

## **Module 05: Industrialization and Its Discontents: The Great Strike of 1877**

### **Evidence 4: J. W. J., "The Poor," 15 April 1877**

# A

#### **Introduction**

The depression of 1873 caused widespread suffering across the United States as wages plummeted, work hours declined, and millions of Americans found themselves out of work. While we lack firm figures for overall unemployment rates during this period, urban areas were hardest hit. By the winter of 1874, for example, about 25% of New York's working men and women found themselves without jobs. Teeming masses overwhelmed public relief agencies and private charities, which were underfunded and uncoordinated and offered only meager handouts even to those in dire need.

The letter to the editor below, written by an unemployed citizen of New Orleans, reveals how desperate America's working men and women had become nearly four years into the depression.

#### **Questions to Consider**

- What did the author of the letter note about the unemployment situation in New Orleans?
- What did he predict would happen if some relief was not provided soon?
- What did he request from his readers?

#### **Document**

##### The Poor

Mr. Editor—Being a constant reader of your valuable paper, I very respectfully ask a small space in your Sunday morning edition to make a few remarks on the situation of affairs as regards the poor and distracted people of our city and State, being somewhat of a sufferer and an observer of things as they have existed for some time past.

New Orleans is laboring in a paroxysm of penury; more mechanics and laboring men are out of employment than ever before. The cry for bread oppresses households innumerable; many unaccustomed to want, and little children for the first time learning to bear the agony of hunger, distress and want. This gorgon of politics which has trampled down industry, paralyzed the energy of the people and sapped the sources of plenty in every grade of industrial life, leaving the elements which should be marshaled in harmony to universal ends discordant and unavailing.

Mr. Editor, God only knows what will become of our poor workingmen who have families, or even single men, who are out of employment by [the] thousands in our city, if something soon don't turn up to give us relief. Sir, if you believe me, death is staring us in the face; nor is it alone, I may say, the poor working man who suffers want in our unhappy city, but many accustomed to luxury endure privation beyond belief under the untoward condition that prevails. The little credit at the corner grocery, always enjoyed in the pressure of other days, is now nearly unknown, and he who has not the price of he coveted loaf subsides into despair to the distracting discords which break from his babes. It is difficult to devise an immediate remedy. New Orleans, more than any other city, has, to some extent, neglected those safeguards. This is partly because her private charities excel those in any other city. The existing distress is hardly known to any but the sufferers and their circle of sympathizers and friends. To make it more impressive, a short time since the statement of one who makes an appeal to a gentleman of our city:

"Sir—I am again compelled to address you, to know if there are any prospects. My family, are, at this time, without the food necessary to keep life together. It is hard to be compelled to starve in this plentiful world; I cannot find employment to provide the requisite food to sustain life. I am willing to perform any occupation that my strength will permit so as to enable me to get food for my suffering family."

Mr. Editor, there are hundreds, yes, sir, I do not hesitate to say, thousands, in our poverty stricken city, today and months past, who have not the requisite food to sustain life. Yes, sir, in my observation I have known death to bring relief to some, and some even taking their own lives rather than live any longer in want and misery. A simple narrative of instances of destitution would fill a volume; and every fact goes to prove that suffering

is widespread and not confined to any particular class, and I am well aware that some good men and women, who themselves visit the haunts of wretchedness and by their humane sympathy relieve more wants than the physical need of bread, but they are few and far between. Walk through, if you please every day, and though at the time you may pass them by indifferently and almost without notice, at some quiet moment they return to your memory and you wonder at your own indifference. . . .

And now, my friend, Mr. Editor, in bringing my feeble remarks to a close, allow me to say, How long! oh, how long! will these poor men and women and children, as also this community at large, be kept in bondage and misery in our distracted city and State? We have, I may say, for years labored and hoped and waited for this promised relief, and yet, after all this and more, and yet, we do not see the end we desire. We demand in behalf of the people of every race and condition, and especially in behalf of the laboring classes of our city, a speedy solution of our present political troubles; for, sir, if this is not done, if I am right in my humble opinion of the sentiments and wishes of the masses of our people, black and white, something serious will certainly have to be done one way or the other.

Mr. Editor, thanking you for this as well as past favors. I remain your very humble servant and fellow-citizen.

J. W. J.

Source:

J. W. J., "The Poor," *New Orleans Daily Picayune*, 15 April 1877, 12.