**Excerpt from Conditions of the Working Class by Friedrich Engels**

***Friedrich Engels****, (born Nov. 28, 1820, Barmen, Rhine province, Prussia [Germany]—died Aug. 5, 1895, London, Eng.), German socialist philosopher, the closest collaborator of Karl Marx in the foundation of modern communism. They coauthored*The Communist Manifesto*(1848), and Engels edited the second and third volumes of*Das Kapital*after Marx’s death. Engels grew up in the*[*environment*](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/environment)*of a family marked by moderately liberal political views, a steadfast loyalty to Prussia, and a pronounced Protestant faith. His father was the owner of a textile factory in Barmen and also a partner in the Ermen & Engels cotton plant in Manchester, Eng. Even after Engels openly pursued the revolutionary goals that threatened the traditional values of the family, he usually could count on financial aid from home. The influence of his mother, to whom he was devoted, may have been a factor in preserving the tie between father and son.*

A town, such as London, where a man may wander for hours together without reaching the beginning of the end, without meeting the slightest hint which could lead to the inference that there is open country within reach, is a strange thing. This colossal centralisation, this heaping together of two and a half millions of human beings at one point, has multiplied the power of this two and a half millions a hundredfold; has raised London to the commercial capital of the world, created the giant docks and assembled the thousand vessels that continually cover the Thames. I know nothing more imposing than the view which the Thames offers during the ascent from the sea to London Bridge. The masses of buildings, the wharves on both sides, especially from Woolwich upwards, the countless ships along both shores, crowding ever closer and closer together, until, at last, only a narrow passage remains in the middle of the river, a passage through which hundreds of steamers shoot by one another; all this is so vast, so impressive, that a man cannot collect himself, but is lost in the marvel of England’s greatness before he sets foot upon English soil.xvi But the sacrifices which all this has cost become apparent later. After roaming the streets of the capital a day or two, making headway with difficulty through the human turmoil and the endless lines of vehicles, after visiting the slums of the metropolis, one realises for the first time that these Londoners have been forced to sacrifice the best qualities of their human nature, to bring to pass all the marvels of civilisation which crowd their city; that a hundred powers which slumbered within them have remained inactive, have been suppressed in order that a few might be developed more fully and multiply through union with those of others. The very turmoil of the streets has something repulsive, something against which human nature rebels. The hundreds of thousands of all classes and ranks crowding past each other, are they not all human beings with the same qualities and powers, and with the same interest in being happy? And have they not, in the end, to seek happiness in the same way, by the same means? And still they crowd by one another as though they had nothing in common, nothing to do with one another, and their only agreement is the tacit one, that each keep to his own side of the pavement, so as not to delay the opposing streams of the crowd, while it occurs to no man to honour another with so much as a glance. The brutal indifference, the unfeeling isolation of each in his private interest, becomes the more repellent and offensive, the more these individuals are crowded together, within a limited space. And, however much one may be aware that this isolation of the individual, this narrow selfseeking, is the fundamental principle of our society everywhere, it is nowhere so shamelessly barefaced, so self-conscious as just here in the crowding of the great city. The dissolution of mankind into monads, of which each one has a separate principle, the world of atoms, is here carried out to its utmost extreme. Hence it comes, too, that the social war, the war of each against all, is here openly declared. Just as in Stirner’s recent book [The Ego and Its Own], people regard each other only as useful objects; each exploits the other, and the end of it all is that the stronger treads the weaker under foot; and that the powerful few, the capitalists, seize everything for themselves, while to the weak many, the poor, scarcely a bare existence remains. What is true of London, is true of Manchester, Birmingham, Leeds, is true of all great towns. Everywhere barbarous indifference, hard egotism on one hand, and nameless misery on the other, everywhere social warfare, every man’s house in a state of siege, everywhere reciprocal plundering under the protection of the law, and all so shameless, so openly avowed that one shrinks before the consequences of our social state as they manifest themselves here undisguised, and can only wonder that the whole crazy fabric still hangs together. Since capital, the direct or indirect control of the means of subsistence and production, is the weapon with which this social warfare is carried on, it is clear that all the disadvantages of such a state must fall upon the poor. For him no man has the slightest concern. Cast into the whirlpool, he must struggle through as well as he can. If he is so happy as to find work, i.e., if the bourgeoisie does him the favour to enrich itself by means of him, wages await him which scarcely suffice to keep body and soul together; if he can get no work he may steal, if he is not afraid of the police, or starve, in which case the police will take care that he does so in a quiet and inoffensive manner. During my residence in England, at least twenty or thirty persons have died of simple starvation under the most revolting circumstances, and a jury has rarely been found possessed of the courage to speak the plain truth in the matter. Let the testimony of the witnesses be never so clear and unequivocal, the bourgeoisie, from which the jury is selected, always finds some backdoor through which to escape the frightful verdict, death from starvation. The bourgeoisie dare not speak the truth in these cases, for it would speak its own condemnation. But indirectly, far more than directly, many have died of starvation, where long-continued want of proper nourishment has called forth fatal illness, when it has produced such debility that causes which might otherwise have remained inoperative brought on severe illness and death. The English working-men call this “social murder”, and accuse our whole society of perpetrating this crime perpetually. Are they wrong? True, it is only individuals who starve, but what security has the working-man that it may not be his turn tomorrow? Who assures him employment, who vouches for it that, if for any reason or no reason his lord and master discharges him tomorrow, he can struggle along with those dependent upon him, until he may find some one else “to give him bread”? Who guarantees that willingness to work shall suffice to obtain work, that uprightness, industry, thrift, and the rest of the virtues recommended by the bourgeoisie, are really his road to happiness? No one. He knows that he has something today and that it does not depend upon himself whether he shall have something tomorrow. He knows that every breeze that blows, every whim of his employer, every bad turn of trade may hurl him back into the fierce whirlpool from which he has temporarily saved himself, and in which it is hard and often impossible to keep his head above water. He knows that, though he may have the means of living today, it is very uncertain whether he shall tomorrow. Meanwhile, let us proceed to a more detailed investigation of the position in which the social war has placed the non-possessing class. Let us see what pay for his work society does give the working-man in the form of dwelling, clothing, food, what sort of subsistence it grants those who contribute most to the maintenance of society; and, first, let us consider the dwellings. Every great city has one or more slums, where the working-class is crowded together. True, poverty often dwells in hidden alleys close to the palaces of the rich; but, in general, a separate territory has been assigned to it, where, removed from the sight of the happier classes, it may struggle along as it can. These slums are pretty equally arranged in all the great towns of England, the worst houses in the worst quarters of the towns; usually one- or two-storied cottages in long rows, perhaps with cellars used as dwellings, almost always irregularly built. These houses of three or four rooms and a kitchens form, throughout England, some parts of London excepted, the general dwellings of the working-class. The streets are generally unpaved, rough, dirty, filled with vegetable and animal refuse, without sewers or gutters, but supplied with foul, stagnant pools instead. Moreover, ventilation is impeded by the bad, confused method of building of the whole quarter, and since many human beings here live crowded into a small space, the atmosphere that prevails in these working-men’s quarters may readily be imagined. Further, the streets serve as drying grounds in fine weather; lines are stretched across from house to house, and hung with wet clothing. Let us investigate some of the slums in their order. London comes first,xvii and in London the famous rookery of St. Giles which is now, at last, about to be penetrated by a couple of broad streets. St. Giles is in the midst of the most populous part of the town, surrounded by broad, splendid avenues in which the gay world of London idles about, in the immediate neighbourhood of Oxford Street, Regent Street, of Trafalgar Square and the Strand. It is a disorderly collection of tall, three- or four-storied houses, with narrow, crooked, filthy streets, in which there is quite as much life as in the great thoroughfares of the town, except that, here, people of the working-class only are to be seen. A vegetable market is held in the street, baskets with vegetables and fruits, naturally all bad and hardly fit to use obstruct the sidewalk still further, and from these, as well as from the fish-dealers’ stalls, arises a horrible smell. The houses are occupied from cellar to garret, filthy within and without, and their appearance is such that no human being could possibly wish to live in them. But all this is nothing in comparison with the dwellings in the narrow courts and alleys between the streets, entered by covered passages between the houses, in which the filth and tottering ruin surpass all description. Scarcely a whole window-pane can be found, the walls are crumbling, door-posts and window-frames loose and broken, doors of old boards nailed together, or altogether wanting in this thieves’ quarter, where no doors are needed, there being nothing to steal. Heaps of garbage and ashes lie in all directions, and the foul liquids emptied before the doors gather in stinking pools. Here live the poorest of the poor, the worst paid workers with thieves and the victims of prostitution indiscriminately huddled together, the majority Irish, or of Irish extraction, and those who have not yet sunk in the whirlpool of moral ruin which surrounds them, sinking daily deeper, losing daily more and more of their power to resist the demoralising influence of want, filth, and evil surroundings.

The great manufacturing district in the centre of the British Islands, the thickly peopled stretch of West Yorkshire and South Lancashire, with its numerous factory towns, yields nothing to the other great manufacturing centres. The wool district of the West Riding of Yorkshire is a charming region, a beautiful green hill country, whose elevations grow more rugged towards the west until they reach their highest point in the bold ridge of Blackstone Edge, the watershed between the Irish Sea and the German Ocean, The valleys of the Aire, along which stretches Leeds, and of the Calder, through which the Manchester-Leeds railway runs, are among the most attractive in England, and are strewn in all directions with the factories, villages, and towns. The houses of rough grey stone look so neat and clean in comparison with the blackened brick buildings of Lancashire, that it is a pleasure to look at them. But on coming into the towns themselves, one finds little to rejoice over. Leeds lies, as the Artisandescribes it, and as I found confirmed upon examination: “on a slope running down towards the river Aire, which meanders about a-mile-and-a-half through the town, and is liable to overflows during thaws or after heavy rains. The higher or western districts are clean for so large a town, but the lower parts contiguous to the river and its becks or rivulets are dirty, confined, and, in themselves, sufficient to shorten life, especially infant life; add to this the disgusting state of the lower parts of the town about Kirk-gate. March-lane, Cross-street and Richmond-road, principally owing to a general want of paving and draining, irregularity of building, the abundance of courts and blind alleys, as well as the almost total absence of the commonest means for promoting cleanliness, and we have then quite sufficient data to account for the surplus mortality in these unhappy regions of filth and misery.... In consequence of the floods from the Aire” (which, it must be added, like all other rivers in the service of manufacture, flows into the city at one end clear and transparent, and flows out at the other end thick, black, and foul, smelling of all possible refuse),”the dwelling-houses and cellars are not infrequently so inundated that the water has to be pumped out by hand-pumps, on to the surface of the streets; and at such times, even where there are sewers, the water rises through them into the cellars,xxii creating miasmatic exhalations, strongly charged with sulphuretted hydrogen, and leaving offensive refuse, exceedingly prejudicial to human health. Indeed, during a season of inundation in the spring of 1859, so fatal were the effects of such an engorgement of the sewers, that the registrar of the North district made a report, that during that quarter there were, in that neighbourhood, two births to three deaths, whilst in all the other districts there were three to two deaths. Other populous districts are wholly without sewers, or so inadequately provided as to derive no advantage therefrom.” In some rows of houses, the cellar dwellings are seldom dry”; in certain districts there are several streets covered with soft mud a foot deep.” The inhabitants have from time to time vainly attempted to repair these streets with shovelfuls of ashes; and soil, refuse-water, etc., stand in every hole, there to remain until absorbed by wind or sun.... An ordinary cottage, in Leeds, extends over no more than about five yards square, and consists usually of a cellar, a sitting-room, and a sleeping chamber. This small size of the houses crammed with human beings both day and night, is another point dangerous alike to the morals and the health of the inhabitants.”