5.4

Labor

Those who produce should have, but we know that those who produce the most—that is, those who work hardest, and at the most difficult and most menial tasks, have the least.

— *Eugene V. Debs,* Walls and Bars *(1927)*

Not everyone shared equally in the growing economy. Many factory jobs brought low pay, long hours, unsafe working conditions, and frequent periods of unemployment. In 1881 the Indiana Department of Statistics published the first report on factory wages, which revealed that the average worker earned $1.00 to $1.50 for a ten- to twelve-hour workday. Skilled workers earned up to $4.50 a day. Ten-hour days and six-day work weeks were common. Industries with the longest working hours included manufacturing products such as gas, cement, paper and wood pulp, baked goods, and iron and steel. Steelworkers often worked seven days a week.

Some felt that state government should do more for workers, but political and industrial leaders of late-nineteenth-century Indiana were reluctant to interfere. Their stance was commitment to individual freedom and laissez-faire economics, a belief that the economy should be let alone without regulation. Only gradually did the state venture into the complex relationship between workers and employers.

Women in the Workforce

The sanitary condition of buildings in which girls were working are not generally at present what they should be to insure the best health and strength of employees.

— *Indiana, Department of Statistics, "Women Wage Earners of Indianapolis,"* Fifth Biennial Report, 1898–99

Industrialization meant that more women worked in paying jobs outside the home. Although middle-class norms discouraged married women from working for pay, some single women with an education became store clerks or teachers. Women with less education worked in domestic service as maids or cooks; and many went to work in factories. In the factory, women worked in jobs specifically for women. Often the departments were even divided by gender. Industries that attracted the most women workers were garment factories, book binderies, paper-box plants, laundries, and pork-packing plants. In 1899 an Indiana state factory inspector's report revealed that female workers in the state's factories were paid about half what men earned for the same work. Working conditions were atrocious. The workers had to stand or sit for hours on end, often in environments with excessive noise, poor ventilation, unsanitary conditions, and lack of protective gear. Many factories qualified as firetraps—several stories high with overheated machinery and inadequate access to fire escapes.

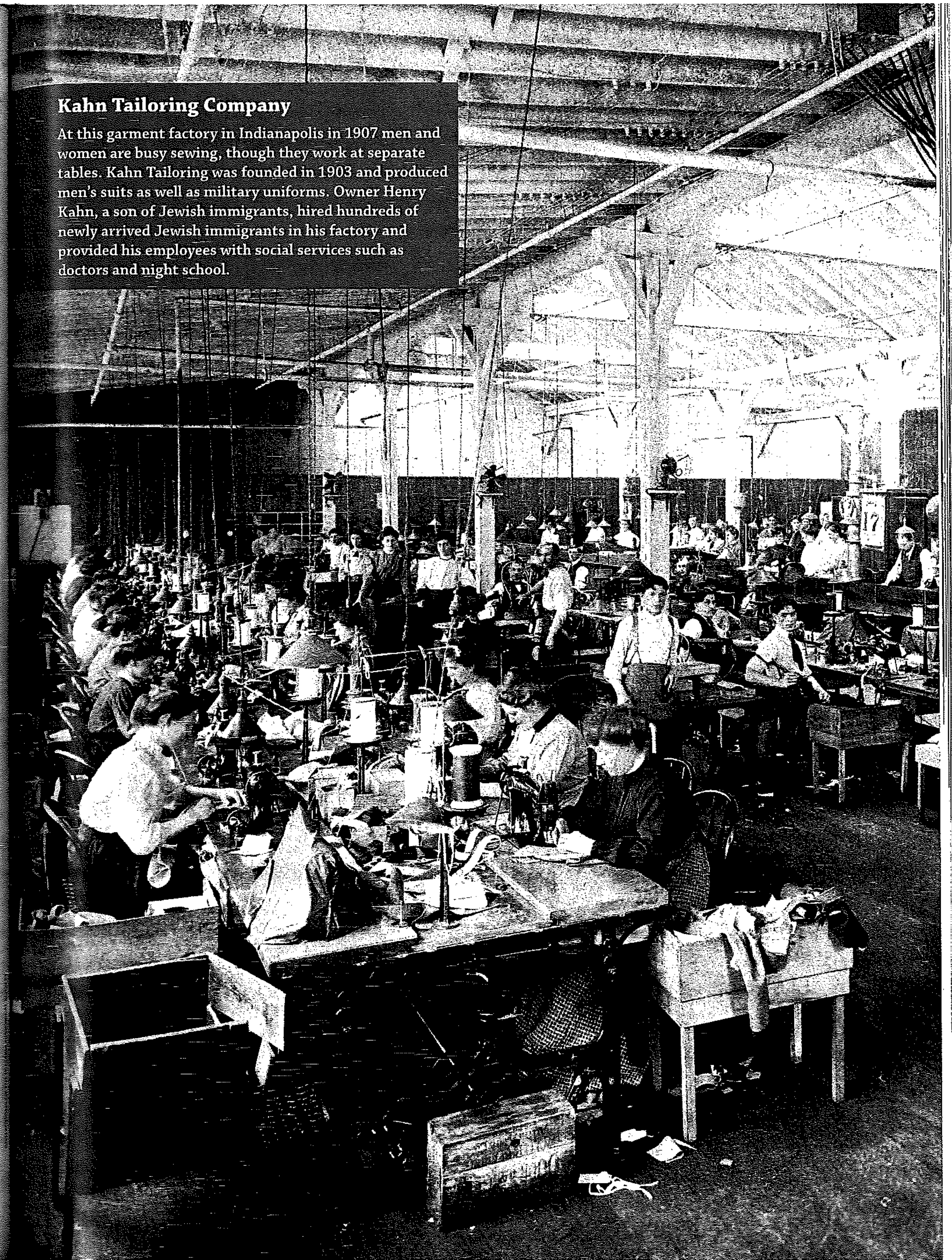
Most industrial states responded to the needs of women workers before Indiana. It wasn't until 1913 that the Indiana General Assembly initiated a study of women's work. Conducted by the Department of Labor, the study focused on garment factories and retail stores, where nearly half of the women who worked outside the home were employed. Despite the study's documentation of long hours, low pay, and generally poor working conditions, the resulting legislation called for only modest reform.

Child Labor

Cheap labor means child labor; consequently there results a holocaust of the children—a condition which is intolerable.

— *Dr. Felix Adler, first meeting of the National Child Labor Committee, 1904*

Children were also a huge part of Indiana's industrial workforce, especially in the glass industry, coal mining, furniture making, and fruit and vegetable canning. As early as 1867 the state legislature passed laws prohibiting persons under age sixteen from working more than ten hours a day in cotton or woolen mills. For the next thirty years, additional attempts at child labor regulation were few and far between.



Kahn Tailoring Company

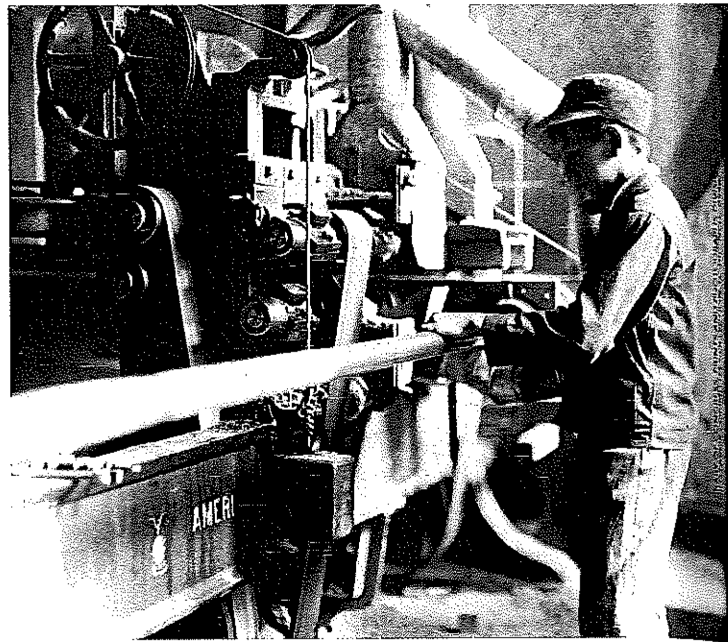
At this garment factory in Indianapolis in 1907 men and women are busy sewing, though they work at separate tables. Kahn Tailoring was founded in 1903 and produced men's suits as well as military uniforms. Owner Henry Kahn, a son of Jewish immigrants, hired hundreds of newly arrived Jewish immigrants in his factory and provided his employees with social services such as doctors and night school.

In 1897 the Indiana General Assembly passed two pieces of legislation that began to correct the situation. One law prohibited factory employment of children under the age of fourteen and stipulated that children under sixteen could work no more than ten hours a day. The legislature also passed the state's first compulsory school attendance law, requiring children between ages eight and fourteen to attend school for a minimum of twelve consecutive weeks each year.

However, the child labor laws were not well enforced. Some parents allowed their children to work at factories such as Muncie's Hemingray Glass Company, claiming that their families needed the children's wages. In 1904 Hemingray employed 150 workers under the age of sixteen. The owner vowed to fight "any attempt to pass a law prohibiting children under sixteen [from] working at night," since "it was better for them than running in the streets and did not hurt them anyway."

The most persuasive exposure of child labor conditions around the country came from the camera of Lewis Hine. In 1908 the National Child Labor Committee sent Hine to Indiana to photograph children working in factories. His powerful images of children working the night shift appeared in the *Indianapolis Star* and in reformers' reports. But, as Hine's colleague Edward Clopper pointed out, "The people of Indiana are slow to take hold of any movement."

A 1910 survey reported that Indiana ranked third highest for its proportion of child labor, below only Pennsylvania and Ohio. Only very gradually did state legislation address the worst abuses. In 1911 the general assembly passed a weak child labor bill. It extended the 1897 ban on employing children in factories under the age of fourteen to all other types of work except farming and domestic service. One exception to this ban was in the canning industry where children between twelve and fourteen were still allowed to work in the summer. It took another ten years (1921) for the general assembly to remove all industry exceptions, regulate which industries children could work in, and to set a rule that all workers between fourteen and sixteen had to have completed the eighth grade.



Lewis Hine Child Labor Photo

This Lewis Hine photograph from 1908 shows a boy taking boards away from a double cutoff machine, a type of saw in a woodwork factory in Peru, Indiana. As was typical of Hine's photographs, it shows a child involved in a dangerous task.

Eugene V. Debs and Workers Rights

And there's 'Gene Debs—a man 'at stands
And jes' holds out in his two hands
As warm a heart as ever beat
Betwixt here and the Jedgment Seat!

— *James Whitcomb Riley, "Regardin' Terry Hut" (1916)*

As the state government dragged its feet to improve working conditions, many workers decided to take matters into their own hands. During the 1850s and 1860s various trades attempted to form labor unions. After the Civil War several labor organizations joined forces to work for common goals, especially the eight-hour work day. Indiana's first widespread—and violent—labor action took place during the depression of the 1870s and involved striking coal miners, who shut down mining operations several times, particularly in Brazil in Clay County. The strikes were broken as management brought in black workers from the South, but armed clashes ensued and eventually, at least one black man was killed. The most important labor unrest involved the railroads, particularly in the great strike of 1877. As part of a national protest against reductions in pay, Indiana workers stopped trains in Evansville, Terre Haute, Indianapolis, and Fort Wayne.

Terre Haute's Eugene V. Debs (1855–1926) emerged as an iconic labor leader on the national stage in the early years of the twentieth century. Debs, who had worked on the railroad from the time he was fourteen, founded the American Railway Union in 1893. Within a year the organization had nearly 150,000 members. Debs gained national recognition and notoriety when he organized the Pullman Strike of 1894 in Chicago, which stopped all train movement west of Chicago as fifty thousand workers walked off the job because their pay had been cut by about 25 percent. His involvement in the strike earned him a six-month prison sentence on conspiracy charges. While in jail, Debs became a Socialist and his reputation as a working class hero grew. He ran for president five times as the Socialist Party's candidate. He even ran for president while serving his second prison term for an anti-war speech during WWI; he got more than 900,000 votes. Debs used his incarceration as an effective campaign strategy: his campaign buttons featured his convict number and his face behind bars.

Organize! Organize!

DIAMOND CHAIN WORKS EMPLOYES

MEN AND WOMEN

Now is the time to Organize

Jones & Lamson and Turrett Lathe operatives,
Screw Machine Operatives and Up-keep Men,
Milling Machine Operatives,
Punch Press Hands and Up-keep Men,
Operatives, operating, Chain assembling machines, and chain parts assembling machines, Chain spinning machines, Drilling machines, Countersinking machines, and all those employed in and around the Chain making industry.

Attend Big Open Meeting

LABOR TEMPLE, 138 W. Washington St.

Saturday Eve., Nov. 29, 8 o'clock

Your employer has grown enormously rich as a result of your faithful and profitable service rendered. He does not have to worry about the winter's fuel, nor the winter's clothing or the high cost of living. He has plenty of wealth that he has made off of your labor. Now, Mr. Working Man how are you fixed for the winter? Are you on easy street like your employer? Don't you find yourself, like all other working men and women, living from hand to mouth? And this after working hard and steady all year. These facts are true, you know they are, then now is the time to organize and improve your conditions. Join the ranks of organized labor, as it is only through organization that you can hope to improve your conditions. **Your employer is organized, why not you?**

GRIT YOUR TEETH AND ORGANIZE

By General Organizing Committee,

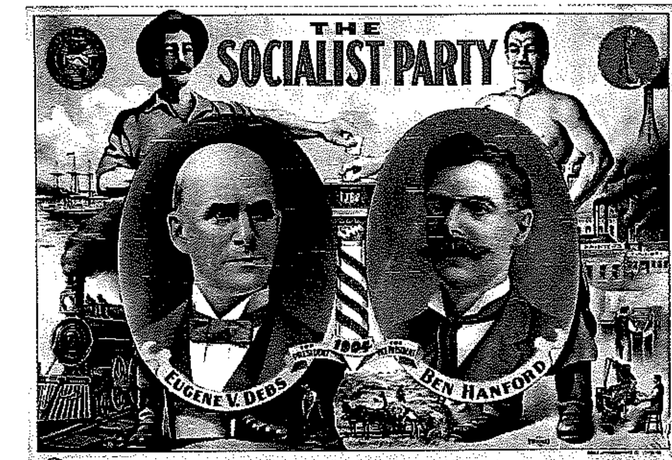
CAL WYATT
A. F. of L. Organizer, Chairman

L. A. BARTH
C. L. U. Sec'y.

GEO. SCHWAB
State Fed

COLLECTIONS OF THE INDIANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Debs's ideas were radical for his day, but many entered the mainstream in the decades following the Pullman Strike. He advocated shorter workweeks, pension (retirement) plans, sick leave, medical benefits, and women's suffrage. Most Hoosiers respected Debs, and residents of his hometown Terre Haute generally treated him affectionately even if they didn't agree with his leftist politics. Debs and his friend, noted Hoosier poet James Whitcomb Riley, who tended to stay out of politics, frequently enjoyed a glass of good whiskey together. Riley visited Debs so often that the guest bedroom in the Debs house is still referred to as "the Riley room."



COURTESY OF THE EUGENE V. DEBS FOUNDATION

Eugene V. Debs for President!

Eugene V. Debs ran for President of the United States a total of five times. This campaign poster is from his second campaign when he received just under 3 percent of the total vote and lost to Theodore Roosevelt. His campaign platform was based on workers' rights and opposition to capitalism. Today the Debs house at 451 North Eighth Street in Terre Haute belongs to the non-profit Eugene V. Debs Foundation and is open to the public. Each year the foundation hosts a banquet to honor an individual whose work advanced causes to which Debs dedicated his life—workers' rights, social justice, and world peace.

Diamond Chain Employees Unite!

In this 1913 flyer labor organizers call for employees of Indianapolis-based Diamond Chain Company, which manufactured bicycle chains, to organize into a union. Once in a union workers gained a voice at the negotiating table for safer working conditions, shorter work days and weeks, and better pay and benefits.