Chapter 17

**[THE BIG IDEA] What new opportunities and risks did industrialization bring, and how did it reshape American society?**

In the photograph of the Marianna mine disaster that begins this chapter, we confront one of the grimmest developments in American history: the erosion of craftsmen’s traditional autonomy and pride in their work, replaced by economic insecurity, poverty, bitter conflict, and accidents and health hazards that caused injury and death. These were the consequences of industrialization for millions of workers and their families.

How did Americans let this happen? It’s easy to look back at previous eras and see problems that should have been addressed—but as we know today, it’s not always so easy to implement solutions.

Corporations seemed at the time modern and efficient. They could organize capital and labor in powerful new ways. They offered alluring forms of employment: men could become managers, engineers, and salesmen; working-class women were blocked from those opportunities, but they could attend business school and work as secretaries and typists in corporate offices. Even grueling, dangerous industrial labor looked promising to poverty-stricken immigrants from Europe and Asia, who arrived by the millions to look for work.

Corporations also introduced an array of inexpensive consumer products, from holiday railroad excursions to ready-made clothes and toys, from bicycles to roast beef. Many Americans saw such items as sure marks of progress. They argued that the hardships of industrialization were worth the rewards. It’s an issue that has haunted America ever since. Which is more important today: the fact that a fifth of American children live below the poverty line? Or that most Americans can aspire to have a credit card, a cellphone, and a flat-screen TV?

In the late nineteenth century, thousands of workers—those who actually endured the greatest hardships—argued that consumer goods were not enough. They wanted better pay and more autonomy and safety on the job. So at almost the same moment industrialization created large private corporations, it also ushered in a national movement for labor rights.