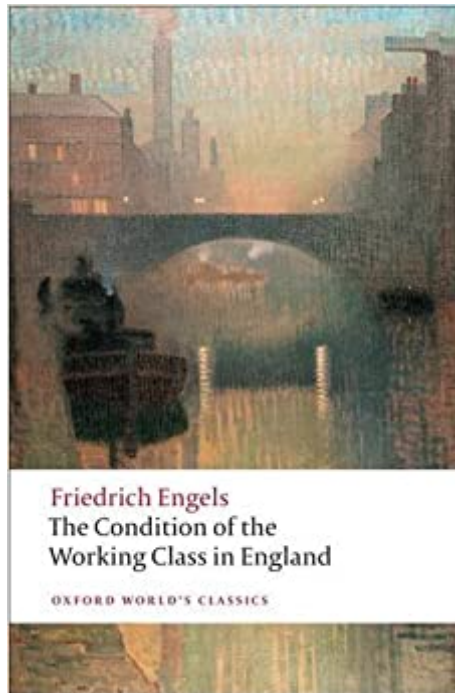


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# The Condition Of The Working Class In England (Oxford World's Classics)



## Synopsis

This, the first book written by Engels during his stay in Manchester from 1842 to 1844, is the best known and in many ways the most astute study of the working class in Victorian England. The fluency of his writing, the personal nature of his insights, and his talent for mordant satire all combine to make Engels's account of the lives of the victims of early industrial change an undeniable classic. About the Series: For over 100 years Oxford World's Classics has made available the broadest spectrum of literature from around the globe. Each affordable volume reflects Oxford's commitment to scholarship, providing the most accurate text plus a wealth of other valuable features, including expert introductions by leading authorities, voluminous notes to clarify the text, up-to-date bibliographies for further study, and much more.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"This is a very nicely-produced edition at a price practical for course use. David McClellan's introduction is clear and useful."--J. Boyden, Tulane University --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

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The natural price of labor is a concept used by 19th Century political economists as different as David Ricardo and Karl Marx. It refers to the minimum needed by wage laborers to survive and reproduce. It is a quantity that varies within narrow limits from person to person and place to place, but whatever its specific value, those who fall below the natural price do not survive. One way to read Friedrich Engels' classic *The Condition of the Working Class in England* is to take it as an exercise in finding out just how low the natural price can fall before the working class is threatened with extinction. Ironically, Engels wrote his book while working at his father's Manchester cotton mills from 1842 to 1844. Textile manufacturing, especially cotton, was then the backbone of Great Britain's industrial might. Engels, on occasion, actually worked side by side with those who labored in the cotton mills, and he visited them in their homes and wherever else they might gather, including churches, taverns, and rooming houses. While conditions were a bit worse among workers in agriculture and especially mining, the circumstance of those who worked in factories, such as those owned by Engels' wealthy bourgeois father, were unthinkably deplorable. For readers who have had their world view shaken by Katherine Boo's account of slum life in Mumbai, it may seem impossible that conditions were far worse among English laborers in 1844, but according to Engels' account, that was certainly the case. Slum life in Mumbai is relatively comfortable when compared with Manchester and other English cities and towns in 1844. Working sixteen hours a day and not infrequently even longer was commonplace for English laborers, with the meager compensation they received in exchange for their efforts varying with periodically changing economic conditions. Work places were hazardous, often lethally so, both with regard to the frequency of serious accidents and the closeted, polluted, and otherwise foul air breathed in unventilated buildings. In addition, discipline enforced by overseers hired for their uncompromising brutality, was harsh and arbitrary. Child labor, some as young as four or five, was commonplace, and women were subjected to the same destructive industrial regime as men. The work itself was typically tedious and repetitive, reducing men, women, and children to the status and condition of simple machines, until a machine was invented to do the same work even more cheaply. Then the workers were displaced, and thrown into the streets. As a result, starvation was not uncommon. All this is easy to report, though it's difficult to do so without sounding a bit histrionic. However, even more frightening and deplorable was the actual condition of the people who survived this way of working and the meager nutrition and barely livable places of habitation it provided. Engels describes them as stunted in growth, with narrow chests, underdeveloped physiques, gray skin, and deformities of the arms and legs whose particular nature was determined by the unnatural bodily positions and movements required by the tasks to which they were tied. Engels' descriptions are frightfully vivid and endorsed

by physicians and disinterested others, but most unexpected and compelling are the intellectual costs of wage labor. Most of us in any society have a common stock of knowledge, things we unself-consciously know, without giving it a moment's thought, and we assume that others know as well. In this regard, however, English laborers were stunningly deficient. Many knew little or nothing of the world outside the demands of the workplace, their grotesquely deficient homes, and perhaps a roadhouse where they purchased spirits. Many if the younger ones, teens as well as those we today might call tots, didn't know that there was any other way of life. Ask them if they're tired or hungry, and the blank stares elicited by the query bespoke lack of understanding. The Hell of the workplace and the damp, dirt-floored, unheated, unfurnished, unventilated discomfort of their homes was all they knew or could imagine. And as noted above, miners and agricultural workers were worse off still. Life was lived according to a Malthusian prescription: short, nasty, and diseased. Just when it seemed that the natural price of labor could be no lower, an economic crisis would occur, and wages, unemployment rates, and the abysmally inhuman circumstances of the working class would deteriorate still further. Nevertheless, enough survived and enough reproduced to keep laborers on the job, with members of the ominously threatening surplus labor pool waiting to take their places. Engels was convinced that circumstances such as these could not prevail indefinitely. Come the next economic crisis, or the one after that, and the more intelligent and worldly workers would lead the others in a violent revolution. In time, however, world political and economic relationships changed, the self-interested bourgeoisie may have recognized that its interests were best served by workers whose prospects included more than a short and miserable life, and government intervention became more effective. What followed was still remotely distant from a workers' paradise, but there was no violent revolution in England. First published in German, in the Preface to the English edition (1885) of *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, Engel's refers the reader to Marx's *Capital* for a thorough account of these developments. *The Condition of the Working Class in England* is not an unreliable, ideologically driven, Marxist polemic. It is a very well written piece of scholarship replete with documentation and reports of first-hand observations made by professionals and men of means who had no stake in contributing to a politicized fictional account of life among wage laborers. It is to Engels' credit that the book, while fairly long, is not redundant, citing the same outrages and abuses again and again. Engels keeps it interesting, enabling the reader to see the consequences of the economic savagery of the ostensibly civilized bourgeoisie. Engels acknowledges, moreover, that in a competitive capitalist economic environment, a war of all against all, survival as a bourgeois demanded unmitigated ruthlessness, whatever the consequences for the working class. The alternative was to eventually sink into the

working class one's self. As for the natural price of labor, I can't express its value in monetary terms, but it's certainly lower than I had ever imagined. In a world where those who don't die in infancy are old at thirty and dead at forty, and in the interim they are commodities unmercifully exploited by the bourgeoisie, the concept of the natural price of labor seems antiquated, misleading, and beside the point, which may explain why Engels didn't use it in this book. Perhaps those born dead were the lucky ones.

Before I say why I think this book deserves 5 stars, I just need to mention that I was quite shocked to see anti-Semitism, sexism and racism in the work of Frederick Engels. The author calls money loving people Jews, he says that house work is demeaning for a man and should only be left to women, and finally there are full pages that contain nothing but racism towards the Irish. With all that in mind, just imagine how good this book should be to deserve 5 stars. In this book we see Engels at his best. We see a man different from what popular culture portrays a mere side-kick of Marx. Engels is a magnificent writer and he delivers what he promises in the title. In great detail, he paints the picture of the working class in England in his days. He doesn't miss a thing yet you never get bored reading. Extremely opinionated, and with enough courage to prophesize about the future, Engels takes the reader on a journey that will surely stimulate the smallest of minds. This book is far from being outdated. Although a worker in England would claim that things have changed a lot, all he has to do is look across the globe to see what is happening to Asian workers in their countries and in countries that they immigrate to. Although the worker in England is not in the same condition as he/she was when this book was written, retail stores all over England are full of products produced by people that are living in the same conditions that were mentioned in this book. I am not a communist, but that doesn't mean that I am blind to the sufferings of workers in many countries. Engels backs everything he says with numbers, documents and interviews. I have never read a book that was as well researched as this one. We can clearly see by reading this book that Engels had intelligence, wit, confidence and, even though he would definitely object to this word, faith. His God was Historical Necessity and he shows unwavering faith to it. I recommend this book to everyone. The greatest benefit from reading this book is to meet the real Engels. Everything else is secondary.

This work is a powerful critique of the appalling poverty endured by industrial workers and their families during the early stages of the English Industrial Revolution. Engels was "Johnny-On-the-Spot", he made his living as a manager of one of the mid-lands factories and saw

first hand how workers fared. He writes with passionate indignation but supports his observations with numerous facts both statistical and empirical. A *crie d'coure* and an strong call to heed the needs of the poor. One cannot hope to grasp the Industrial Revolution and its political outgrowth without reference to Engels.

A bit of a tedious read, but worth the trouble. If you want to know how we got into the whole "employee vs. employer" tension, this would shed some light. Granted, Engels is writing from a pre-conceived notion that worker revolt is needed to change things. Fortunately, this didn't happen as both sides eventually realized they needed each other to succeed. Still, his detailed description of the poverty caused by England's Industrial Revolution is hard to dismiss. It shows that no system is above reform and improvement.

Follows in the footsteps of Mayhew's "London Labor and London Poor". Engels provides vivid description of urban poverty created by the Industrial Revolution, with an emphasis on class inequality.

He wrote this when he was 24 years old and when his father had sent him to UK to manage the family business there - so that the young radical got his mind off revolution and became a good bourgeois! Shows how often short-sighted parents are! But Engel's father deserves thanks from the world revolutionaries for sending his radical son off to the bitter heartland of 19th Century Industrial Revolution! Read it!

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