Voices from the Mills

Women workers and the fight for shorter hours

8.C.10.1.D "Examine the role of women as the primary workforce in New England textile factories and leaders in the reform of working conditions."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline two details showing that women were the main workforce in the mills, circle two working conditions they wanted to change, and number two actions women took to seek change.

From Mill Floor to Public Debate

1 In the 1830s, the bell at a Lowell, Massachusetts, textile mill called workers in before sunrise. Rows of young women tended spinning frames and power looms that turned cotton into cloth. Women made up most of the workers in Lowell's mills, though men also held jobs, often as overseers or mechanics. Many women came from New England farms to earn wages. Mill owners offered pay and company boardinghouses, with strict rules. For some workers, a paycheck meant helping family or saving for a future beyond farm work.

2 That opportunity came with a cost. A worker might spend more than twelve hours a day in a loud room, watching fast machines while cotton dust hung in the air. Boardinghouse rules shaped life after the shift, too. When mill owners cut wages in 1834, women in Lowell walked out in protest. Their action did not stop the cut, but it showed that workers could challenge owners together. Women who ran the machines had direct knowledge of the conditions they wanted to change.

3 In 1844, Lowell workers formed the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association. Sarah Bagley helped lead it. Members organized meetings and gathered signatures asking Massachusetts lawmakers to limit work to ten hours a day. They argued that long hours harmed workers' health and left little time for learning. The state did not grant their request then, yet their petitions brought factory conditions into public debate. Women were not only the main labor force inside many early New England textile mills. They also became leaders who demanded a stronger voice in decisions about work.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How does the passage show that women did more than earn wages in Lowell's mills?

2. Why might a mill job have appealed to a young woman from a New England farm, even though the work was difficult?

3. What did the 1834 walkout show about women workers' role in changing conditions, and what was its limit?

4. How did the reform association use women's experience in the mills to argue for a ten-hour workday?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Write a four-sentence speech to a Massachusetts lawmaker from the point of view of a Lowell woman worker in 1844. Include two working conditions from the passage, one action women took to seek change, and a reason lawmakers should listen to women workers.

ANSWER KEY

Voices from the Mills

GRADE 8 · 8.C.10.1.D

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline two details showing that women were the main workforce in the mills, circle two working conditions they wanted to change, and number two actions women took to seek change. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How does the passage show that women did more than earn wages in Lowell's mills?	**Women made up most of the mill workforce, and they also walked out, organized meetings, and petitioned lawmakers to change working conditions.**
2	Why might a mill job have appealed to a young woman from a New England farm, even though the work was difficult?	**She could earn wages to help her family or save for a future beyond farm work, despite long hours and strict rules.**
3	What did the 1834 walkout show about women workers' role in changing conditions, and what was its limit?	**Women acted together to challenge a wage cut, but the walkout did not stop the cut.**
4	How did the reform association use women's experience in the mills to argue for a ten-hour workday?	**Its members knew the effects of long hours firsthand. They gathered signatures and told lawmakers that long hours harmed workers' health and left little time for learning.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

Lawmakers, I tend a power loom in a loud mill room for more than twelve hours a day. Cotton dust hangs in the air as we work. We have gathered signatures asking you to limit work to ten hours a day. Listen to the women who run these machines because we know how these conditions affect our lives.

Accept other passage-supported examples of working conditions and worker actions. The speech should connect women's firsthand experience as mill workers to their call for change.