—the same sidewalk every day, rain or shine, summer or winter—leading by the same low houses—inhabited by beings walking the same social treadmill as himself. Half-past seven comes at last, and as the wheel stops he catches his coat, and half staggering with fatigue, hurries homeward in the darkness, thinking of nothing but food and rest.

This reading is taken from Milton Meltzer, *Bread and Roses: The Struggle of American Labor, 1865–1915,* copyright © 1967 by Milton Meltzer. Reprinted by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

Assignment: Imaginative Writing

1. Imagine you are a worker who has just gotten a job in a factory that has introduced new machinery and assembly-line techniques. Before this new job, you worked as a skilled craftsman in conditions similar to those described by Samuel Gompers or Mr. Eaton of the Boot and Shoe Workers' Union. Write a letter back to your former workmates telling them about your new job. In the letter explain your new conditions of work, how these compare to your earlier conditions, how this affects relations between workers, how your personal and family life have changed, and how all this makes you feel. Be specific, be imaginative.

   or

2. The industrial changes described in the reading gave rise to unions formed by workers. Pretend you are a worker in a Massachusetts shoe factory who has been assigned to draw up a leaflet or pamphlet detailing the demands of your union. Be specific, be eloquent and, if you like, be artistic.