Progressive Reformers: Jacob Riis And Florence Kelley

After America changed during the Industrial Revolution and Reconstruction, it entered a new era called the Gilded Age. The Gilded Age took place from the late 1860s to 1896. This time period transformed the economy, technology, government, and social customs of America. During this era, the wealthy endowed private money to thousands of colleges, hospitals, museums, schools, public libraries, and charities. The term “Gilded Age” was coined by Mark Twain, an author of the Progressive Age because, like gilded objects, the time period appeared to be better than it actually was. This proved to be true, as industrialists who had made great fortunes led glittering lives, but in reality, this period was marked by child labor, poverty, corrupt business practices, political corruption, and much more. Many people took it upon themselves to fix these problems. These men and women were known as Progressive Reformers. These reformers created the Progressive era which was a movement of widespread social activism and political reform across the United States. The main goals of the Progressive movement were to eliminate the problems caused by industrialization, urbanization, immigration, and political corruption. Two Reformers who focused on bringing light to the horrors of child labor were Jacob Riis and Florence Kelley. Both Riis and Kelley had similarities and differences in how they attempted to resolve child labor.

Soon after America’s dramatic change after the Industrial Revolution, child labor became an inexpensive, and popular resource for large companies. During Industrialization, child labor was a large issue, but it was the Gilded Age that triggered the darkest time in US history for child labor. The difficulties with child labor were so terrible that it “ trapped children in a cycle of poverty by interfering with their schooling and physical development”(Neumann). Large companies would hire children at ages 5 to 15 for dangerous tasks, at very little pay. For companies, children became an important resource because of their nimble fingers, which made them well suited to get into the cracks and crevices of the factory machines for the repetitious, and small tasks that the industries were demanding. Child labor at the time was not a concern, because it was a way children could help support their family’s income. But what people saw child labor from on the outside, was the complete opposite of what it was really like. For example, to most people, child labor seemed like a good thing because it was helping families income, and children were a good resource to get the job done inexpensively. But behind the scenes of it all, child labor was a disgusting a very sad system. Children were suffering from eye and lung damage in the glass factories, bleeding hands from the oyster and shrimp industry, and loss of fingers or limbs from working at the mills. Not only was child labor extremely dangerous, but it was also setting children up for a bad future. If a child was involved in labor, they were not going to school and getting an education. This often led to children growing up to become uneducated, were they involved in crime, poverty, and low-income jobs in their future. But with the help of progressive reformers like Jacob Riis, and Florence Kelley, they helped raise awareness of this issue, and change regulations of this problem.

Jacob Riis was a journalist, author, photographer, and progressive reformer. He was born and raised in Denmark, but In 1970 he immigrated to New York on Whitsunday. At first, he was in the work industry of farming, coal mining, brickmaking, and peddling. But he soon scored a job in police reporting crimes. Working at the police headquarters led Riis to his discovery of child labor. Riis discovered the true dark side of child labor and knew he had to do something about

it. Day and night Jacob would go to the ghettos of were people who were living in poverty, and despair. Riis would study and take photographs of all the children who were suffering from child labor. For example, one of Riis's photographs displays a picture of “students attending night class for working children at a lodging house”. The photo shows a dark crowded classroom with a little boy sleeping on his desk because he is so exhausted from laboring all day long. Riis exposed the real issue of child labor by setting up lectures, articles in magazines, and books. In Riis’s articles, he would demand that the government would do something about the issue. By doing this he gained a lot of support and made more and more people realize child labor was a huge issue that needed to be fixed.

Another reformer who helped resolve the issue of child labor is Florence Kelley. Florence Kelley was a social worker, progressive reformer, and successfully fought for child labor laws. She was born in Philadelphia and was the daughter of US congressman William Darrah Kelley. In 1889 she moved to Chicago, where she started her new journey to study social conditions and taking an interest in women and children working in the Chicago trades. Kelley soon came to discover that “over 1 million children working in hot, crowded and unsafe factories. The work was very dangerous. Every year tens of thousands of kids died or were seriously hurt. In 1889, Kelley knew something had to be done. She wrote a book called Our Toiling Children. Kelley asked people not to buy goods made by child workers” ( ) In response, Kelley and some other reformers founded the New York Labor Committee. The NYLC “ objected to the employment of children at monotonous tasks under unhealthy conditions for 10 to 12 hours a day, week in week out.” So Kelley and the founders of “the NYLC put laws in place that would protect children, and convince Americans that the problem existed.” Kelley also authored a number of anti-child labor articles in popular magazines. With Kelley’s help, the issue of child labor may never have been resolved at the time. But although Kelley and Riis both were reformers of the same issue, they had their differences in how they helped the issue of child labor.

Both Riis and Kelley’s main goal was to put an end to child labor. But the two reformers contrasted in many ways. Riis was more focused on exposing child labor with photographs of the bad conditions the children were struggling with. While on the other hand, Kelley was more focused on how she can fix the issues of child labor and put an end to it. Overall, Riis worked ended with exposing and educating the government and citizens of New York the true dark side of child labor. While Kelley’s work resulted in the formation of the NCLC, which “promoted the rights, awareness, dignity, well-being, and education of children and youth as they relate to work and working.' Together in their own ways, these reformers made a huge impact on how to solve child labor and expose the horrible conditions children were going through.