

# Militancy Grows Among the Textile Workers in the Anthracite Regions

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The growing militancy of the textile workers of the anthracite, as witnessed by the recent strikes of silk workers involving in some places as many as seven or eight hundred employes, mostly young girls, draws attention forcibly to the textile industry of that region. Silk and knit goods mills, producing goods of tremendous value, and paying unbelievably low wages, are scattered throughout the entire anthracite territory.

These textile mills of the anthracite are an illustration of a light industry following a heavy one. They came into that territory in the wake of the coal mines. Two considerations drew them there; first, the closeness to fuel, the source of power; second, the existence there of plenty of cheap labor, which means, in plain terms, the women and children of the coal miners' families. When we consider that the textile employers of this region pay their help seven and eight dollars a week, and in some cases as low as five or six dollars, we readily see what inducement led them to locate in that part of the country.

Two varieties of textile mills predominate in this region, knitting (including underwear, stockings, sweaters and bathing suits) and silk. In the southern anthracite strip reaching from Lehigh to Shamokin and including the cities of Shenandoah, Pottsville and Mahanoy, it is the knit goods mills which are more numerous, with some silk mills. In the upper anthracite, on the other hand, the district which runs from Carbondale to Nanticoke, and includes the cities of Scranton, Pittston, Plymouth and Wilkes-Barre, it is silk which predominates, with a few knitting and other sorts of textile mills. There are, according to Davison's Textile Blue Book (1926), 54 knitting mills in the counties of Carbon, Schuylkill, and Northumberland, the southern anthracite counties, and 35 silk mills. In the upper anthracite region, comprising the counties of Lackawanna and Luzerne, there are 140 silk and 16 knitting mills. The only considerable textile mills outside of these two branches are the Scranton Lace Co. in Scranton, employing 800 people and the Wilkes-Barre Lace Mfg. Co., with a capital of \$1,500,000 and employing 1250.

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The anthracite is not only a silk center, but is in fact the most important center of the entire country for one branch of the silk industry, namely, silk throwing.

To understand the significance of these facts we must look a little into the various processes of silk manufacture.

The first stage of broad silk manufacture is the importation into this country—chiefly from the Orient—of raw silk. This means silk, in long, fine, strands, wound just as it comes from the cocoon onto spools, threads from several cocoons being combined together. There are certain silks, like pongees which are made directly from this raw silk. In others, raw silk is used for the warp. However, most silk cloths require the silk to be first "thrown" or twisted before weaving. Throwing is a process by which several of the long, tenuous cocoon fibres (which are already several of the original ones combined) are twisted together. This process gives greater durability to the silk and in some cases, as in crepes, by an extra hard twist imparts a special texture. Of all the raw silk imported into the country—which means all the raw silk used—65 per cent is thrown.

For the most part, this throwing process is a separate industry, carried on in mills especially equipped for it, which do nothing else. Most broad silk producers buy raw silk themselves for their orders (because they can better judge of the quality before the silk is thrown) and give it out to throwing mills to be thrown on commission.

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These silk mills are scattered over the region, not only in the cities but in the smallest towns and villages. Sixty-one mill units of Lackawanna and Luzerne counties are found in towns of less than 10,000 inhabitants and 51 towns of this class possess at least one silk mill. Outside of Scranton and Wilkes-Barre, only 22 mills are located in towns of over 10,000. There is hardly a village of the anthracite big enough to cluster a few hundreds of families together around its coal mine, which has not also a silk mill, generally small and dingy.

The greatest number of workers in these mills are young girls, and most of them are daughters of coal miners. While the wives of the miners do not as a rule go out to work, except in cases of sickness or long unemployment of the husband, their daughters as a regular thing go out for a job at the age of fourteen. There are not many industries in the anthracite. Outside of the large cities, the silk mills are almost the only places where girls can work.

The conditions under which these young girls are working are poor, their wages unbelievably low. The speed-up has been universally introduced. The nine-hour day or longer prevails. As for wages, let us look at the U. S. Labor Statistics Bulletin No. 190, "Wages and hours in the cotton, woolen and silk industries." This bulletin gives as the wages of doublers in silk throwing mills for 1914 the magnificent sum of \$5.80 per week. These figures are an average for the industry at large. Figures are not available for the present time and for the anthracite region specifically. The writer would place the average there—judging from personal accounts—at about \$8 a week.

The U. S. Tariff Commission report mentioned above speaks of the "peaceful labor conditions" and lack of labor "troubles" as one of the inducements for the silk mills to locate in the anthracite. This may have been true in the past, but recent indications would show that these glorious (for the employers) days of workers' "peaceful" submission to outrageous wages and conditions are about over. Witness the fine militant fight lasting for many weeks put up this summer by 300 girl employees of the Klotz Throwing Co.'s plant in Carbondale (a powerful \$2,000,000 corporation with branches in twelve different localities). Witness the snappy struggle of 700 young workers of several silk companies in Wilkes-Barre within recent weeks, a struggle which won recognition of their union and better sanitary conditions and was followed by a strike of eight or nine hundred more silk workers in Kingston.

These are American young girls and youths who work here. Whether their parents were born here or in Europe, they themselves are American bred, with the American pep and push, with higher standards than their parents. They are showing their appreciation of organization and their readiness to struggle to wipe out the miserable conditions now prevailing in those mills.