The Progressive Era 1897-1914

The word "progressive" comes from the word "progress," which means gradually making something better. The Progressive Era was a time of great reform. It was led by people called progressives, who worked to improve every area of modern life. Progressives were individuals who were interested in social and political reform, not revolution. They were mainly middle-class, educated, Protestant white people. They used efficiency, honesty, and practical knowledge to solve public issues. The underlying idea of the time was that the government could and should act to address social and economic issues. They had great concern for the poor and the working class.

During this time, laws were passed that helped regulate working conditions in factories, and groups called unions formed to ensure that fair wages would be paid by industries. Before the Progressive Era, it was legal for children to work factory jobs just like adults. Child labor became one of the most important causes during the Progressive Era.

In 1890, the U.S. census showed that one million children ages ten to fifteen had a job. By 1910, that number had doubled. Some factories hired children as young as five or six years old! Children were expected to work their industrial jobs just like adults, often working as many as sixteen to eighteen hours a day.

Many companies preferred employing children because they were easier to train and willing to work for lower wages than adults. Progressive Era reformers, with the allies of presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, felt that these working conditions were especially harmful for children. Reformers sought ways to legally protect the nation's children and did so.

Although child labor reform would continue after the Progressive Era, by 1920, the number of working children ages ten to fifteen was cut in half. Decades passed before child labor became illegal in the United States. The Progressive Era began to draw to a close when America entered World War I.

Who Was President during the Progressive Era?

Year(s)	President	Political Party	Influence
1896; 1900	William McKinley	Republican	Made decisions that enabled America to be a superpower; expanded the influence of the executive office; assassinated in 1901
1901; 1904	Theodore Roosevelt	Republican	Enduring legacy of land preservation; started national park system
1908	William Taft	Republican	Served as president and as chief justice of the Supreme Court
1912; 1916	Woodrow Wilson	Democratic	Strong foreign policy and domestic reforms; developed a program of progressive reform
1920	Warren G. Harding	Republican	Worked for tariff and tax revisions