



## A Former Mill Girl Remembers the Lowell Strike of 1836

Harriet Hanson Robinson began work in Lowell at the age of ten, later becoming an author and **advocate** of women's **suffrage**. In 1834 and 1836, the mill owners reduced **wages**, increased the pace of work, and raised the rent for the boardinghouses. The young female workers went on strike (they called it "turning out" then) to protest the decrease in wages and increase in rent. In 1898 Robinson published a **memoir** of her Lowell experiences where she describes the strike of 1836.

Cutting down the wages was not their only **grievance**, nor the only cause of this strike. [Before] the corporations had paid twenty-five cents a week towards the board of each **operative**, and now it was their purpose to have the girls pay the sum; and this, in addition to the cut in the wages, would make a difference of at least one dollar a week. It was estimated that as many as twelve or fifteen hundred girls **turned out**, and walked **in procession** through the streets. They had neither flags nor music, but sang songs, [including]

"Oh! isn't it a pity, such a pretty girl as I-  
Should be sent to the factory to **pine away** and die?  
Oh ! I cannot be a slave,  
I will not be a slave,  
For I'm so fond of liberty  
That I cannot be a slave."

### Vocabulary

**Advocate:** someone who speaks and writes in favor of a cause

**Suffrage:** right to vote

**Wages:** money earned by doing work

**Memoir:** personal account of experiences; autobiography

**Grievance:** cause for complaint

**Operative:** worker in a factory

**Turned out:** went on strike

**In procession:** in an orderly way

**pine away:** slowly lose your health

Source: Harriet Hanson Robinson, *Loom and Spindle or Life Among the Early Mill Girls* (New York, T. Y. Crowell, 1898), 83–86, from *History Matters: The U.S. Survey on the Web*, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5714/>.