The Garment District

New York City as the Fashion Capital · 1870–1910

GUIDING QUESTION

Who should have been held responsible for sweatshop conditions: the contractor, the manufacturer, the government, or the consumer?

Teacher notes

Objectives: students will be able to

- Place the chapter's key events, from 1880s to 1909, in order and explain why each mattered.
- Analyze 3 primary sources for context, audience, purpose, and point of view.
- Use the chapter's vocabulary accurately: Sweatshop, Piecework, Tenement, Subcontracting, General strike, ILGWU.
- Write an evidence-based argument that answers the guiding question.

AP U.S. History
Period 5 (1844–1877), Period 6 (1865–1898), Period 7 (1890–1945)

Standards

D2.His.1.9-12	Explain how events were shaped by their time and place and by broader historical contexts.
D2.His.4.9-12	Analyze the factors that shaped people's perspectives in different eras.
D2.His.10.9-12	Identify the limitations of different kinds of historical evidence.
D2.His.16.9-12	Integrate evidence from multiple sources into a reasoned argument about the past.
RH.9-10.1 / RH.11-12.1	Cite specific textual evidence from primary and secondary sources.
RH.9-10.4 / RH.11-12.4	Determine the meaning of words and phrases as used in historical texts.
RH.9-10.6 / RH.11-12.6	Compare and evaluate authors' points of view on the same events.
WHST.9-10.1 / WHST.11-12.1	Write arguments focused on discipline-specific content.

Pacing

Day 1 (50 minutes)

Day 2 (50 minutes)
5 min · Key terms matching

5 min · Before you read: guiding question and predictions
15 min · Reading and timeline
25 min · Primary source workshop (3 sources)
5 min · Exit ticket
20 min · Corroboration and discussion questions
25 min · Claim, evidence, reasoning paragraph

Teaching hard history

• Never use role-play or simulations of slavery, violence, or other atrocities. Ask students to analyze the testimony and documented choices of real people instead.

• Pair the voices of the people who did the work (enslaved people, children, strikers, immigrants) with the voices of those who profited, and ask whose records survived and why.

• Primary sources are reproduced word for word, including period language and dialect transcribed by interviewers. Before reading, discuss who recorded each source and for whom. Do not ask students to perform dialect aloud.

• Tell students before they see images of injured, captive, or dead people, and give them a way to step back.

• Distinguish what the sources show from what they cannot prove. Several stories in this exhibit correct popular myths; name the myth, then the evidence.

Guidance follows Learning for Justice, "Teaching Hard History: American Slavery" (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2018).

Answer key: key terms
Sweatshop: E · Piecework: B · Tenement: D · Subcontracting: C · General strike: A · ILGWU: F

PART 1

Before you read

1. Read the guiding question. Write down what you already know, or think you know, about it.
2. Predict one way your answer might change after reading the sources.

PART 2

Read

After the Civil War, the American apparel industry centered itself in New York City. The streets of Lower Manhattan became a hive of tenement sweatshops where Jewish and Italian immigrant labor fueled a booming fashion economy.

Jewish tailors from the Russian Pale and Italian seamstresses from southern Italy and Sicily brought needle skills to the Lower East Side. The industry organized around sub-contracting: a manufacturer bought and cut the fabric and handed bundles to a 'contractor,' who set up a shop in a crowded tenement apartment and paid piece rates to workers—often including members of his own family. As fashion magazines, department stores, and standardized sizes converged, New York emerged as the apparel capital of the Western Hemisphere, and the tenement sweatshop became its defining workplace.



"Knee Pants at Forty-Five Cents a Dozen"-a Ludlow Street sweatshop photographed by Jacob Riis. Jacob A. Riis, "Knee Pants at Forty-Five Cents a Dozen-A Ludlow Street Sweater's Shop," from "How the Other Half Lives" (1890). Public domain.

PART 3

Timeline

Students write one sentence on why each event mattered.

1880s — **Tenement Production Spreads**
Lower East Side apartments become 'sweating' workshops where families live and sew in the same cramped rooms.

1890 — **Jacob Riis Publishes 'How the Other Half Lives'**
Riis's flash photographs and reporting on tenement sweatshops bring the industry's conditions before a wide middle-class audience.

1900 — **The ILGWU Is Founded**
Eleven delegates representing about two thousand garment workers found the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union in New York.

1909 — **The Uprising of the 20,000**
Some twenty thousand shirtwaist makers, most of them young immigrant women, strike across New York—the largest strike by women in American history to that point.

PART 4

Key terms

Sweatshop (answer E)
A crowded, unsafe workplace where people work long hours for very low pay, often for a subcontractor called a "sweater."

Piecework (answer B)
A pay system in which workers earn a set amount for each item finished rather than an hourly wage.

Tenement (answer D)
A crowded, poorly built city apartment building, often used as both home and workshop.

Subcontracting (answer C)
When a company hires another business to do part of its work, often pushing costs and responsibility down to smaller shops.

General strike (answer A)
A strike in which workers across an entire industry or city stop work at the same time.

ILGWU (answer F)
The International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, founded in 1900, which became one of the largest unions in the country.

PART 5

Primary source workshop

These excerpts are quoted word for word, including the spelling and language of their time.

DOCUMENT A

How the Other Half Lives

Jacob A. Riis, 1890

> Up two flights of dark stairs, three, four, with new smells of cabbage, of onions, of frying fish, on every landing, whirring sewing machines behind closed doors betraying what goes on within, to the door that opens to admit the bundle and the man. A sweater, this, in a small way. Five men and a woman, two young girls, not fifteen, and a boy who says unasked that he is fifteen, and lies in saying it, are at the machines sewing knickerbockers, "knee-pants" in the Ludlow Street dialect. The floor is littered ankle-deep with half-sewn garments.

Context: Riis, a Danish-born police reporter, used words and flash photography to expose conditions in New York's Lower East Side tenements. His book shaped middle-class opinion and housing reform, though it also repeated ethnic stereotypes of the immigrants he described.

Source: Jacob A. Riis. How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York. Charles Scribner's Sons (via Project Gutenberg). 1890. https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/45502

Historical context
What was happening when and where this was created?

Intended audience
Who was meant to read, hear, or see it?

Purpose
Why was it created? What did its creator want to happen?

Point of view
Whose perspective does it show, and whose is missing?

DOCUMENT B

Life in the Shop

Clara Lemlich, November 28, 1909

> First let me tell you something about the way we work and what we are paid. There are two kinds of work—regular, that is salary work, and piecework. The regular work pays about $6 a week and the girls have to be at their machines at 7 o'clock in the morning and they stay at them until 8 o'clock at night, with just one-half hour for lunch in that time. ... Whenever we tear or damage any of the goods we sew on, or whenever it is found damaged after we are through with it, whether we have done it or not, we are charged for the piece and sometimes for a whole yard of the material.

Context: Lemlich published this account in the New York Evening Journal days after the shirtwaist makers' general strike began. It explains, in a worker's own words, why some 20,000 young, mostly immigrant women walked out in the "Uprising of the 20,000."

Source: Clara Lemlich. Life in the Shop, by Clara Lemlich (from Leon Stein, ed., Out of the Sweatshop, 1977). Kheel Center, Cornell University ILR School. 1909-. https://trianglefire.ilr.cornell.edu/primary/testimonials/ootss_ClaraLemlich.html

Historical context
What was happening when and where this was created?

Intended audience
Who was meant to read, hear, or see it?

Purpose
Why was it created? What did its creator want to happen?

Point of view
Whose perspective does it show, and whose is missing?

DOCUMENT C

Speech at Cooper Union

Clara Lemlich (as reported and translated from Yiddish), November 22, 1909

> I have no further patience for talk. I am a working girl, one of those striking against intolerable conditions. I am tired of listening to speakers who talk in generalities. ... I make a motion that we go out in a general strike.

Context: At a mass meeting of shirtwaist makers, Lemlich interrupted hours of speeches by labor leaders and called for a strike. The walkout that followed helped build the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union; versions of her words differ because reporters translated them.

Source: International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union. National Park Service. 1909-. https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/international-ladies-garment-workers-union.htm

Historical context
What was happening when and where this was created?

Intended audience
Who was meant to read, hear, or see it?

Purpose
Why was it created? What did its creator want to happen?

Point of view
Whose perspective does it show, and whose is missing?

Corroborate
Compare "How the Other Half Lives" (Jacob A. Riis, 1890) with "Life in the Shop" (Clara Lemlich, November 28, 1909). Where do they agree, where do they differ, and what might explain the differences?

PART 6

Discuss

1. List three specific workplace grievances Clara Lemlich describes in "Life in the Shop."
2. Riis was a reformer writing for middle-class readers; Lemlich was a 23-year-old striker writing for a mass-circulation newspaper. How do their purposes shape what each notices about the same kind of workplace?
3. Lemlich's Cooper Union speech was delivered in Yiddish and survives in several slightly different English versions. What does this tell historians about using speeches "as reported"?

4. U.S. Department of Labor investigators still find wage violations in Los Angeles and New York garment shops. Using Riis's description of layered subcontracting, explain why sweatshops persist and argue for one solution.

PART 7

Write: claim, evidence, reasoning

Answer the guiding question in one paragraph, using the documents and the reading.

Claim	Answers the guiding question directly in one or two sentences.
Evidence	Cites at least two primary sources by name and at least one fact from the reading.
Reasoning	Explains how each piece of evidence supports the claim.
Sourcing	Notes at least one limitation of a source: who made it, when, and why.

PART 8

Exit ticket

1. In one sentence, how would you answer the guiding question now?
2. What piece of evidence would most change your mind?

Keep exploring

LABOR

The Sweatshop System

Exploitation engineered into the architecture of the tenement.

https://www.threadingamerica.com/topics/sweatshop-system

MATERIAL CULTURE

Lewis Hine and the Camera as Indictment

A sociologist with a flash camera redefined documentary photography.

https://www.threadingamerica.com/topics/lewis-hine-photographs

BIOGRAPHY

The Uprising of the 20,000

The strike that built the ILGWU—and set the stage for Triangle.

https://www.threadingamerica.com/topics/uprising-of-20000

Places: New York, Pennsylvania, Alabama

SOURCES AND CREDITS

Jacob A. Riis. How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York. Charles Scribner's Sons. 1890

Sweatshops and Strikes before 1911. Kheel Center, Cornell University ILR School (Remembering the 1911 Triangle Factory Fire). https://trianglefire.ilr.cornell.edu/story/sweatshopsStrikes.html

History of Sweatshops: 1820–1880. Smithsonian National Museum of American History-. https://www.americanhistory.si.edu/explore/exhibitions/sweatshops/online/history/1820-1880

Image: Jacob A. Riis, "Knee Pants at Forty-Five Cents a Dozen-A Ludlow Street Sweater's Shop," from "How the Other Half Lives" (1890). Public domain.

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