Excerpt from *Twenty Years at Hull House* by Jane Addams

Questions to think about

1. What were the goals of Jane Addams and the other women who worked in settlement houses?
2. How did Addams view immigrants?

*The Social Gospel in Action: Hull House*

from Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull House*, 1910

The clergymen who sought to establish a social Christianity were by no means the only Americans who were interested in bettering the living and working conditions of the American laboring classes. In the 1880's and 1890's many public-spirited Americans began to agitate for legislation regulating wages and working conditions, for better social services in slum-ridden cities, for protection of women and children from the excruciating hardships of factory labor, sweatshops, and tenement conditions, and for the establishment of charitable organizations to assist immigrants in making adjustments to the new society.

A pioneer in this work, and one of the most remarkable women in American history, was Jane Addams (1860-1935). Disgusted with the sterility of upper middle-class life in her native rural Illinois and disturbed by the slum conditions in the city of Chicago, she decided while on a trip to Europe in 1887-1888 to devote her life to the assistance of the urban lower classes. Becoming familiar with the English university settlement houses, Miss Addams determined to start such an institution in Chicago. The result in 1889 was Hull House, one of the first settlement houses in the United States. This institution was simply an old mansion—to which other buildings were eventually added—located in the middle of the Chicago slums, where Miss Addams lived together with other men and women who shared her desire to help the working classes. Determined not to be bossy but to work democratically with the immigrants among whom they lived, Miss Addams and her fellows did a little bit of everything: they helped immigrants to make and market their traditional handicrafts, collected statistics on urban conditions, and lobbied for factory and tenement regulatory codes at the state legislature. The crucial significance of Hull House in the history of American reform was that it provided a new, more democratic alternative to the traditional humanitarian method of paternalistic almsgiving.

This selection from her autobiographical account, *Twenty Years at Hull House*, gives a good example of the way in which many Americans of the late nineteenth century, becoming aware of bad social conditions, sought new legislation to correct these flaws.

Our very first Christmas at Hull-House, when we as yet knew nothing of child labor, a number of little girls refused the candy which was offered them as part of the Christmas good cheer, saying simply that they "worked in a candy factory and could not bear the sight of it." We discovered that for six weeks they had worked from seven in the morning until nine at night, and they were exhausted as well as satiated. The sharp consciousness of stern economic conditions was thus thrust upon us in the midst of the season of good will.

During the same winter three boys from Hull-House club were injured at one machine in a neighboring factory for lack of a guard which would have cost but a few dollars. When the jury of one of these boys resulted in his death, we felt quite sure that the owners of the factory would share our horror and remorse, and that they would do everything possible to prevent the recurrence of such a tragedy. To our surprise they did nothing whatever, and I made my first acquaintance then with those pathetic documents signed by the parents of working children, that they will make no claim for damages resulting from "carelessness."

The visits we made in the neighborhood constantly discovered women sewing upon sweatshop...
work, and often they were assisted by incredibly small children. I remember a little girl of four who pulled out basting threads hour after hour, sitting on a stool at the feet of her Bohemian mother, a little bunch of human misery. But even for that there was no legal redress, for the only child labor law in Illinois, with any provision for enforcement, had been secured by the coal miners’ unions, and was confined to children employed in mines.

We learned to know many families in which the working children contributed to the support of their parents, not only because they spoke English better than the older immigrants and were willing to take lower wages, but because their parents gradually found it easy to live upon their earnings. A South Italian peasant who has picked olives and packed oranges from his toddler’s babyhood, cannot see at once the difference between the outdoor healthy work which he has performed in the varying seasons, and the long hours of monotonous factory life which his child encounters when he goes to work in Chicago. An Italian father came to us in great grief over the death of his eldest child, a little girl of twelve, who had brought the largest wages into the family fund. In the midst of his genuine sorrow he said: “She was the oldest kid I had. Now I shall have to go back to work again until the next one is able to take care of me.” The man was only thirty-three and had hoped to retire from work at least during the winters. No foreman cared to have him in a factory, untrained and unintelligent as he was. It was much easier for his bright, English-speaking little girl to get a chance to paste labels on a box than for him to secure an opportunity to carry pig iron. The effect on the child was what no one concerned thought about, in the abnormal effort she made thus prematurely to bear the weight of life. Another little girl of thirteen, a Russian-Jewish child employed in a laundry at a heavy task beyond her strength, committed suicide, because she had borrowed three dollars from a companion which she could not repay unless she confined the story to her parents and gave up an entire week’s wages—but what could the family live upon that week in case she did! Her child mind, of course, had no sense of proportion, and carbolic acid appeared inevitable.

While we found many pathetic cases of child labor and hard-driven victims of the sweating system who could not possibly earn enough in the short busy season to support themselves during the rest of the year, it became evident that we must add carefully collected information to our general impression of neighborhood conditions if we would make it of any genuine value.

There was at that time no statistical information on Chicago industrial conditions, and Mrs. Florence Kelley, an early resident of Hull-House, suggested to the Illinois State Bureau of Labor that they investigate the sweating system in Chicago with its attendant child labor. The head of the Bureau adopted this suggestion and engaged Mrs. Kelley to make the investigation. When the report was presented to the Illinois Legislature, a special committee was appointed to look into the Chicago conditions. I well recall that on the Sunday the members of this commission came to dine at Hull-House, our hopes ran high, and we believed that at last some of the worst ills under which our neighbors were suffering would be brought to an end.

As a result of its investigations, this committee recommended to the Legislature the provisions which afterwards became those of the first factory law of Illinois, regulating the sanitary conditions of the sweatshop and fixing fourteen as the age at which a child might be employed. Before the passage of the law could be secured, it was necessary to appeal to all elements of the community, and a little group of us addressed the open meetings of trades-unions and of benefit societies, church organizations, and social clubs literally every evening for three months. Of course the most energetic help as well as intelligent understanding came from the trades-unions. The central labor body of Chicago, then called the Trades and Labor Assembly, had previously appointed a committee of investigation to inquire into the sweating system. This committee consisted of five delegates from the unions and five outside their membership. Two of the latter were residents of Hull-House, and continued with the unions in their well-conducted campaign until the passage of Illinois’s first Factory Legislation was secured, a statute which has gradually been built upon by many public-spirited citizens until Illinois stands well among the States, at least in the matter of protecting her children. The Hull-House residents that winter had their first experience in lobbying. I remember that I very much disliked the word and still more the prospect of the lobbying itself, and we insisted that well-known Chicago women should accompany this first little group of Settlement folk who with trade-unionists moved upon the state capitol in behalf of factory legislation. The national or, to use its formal name, The General Federation of Woman’s Clubs had been organized in Chicago only the year before this legislation was secured. The Federation was then timid in regard to all legislation because it was anxious not to frighten its new membership, although its
second president, Mrs. Henrotin, was most un-
tiring in her efforts to secure this law.

It was, perhaps, a premature effort, though
certainly founded upon a genuine need, to urge
that a clause limiting the hours of all women
working in factories or workshops to eight a day,
or forty-eight a week, should be inserted in the
first factory legislation of the State. Although we
had lived at Hull-House but three years when we
urged this legislation, we had known a large
number of young girls who were constantly ex-
hausted by night work; for whatever may be said
in defense of night work for men, few women
are able to endure it. A man who works by night
sleeps regularly by day, but a woman finds it
impossible to put aside the household duties
which crowd upon her, and a conscientious girl
finds it hard to sleep with her mother washing
and scrubbing within a few feet of her bed. One
of the most painful impressions of those first
years is that of pale, listless girls, who worked
regularly in a factory of the vicinity which was
then running full night time. These girls also
encountered a special danger in the early morn-
ing hours as they returned from work, debilitated
and exhausted, and only too easily convinced
that a drink and a little dancing at the end of the
balls in the saloon dance halls, was what they
needed to brace them. One of the girls whom we
then knew, whose name, Chloe, seemed to fit
her delicate charm, craving a drink to dispel her
lassitude before her tired feet should take the
long walk home, had thus been decoyed into a
saloon, where the soft drink was followed by an
alcoholic one containing "knockout drops," and
she awoke in a disreputable rooming house—too
frightened and disgraced to return to her mother.

Thus confronted by that old conundrum of the
interdependence of matter and spirit, the convic-
tion was forced upon us that long and exhausting
hours of work are almost sure to be followed by
lurid and exciting pleasures; that the power to
overcome temptation reaches its limit almost auto-
matically with that of physical resistance. The
eight-hour clause in this first factory law met
with much less opposition in the Legislature
than was anticipated, and was enforced for a year
before it was pronounced unconstitutional by the
Supreme Court of Illinois. During the halcyon
months when it was a law, a large and enthusiastic
Eight-Hour Club of working women met at Hull-
House, to rend the literature on the subject and
in every way to prepare themselves to make public
sentiment in favor of the measure which meant
so much to them. The adverse decision in the
test case, the progress of which they had most
intelligently followed, was a matter of great dis-
appointment. The entire experience left on my
mind a distrust of all legislation which was not
preceded by full discussion and understanding.
A premature measure may be carried through a
legislature by perfectly legitimate means and still
fail to possess vitality and a sense of maturity.
On the other hand, the administration of an
advanced law acts somewhat as a referendum.
The people have an opportunity for two years
to see the effects of its operation. If they choose
to reopen the matter at the next General As-
sembly, it can be discussed with experience and
conviction; the very operation of the law has
performed the function of the "referendum" in a
limited use of the term.

Founded upon some such compunction, the
sense that the passage of the child labor law
would in many cases work hardship, was never
absent from my mind during the earliest years
of its operation. I addressed as many mothers'
meetings and clubs among working women as
I could, in order to make clear the object of the
law and the ultimate benefit to themselves as
well as to their children. I am happy to remember
that I never met with lack of understanding among
the hard-working widows, in whose behalf many
prosperous people were so eloquent. These wid-
owed mothers would say, "Why, of course, that
is what I am working for,—to give the children a
chance. I want them to have more education than I
had"; or another, "That is why we came to America,
and I don't want to spoil his start, even although
his father is dead"; or, "It's different in America.
A boy gets left if he isn't educated." There was
always a willingness, even among the poorest
women, to keep on with the hard night scrubbing
or the long days of washing for the children's sake.

The bitterest opposition to the law came from
the large glass companies who were so accustomed
to use the labor of children, that they were con-
vinced the manufacturing of glass could not be

carried on without it.

Fifteen years ago the State of Illinois, as well
as Chicago, exhibited many characteristics of the
pioneer country in which untrammelled energy
and an "early start" were still the most highly
prized generators of success. Although this first
labor legislation was but bringing Illinois into
line with the nations in the modern industrial
world, which "have long been obliged for their
own sakes to come to the aid of the workers by
which they live,—that the child, the young person
and the woman may be protected from their own
weakness and necessity,—" nevertheless from the
first it ran counter to the instinct and tradition, al-
most to the very religion of the manufacturers of the
state, who were for the most part self-made men.