

Letter from a Lowell Operative (1834)

In this letter to a newspaper in Lowell, Massachusetts, a female operative encouraged her fellow workers to leave their looms and go out on strike. Cloth production had long depended on the labor of married and unmarried women, but most often as outworkers producing cloth from their homes. When the Lowell factories first applied waterpower to large-scale weaving, it began the new practice of employing large numbers of young women who were lured out of their homes and into the factories. Special dormitories, strict rules, and a paternalistic regimen characterized most of the early mills. However, as time passed and competition grew, the female operatives chafed under the restrictions and resented being kept at the machines for longer and longer hours, all the while enjoying fewer benefits. As you examine this account, consider this author's definition of freedom and slavery.

We must leave our looms. We are daughters of free men and are being forced to work under conditions that approach slavery. Do we need this money so badly that we will submit to these inhumane working conditions while this aristocracy of mill owners lives off the profits of our sweat? Are we not entitled to reasonable breaks in our toil to eat our meals as decent people do - not racing to our boardinghouses and bolting our food like piglets at the trough? And is it not reasonable to limit the workday to ten hours so we have time in the evenings to improve our minds as we were promised? WE must prevent our sex from being made into living machines to do the bidding of incorporated aristocrats and reduced to a sum for their services hardly sufficient to keep soul and body together. The mill managers have been deaf to our petitions and our rallies. They will only hear us when the factories are stilled by workers leaving their looms to secure their dignity and their rights.

A Factory Operative