**Factory Workers in the North**

**Orestes Brownson, *The Laboring Classes: An Article from the Boston Quarterly Review*, Boston: Benjamin H. Greene, 1840**.

The operatives are well dressed, and we are told, well paid. They are said to be healthy, contented, and happy. This is the fair side of the picture . . . There is a dark side, moral as well as physical. Of the common operatives, few, if any, by their wages, acquire a competence . . . the great mass wear out their health, spirits, and morals, without becoming one whit better off than when they commenced labor. The bills of mortality in these factory villages are not striking, we admit, for the poor girls when they can toil no longer go home to die. The average life, working life we mean, of the girls that come to Lowell, for instance, from Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont, we have been assured, is only about three years. What becomes of them then? Few of them ever marry; fewer still ever return to their native places with reputations unimpaired. “She has worked in a Factory,” is almost enough to damn to infamy the most worthy and virtuous girl.

**A Factory Girl, “Factory Girls,” *Lowell Offering*, December 1840**

Whom has Mr. Brownson slandered? . . . girls who generally come from quiet country homes, where their minds and manners have been formed under the eyes of the worthy sons of the Pilgrims, and their virtuous partners, and who return again to become the wives of the free intelligent yeomanry of New England and the mothers of quite a proportion of our future republicans. Think, for a moment, how many of the next generation are to spring from mothers doomed to infamy! . . . It has been asserted that to put ourselves under the influence and restraints of corporate bodies, is contrary to the spirit of our institutions, and to that love of independence which we ought to cherish. . . . We are under restraints, but they are voluntarily assumed; and we are at liberty to withdraw from them, whenever they become galling or irksome. Neither have I ever discovered that any restraints were imposed upon us but those which were necessary for the peace and comfort of the whole, and for the promotion of the design for which we are collected, namely, to get money, as much of it and as fast as we can; and it is because our toil is so unremitting, that the wages of factory girls are higher than those of females engaged in most other occupations. It is these wages which, in spite of toil, restraint, discomfort, and prejudice, have drawn so many worthy, virtuous, intelligent, and well-educated girls to Lowell, and other factories; and it is the wages which are in great degree to decide the characters of the factory girls as a class. . . . Mr. Brownson may rail as much as he pleases against the real injustice of capitalists against operatives, and we will bid him *God speed*, if he will but keep truth and common sense upon his side. Still, the avails of factory labor are now greater than those of many domestics, seamstresses, and school-teachers; and strange would it be, if in money-loving New England, one of the most lucrative female employments should be rejected because it is toilsome, or because some people are prejudiced against it. Yankee girls have too much *independence* for *that*. . . . And now, if Mr. Brownson is a *man*, he will endeavor to retrieve the injury he has done; . . . though he will find error, ignorance, and folly among us, (and where would he find them not?) yet he would not see worthy and virtuous girls consigned to infamy, because they work in a factory.

Dear Father,

I received your letter on Thursday the 14th with much pleasure. I am well, which is one comfort. My life and health are spared while others are cut off. Last Thursday one girl fell down and broke her neck, which caused instant death. She was going in or coming out of the mill and slipped down, it being very icy. The same day a man was killed by the [railroad] cars. Another had nearly all of his ribs broken. Another was nearly killed by falling down and having a bale of cotton fall on him. Last Tuesday we were paid. In all I had six dollars and sixty cents paid $4.68 for board. With the rest I got me a pair of rubbers and a pair of 50 cent shoes. Next payment I am to have a dollar a week beside my board...

I think that the factory is the best place for me and if any girl wants employment, I advise them to come to Lowell.

-Excerpt from a Letter from Mary Paul, Lowell mill girl, December 21, 1845.

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**HISTORICAL CONTEXT INFORMATION**

By 1880 five million Americans were engaged in manufacturing, construction, and transportation. They were paid employees, not producers and were dependent upon hourly wages and the good will of their employers. The worker was seen as “a mere machine”—he could not make the simplest decisions and had no self-respect. The degradation of the skilled labor class was one of the major grievances of labor. Wages were not enough to support a family—work was marred by inequities and corruption. Working families could survive only by “ruthless under consumption.” Workers were victims of business cycles—the winds of change swept many away. Piece work and lower wages were introduced to reduce labor costs. Whereas workers in earlier times had worked alongside their employers, now they were separated. Managers of large business rarely had personal contact with workers.

The machines that made mass manufacturing possible were often very dangerous. Kept in small spaces without proper enclosure or ventilation, manufacturing machines emitted noxious fumes and contributed to excessive heat inside factories filled with workers. The exposed machinery routinely claimed lives and maimed laborers. In 1900, 35,000 workers were killed in industrial accidents, according to the ''Gale Encyclopedia of U.S. Economic History.'' That same year, 500,000 were maimed in factory accidents.

**Long Hours**

Work in the factories was long and monotonous. The average worker completed the same task, over and over, for at least 10 hours a day. Working long hours, six days per week contributed to extreme fatigue, illness and even injury. Children often worked even longer hours -- those who lived at the factory worked up to 18 hours a day.

**Low Pay**

The mechanization of the industrial age allowed businesses to replace skilled laborers in favor of unskilled workers for much less pay. Paired with machines, large groups of unskilled workers were assigned to complete small portions of the manufacturing process. By assigning repetitive tasks to large groups, factories "deskilled" work and lowered wages. Though pay varied by gender and age, typical employees made about $6 a week, notes the American Postal Workers Union. This pay, at less than a living wage, forced workers into an endless cycle of poverty.

**Child Workers**

As factories grew, the demand for cheap labor grew with it. In the late 19th century, many children were drawn into the labor force for work inside factories. With adult wages so low, children were often forced to work in the factories to support their families. In 1900, there were 1.7 million children under the age of 15 working in America, according to the National Archives. Children working in the factories often had spine curvature, stunted growth and contagious diseases like tuberculosis.

“In a cotton mill the temperature has to be high on account of the thin threads. It was a rainy day in May, and the temperature in the mill was 85 degrees Fahrenheit. Add to this a roar of machinery so deafening that one has to scream to be heard, and an atmosphere damp and lint-laden without a current of air to be felt, and one gets a suggestion of a cotton mill.” Sarah Atherton

“Oh! No, no, don’t do that Joe,” he said “…you are going to make your children into slaves, spending their days behind thick, dirty walls bound to some looms in the terrific and incessant noise. From six o’clock in the morning until six o’clock at night, they will be driven by some blind power, and then, they will fall into their beds in some crowded rooms, in order to gather enough strength to begin over again, the next day. I know! I have seen these mills, when I went for a business trip to Boston last year. I thought they were something inhuman, almost infernal. You and yours do not belong there, Joe. . .” recollection of Joe who was cautioned against working in a mill

*'The hours of labour at that mill were from five in a morning till eight at night, with an interval for refreshments of thirty minutes at noon.'*

(Evidence given to the Factory Inquiry Commission 1833)

 *'I have been in the mills at all hours and I have never in my life seen the machinery stopped at meal times in any of the mills…'*

(Evidence given to the Factory Inquiry Commission 1833)

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MORE INFO

Since work in factories required dexterity rather than brute strength, factory owners hired women as well as men and also children as young as 6 years old. Owners often sent children between and below pieces of heavy machinery, and many children were mangled and killed. Children were paid only a tiny percentage of an adult salary, and some children, such as orphans, received no pay. Children were also verbally abused and beaten. Schools were out of the question for kids who worked in factories. Women were also treated horrendously, and they earned less than men and were sometimes sexually assaulted. Men, women and children had no job security, as they could be easily replaced.

Because industrialized areas could not keep up with the housing demands of the ever-increasing populace flocking from the countryside to the cities searching for work, tenements sprang up near factories. These were filthy, overcrowded hovels with no sanitation or heating. When factory workers finally returned home after their overlong shifts, their squalid living quarters gave them no respite from the wretched factory conditions.

