

# The Condition of the Working Class in England

Friedrich Engels

*To many contemporaries, child labor in factories and mines under harsh conditions was the most shocking change in working conditions brought on by industrialization. However, several investigators documented a whole range of problems facing England's industrial working class. One of the most famous of these investigators was Friedrich Engels (1820–1895), the son of a German textile manufacturer. Engels moved to England in the 1840s, where in addition to learning about business he traveled through cities visiting working-class areas and interviewing people. He would soon become a collaborator with his friend, Karl Marx, and one of the founders of modern socialism. The following excerpt is from the book that arose from his studies, The Condition of the Working Class in England, first published in 1845. Here Engels focuses on workers' living environment in England's industrial cities.*

*Consider: What Engels considers the worst health conditions facing the poor, Engels' analysis of how the environment affects the poor mentally as well as physically; how this description adds to the testimony before the commission on child labor (in a previous excerpt).*

The way in which the vast mass of the poor are treated by modern society is truly scandalous. They are herded into great cities where they breathe a fouler air than in the countryside which they have left. They are housed in the worst ventilated districts of the towns; they are deprived of all means of keeping clean. They are deprived of water because this is only brought to their houses if someone is prepared to defray the cost of laying the pipes. River water is so dirty as to be useless for cleansing purposes. The poor are forced to throw into the streets all their sweepings, garbage, dirty water, and frequently even disgusting filth and excrement. The poor are deprived of all proper means of refuse disposal and so they are forced to pollute the very districts they inhabit. And this is by no means all. There is no end to the sufferings which are heaped on the heads of the poor. It is notorious that general overcrowding is a characteristic feature of the great towns, but in the working-class quarters people are packed together in an exceptionally small area. Not satisfied with permitting the pollution of the air in the streets, society crams as many as a dozen workers into a single room, so that at night the air becomes so foul that they are nearly suffocated. The workers have to live in damp dwellings. When they live in cellars the water seeps through the floor and when they live in attics the rain comes through the roof. The workers' houses are so badly built that the foul air cannot escape from them. The workers have to wear poor and ragged garments and they have to eat food which is bad, indigestible and adulterated. Their mental state is threatened by being subjected alternately to extremes of hope and fear. They are goaded like wild beasts and never have a chance of enjoying a quiet life. They are deprived of all pleasures except sexual indulgence and intoxicating liquors. Every day they have to work until they are physically and mentally exhausted. This forces them to excessive indulgence in the only two pleasures remaining to them. If the workers manage to survive this sort of treatment it is only to fall victims to starvation when a slump occurs and they are deprived of the little that they once had.

How is it possible that the poorer classes can remain healthy and have a reasonable expectation of life under such conditions? What can one expect but that they should suffer from continual outbreaks of epidemics and an excessively low expectation of life? The physical condition of the workers shows a progressive deterioration.