

**Primary Source
Document
Analysis**

Living Wage

Historical Context: During the Gilded Age, the average laborer was expected to work 12 to 14 hours a day, 6 days a week for about \$0.10 an hour (\$2.51 today - this figure was generated accounting for inflation). The wages were barely enough to live; meanwhile, robber barons such as Cornelius Vanderbilt amassed wealth that was record setting.

Directions: Read the excerpt of the primary source below and answer the analysis questions that follow.

“A man’s **natural rights** are as many and as extensive as are the **liberties**, opportunities, and possessions that are required for the reasonable maintenance and development of his personality...Some of them, for instance the right to live and the right to marry, are original and primary, **inhering** in all persons of whatever condition; others are **derived** and secondary, occasioned and determined by the particular circumstances of particular persons. To the second class belongs the right to a living wage. It is not an original and universal right; for the receiving of wages supposes that form of **industrial** organization known as the wage system, which has not always existed and is not essential to human **welfare**.....The right to a living wage is evidently a derived right which is measured and determined by existing social and industrial institutions....

So much for the right to **subsistence**, to a bare livelihood. By a decent livelihood is meant that amount of the necessities and comforts of life that is in keeping with the dignity of a human being. It has not precise relation to the conventional standard of living that may **prevail** within any social or industrial class, but describes rather that minimum of conditions which the average person of a given age or gender must enjoy in order to live as a human being should live...in a reasonable degree of comfort...He must have food, clothing and shelter...

The obligation of providing the **laborer** with a Living Wage...rests upon the State...Negatively, liberty is the absence of restraint; positively, it is the power to act and enjoy...the absence of State intervention means the presence of **insuperable** obstacles to real and effective liberty...Such legislation would secure a wider measure of freedom in larger economic opportunity....the State has both the right and duty to compel all employers to pay a Living Wage.”

Source: Rev. John A. Ryan - A Living Wage: Its Ethical and Economic Aspects (New York, 1912) pp 67 - 73, 297 - 301

Vocabulary

- Liberties: freedom over choices to make for oneself
- Inhering: exist within (permanent)
- Derived: acquired, gained, not just given to you
- Industrial: related to business, commercial production, trade
- Wage: payment for labor
- Subsistence: maintenance
- Prevail: overcome
- Laborer: someone who works at physical work for a living (coal miner, railroad worker), workman
- Insuperable: difficult to overcome

Analysis Questions:

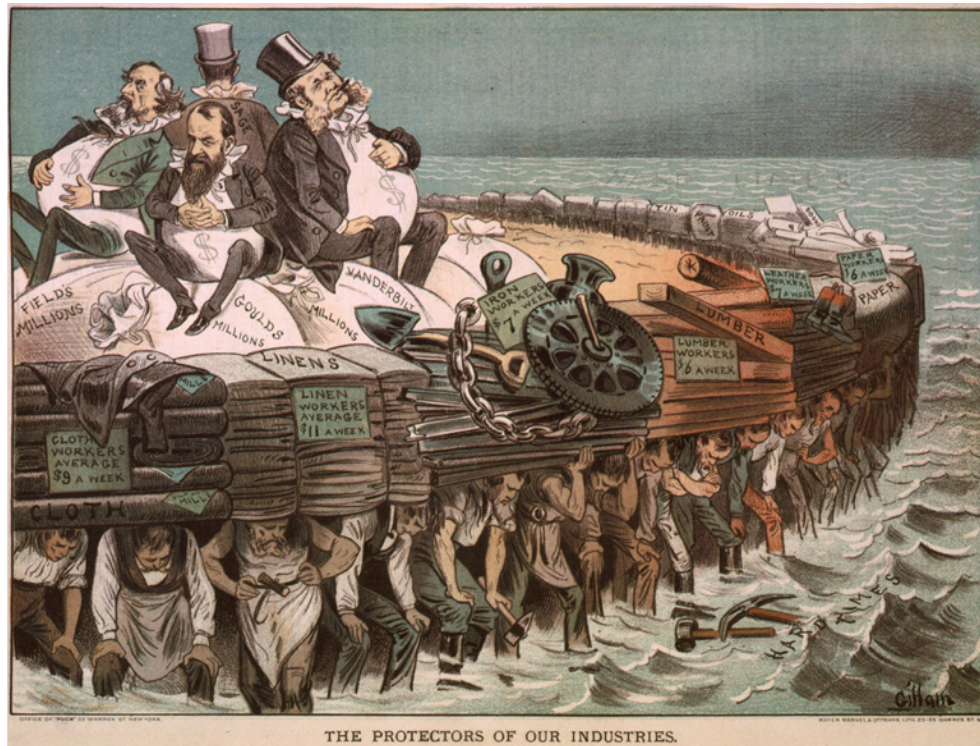
1. According to Rev. John A. Ryan, is the living wage a primary or secondary natural right?
 - a. Do you agree with him?

2. What does the following quote from the excerpt mean?

“By a decent livelihood is meant that amount of the necessities and comforts of life that is in keeping with the dignity of a human being. It has not precise relation to the conventional standard of living that might prevail within any social or industrial class, but describes rather that minimum of conditions which the average person of a given age or gender must enjoy in order to live as a human being should live....in a reasonable degree of comfort...he must have food, clothing, and shelter”

- a. Do you agree - should a minimum or a living wage provide you with what Rev. John A. Ryan has listed above?
3. Who does Rev. Ryan believe has to provide the laborer with a living wage: industrialists & industry, or the state?
 - a. Do you think conservatives at the time agreed with him? Why or why not?
 - b. Do you think robber barons of the Gilded Age agreed with him? Why or why not?
 - c. Do you think progressives at the time agreed with him? Why or why not?

4. Closely examine this political cartoon which was drawn in 1883. Based on this image, and the information provided in the historical context, what do you think motivated Rev. John A. Ryan to suggest a living wage?



5. Watch [this video clip](#) [from 0:00 - 5:00] of Senator Bernie Sanders (Vermont) arguing for a raise in the minimum wage in 2013.
- Is the economic situation in 2013 similar or different to the economic situation during the Gilded Age, when Rev. Ryan was arguing for a minimum wage? Cite specific evidence to support your claims.
 - What is Senator Sanders arguing for? What is the current minimum wage, how much does he want?