

The Lowell Girls go on strike, Part 2



Director of Education
Jamie Lumm

Until the 19th century, women were largely confined to work within the home. But in the years between 1823 and 1850, the rise of the textile industry in New England radically altered women's working and living conditions. Thousands of young, single women left the homes of their parents, filed into the halls of the cotton factories and lived together in the company boarding houses adjacent to the mills. They experienced a freedom never before felt by American women.

Although the living and working conditions were far from comfortable, the environment of their all-female boarding homes allowed for strong gender solidarity among the mill girls. This permitted them to share their intellectual creations with one another. Some shared their poetry or songs, or asked advice on the Sunday school curricula they prepared for their local church. The sense of community among the women would be a key factor in the organization of their strikes, and the nature of their housing greatly contributed to the growth and solidarity of their community.

As the mills and the city of Lowell expanded and became the nation's largest textile manufacturing center, the experiences of the mill girls changed as well. More mills led to overproduction, which led to a drop in prices and profits. The high profits of the early years declined and, along with it, the conditions of the mill workers. The boarding houses were packed with as many as eight women per tiny room and twice as many machines were crammed onto the factory floors. The workload increased as well, with mill workers now expected to tend to three to four looms instead of the usual one or two.

In early February 1834, a 15 percent reduction in wages was announced to go into effect on March 1. After a series of meetings, the female textile workers organized a "turn-out," or strike. In preparation for the strike, the women immediately withdrew their savings, causing a run on two local banks. Unfortunately, the strike was short-lived and within days the protesters had all returned to work at reduced pay or had left town, but the turn-out was an indication of the determination among the Lowell female textile workers to take labor action. This dismayed the agents of the factories, who had portrayed the turn-out as a betrayal of femininity.

As the economic situation worsened, in October 1836, the Lowell directors proposed a rent hike to be paid by the textile workers living in the company boarding houses. This essentially amounted to another 15 percent wage cut. The female textile workers responded immediately by forming the Factory Girls' Association and organizing another strike. Harriet Robinson, an 11-year-old doffer (spindle changer) at the time of the strike, recalled in her memoirs:

When the day came on which the girls were to turn out, those in the upper rooms started first, and so many of them left that our mill was at once shut down. Then, when the girls

in my room stood irresolute, uncertain what to do, asking each other, 'Would you?' or 'Shall we turn out?' and not one of them having the courage to lead off, I, who began to think they would not go out, after all their talk, became impatient, and started on ahead, saying, with childish bravado, 'I don't care what you do, I am going to turn out, whether anyone else does or not;' and I marched out, and was followed by the others.

This turn-out attracted more than 1,500 workers—nearly twice the number two years previously—causing Lowell's textile mills to run far below capacity. Unlike the strike in 1834, in 1836, there was enormous community support for the striking female textile workers. The proposed rent hike was seen as a violation of the written contract between the employers and the employees. The strike went on for two months and eventually the rent hike was rescinded.

The sense of community that arose from working and living together contributed directly to the energy and growth of the first union of women workers, the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association (LFLRA). The association was run completely by the women themselves: They elected their own officers and held their own meetings; they helped organize the city's female workers; and they set up branches in other mill towns.

One of its first actions was to send petitions signed by thousands of textile workers to the Massachusetts General Court, demanding a 10-hour workday. In response, the Massachusetts Legislature established a committee to which workers testified about conditions in the factories and the physical demands of their 12-hour days. These were the first investigations into labor conditions by a governmental body in the United States. When the committee determined that it was not the state legislature's responsibility to control the hours of work, the LFLRA worked to defeat its chairman, William Schouler, in his next campaign for the State Legislature. In 1853, the workday was reduced to 11 hours.

The experience of the Lowell women before 1850 presents a fascinating example of the contradictory impact of early industrialization as the mills both exploited and liberated women in ways unknown to the pre-industrial political economy. While the mills provided women with work outside of the home and opened the door to financial opportunity that was previously sealed shut, the labor unrest reveals that the workers felt the demands of the mills to be oppressive and restricting to their liberty. Though their gains took years to accomplish, the history of the Lowell Girls is reflective of the history of the American labor movement. Change did not come in great leaps overnight, but in small steps following years of persistent organization and action. It is still that way today.

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