

## Toiling in the Textile Mills

In the nineteenth-century United States, many men, women, and children worked from dawn to dusk in textile mills. They worked hurriedly to try to meet impossible quotas. The wages were low, the hours were long, and the conditions were poor. In the winter the workers endured the cold; in the summer they suffered through the heat. The air in the mills was thick with lint, which often caused respiratory disease in workers. Conditions were not only uncomfortable and unhealthful, but also dangerous. One who grew weary from the long hours and dull work could easily be hurt by slipping or falling or losing a finger or worse in the machinery.

People accepted the trials and toil of labor in the textile mills as a necessary way of life. Some families were so poor that all of its members worked in the mills. The mills employed children as young as six years old. By their teen years, most children in the mills were working more than 60 hours per week. Children and women were preferred workers because their wages were lower than those earned by men.

To attract these poor families to the mills, the owners built housing for workers. Although this may appear to be a kind act, building mill complexes only increased the power that mill owners had over their workers. The housing was cramped and not well kept up. An immigrant worker recalled that, at one mill, 24 workers were crowded into a single house, six to a room. The mill owners also built a company store in the mill complex, from which the workers were to buy the things they needed. Even with the whole family working, some could not make ends meet.

In the middle of the century, women textile workers in New England started a movement to limit their workday to 10 hours. Although the mill owners did not consent, over the next few decades more workers began to organize. They formed unions and held strikes to obtain higher wages, shorter hours, and better working conditions. They tried to get labor laws passed to protect their rights. Over time they achieved small victories, but they still sought federal laws that would protect all workers. It was not until the outbreak of World War I that Congress passed a federal law in support of the eight-hour workday. Two decades later, Congress passed an effective law to combat child labor.

Reading Time \_\_\_\_\_

### Recalling Facts

1. In nineteenth-century textile mills, workers met with
  - a. uncomfortable, unhealthful, and dangerous working conditions.
  - b. pleasant surroundings.
  - c. fair wages.
2. Because owners could pay such workers lower wages, owners preferred that workers in the mills be
  - a. men.
  - b. immigrants.
  - c. women and children.
3. The mill complex was often made up of the mill, the company store, and
  - a. schools for children.
  - b. housing for workers.
  - c. community centers.
4. To obtain better hours, wages, and conditions, textile workers
  - a. organized to form unions.
  - b. moved from mill to mill.
  - c. went back to school.
5. Unions sought federal labor laws to
  - a. legalize strikes.
  - b. protect the rights of all workers.
  - c. monitor company stores.

### Understanding Ideas

6. One can conclude from the passage that workers endured the conditions in the mills because
  - a. the job paid well.
  - b. the job was better than others.
  - c. they were very poor and needed the work and money to survive.
7. It is likely that children working in the mills were
  - a. promoted to high-paying jobs.
  - b. not attending school regularly, if at all.
  - c. able to read and write before they were allowed to work in the mills.
8. Compared with textile workers in the nineteenth century, laborers today
  - a. work more hours.
  - b. receive fewer benefits.
  - c. have more rights.
9. One can conclude from the article that Congress initially
  - a. was eager to help protect worker's rights.
  - b. opposed the owners of the mills.
  - c. was slow to pass federal labor laws.
10. Without the work of unions and the struggles of textile workers and laborers in the nineteenth century, it is possible that
  - a. no federal laws would exist to protect workers' rights.
  - b. the textile industry would have survived to present times.
  - c. modern-day factories would provide workers with housing and a company store.