

New England Mill Workers

You are young white women who were born on farms throughout New England and have come to Lowell, Massachusetts, to work in the textile mills. Most of you are single, but some of you left bad marriages. Married women often must change their names, because according to the law, whatever money a woman makes belongs to her husband. By the way, many people stereotype factory jobs as *male* jobs. But in 1848, almost a quarter of the people working in factories in the United States are women.

People say that at one time, conditions were pleasant in the mills, but no more. The verse of one of the songs that the girls sing goes like this:

*Amidst the clashing noise and din
Of the ever beating loom
Stood a fair young girl with throbbing brow
Working her way to the tomb.*

Is this an exaggeration? Hardly. Summer hours of work in the mills are from 5 a.m. to 7 p.m. Young women work an average of 75 hours a week with only four holidays a year. You get about 35 minutes for meals, but this includes travel time between the mill and your boarding house in the neighborhood. For this, you're paid anywhere from \$20-25 a month.

But it's not only the long hours and the short time for meals that are making you "work your way to the tomb." The conditions of the work itself are also terrible. The air in the factory is awful. It's polluted with flying lint and the fumes from the whale-oil lamps that hang on pegs from each loom. The owners demand that the overseers regularly spray the air with water to keep the humidity high so that

the cotton threads won't break. The windows are all nailed shut. The long hours in the bad air means that you and your friends often get sick. It's common for workers to get tuberculosis—"the white death," as you call it. The owners don't have any clinics for the workers, and there are no hospitals for the poor. Young women with breathing problems just go home to die. Add to this the terrible speed of the work. All workers must tend more than one loom, and male overseers, who are paid a premium based on how much cloth is produced, harass slower workers.

Living conditions are also very crowded. It's common for young women to live six to a room with three beds. There are very limited bathing facilities.

In response to these conditions, you've joined with other young women in the "10-hour movement" to reduce hours from the current 12 or 13 a day down to 10. Some people say that women are to do as they're told, but women in the mills have gone on strike a number of times to protest the long hours and bad conditions of work and housing. Thousands of women have signed petitions demanding shorter hours. During strikes, owners have fired strikers and hired "scabs," people who take the place of strikers. Some of the newer people hired by the mill owners are Irish immigrants—still, all women—who the owners say will work for less and not complain.

The owners are especially eager to learn the identities of the women who are the organizers of the 10-hour movement. When they find out who the leaders are they fire them and put their names on a "blacklist," so that no mill owner will hire them. So all meetings must be held in secret.