



Petition of the **twenty thousand**

By **Stephanie McCurry**

▲ **Labored relations**

Seamstresses joined the labor movement even before the war.

In late July 1864, 800 Philadelphia seamstresses put their names on a petition addressed to the Honorable Edwin M. Stanton, U.S. secretary of war. Titled “Twenty Thousand Working Women of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania”—so clearly speaking for more than themselves—it protested their abysmally low wages at the Schuylkill Arsenal and the outsourcing of work on government contracts to private manufacturers who paid even less. Incredibly, their petition worked, garnering the attention of both Stanton and his boss, President Abraham Lincoln, acquiring Lincoln’s endorsement and earning the women an invitation to Washington. In the

midst of a nerve-wracking reelection campaign, President Lincoln met with a delegation of the Philadelphia women in August 1864.

The episode draws our attention to something significant in the history of the war: the way the war economy prompted an expansion of women’s

waged work and created openings for collective organization.

Sewing had long been women’s work. In the 19th century in places like Philadelphia and New York City, the center of the garment industry, it had offered a meager living to desperate women, many of them immigrants. Sewing

was not regarded as a skill. The labor market was perennially overcrowded, starvation prices on piecework were the norm and seamstresses had little bargaining power.

By 1864 the conditions of wage work for the government presented different opportunities. By one estimate as many as 300,000 women entered the labor market during the war. They did a wide range of war work for the U.S. government and private contractors. Women worked in U.S. arsenals in Cincinnati, St. Louis, Detroit and New York, as well as Philadelphia, sewing uniforms, haversacks, tents, etc. But others did far more dangerous munitions work in arsenals at Indianapolis, Watertown, Mass.; Allegheny, Pa.; Philadelphia and Washington, D.C.: Young girls and women (females were preferred) spent their days pouring gunpowder into cartridges in rooms stacked with Minié



■ **Hazardous duty** At several U.S. arsenals, women filled ammunition cartridges for soldiers in the field. These women work in the Watertown, Mass., arsenal.

balls, shells and barrels of gunpowder.

The Allegheny Arsenal had exploded in September 1862, killing at least 78 people—mostly women and girls working in the cartridge room. Women ran screaming from the building with their clothes on fire or flung themselves out windows. Others were blown up. Pieces of bodies were found in the river nearby, in the streets and hanging from the trees. In June 1864 there was another explosion—this time in the D.C. Arsenal, also in a cartridge room; 22 died that day. Stanton and Lincoln walked in the funeral procession.

Women increasingly protested the conditions of their work. At the arsenal in Watertown, female munitions workers petitioned their supervisors repeatedly about wages, employment practices and, especially, about safety violations—including the men's habit of experimenting with gunpowder. In 1864 they petitioned their congressman, Daniel Gooch, who called hearings of the Committee on the Conduct of the War. In their testimony the women spoke of their rights and of themselves as patriotic war workers, and they challenged conventional gender assumptions by reminding the legislators that they had husbands and sons wounded in the war—men now, as they pointedly put it, "dependent upon us."

The Philadelphia women who claimed to speak for 20,000 also knew how to stand up for themselves. A year earlier, in the summer of 1863, they had written their first petition to Secretary Stanton after 145 of them were laid off for failing to meet the terms of a new loyalty test designed to preserve arsenal jobs for loyal women and soldiers' wives. Those who could not "provide written evidence of their relationship to U.S. Army soldiers" or who "belonged to families opposed to the war," were laid off. As historian Judith Giesberg explains in her wonderful recent book *Army at Home*, the loyalty test has to be seen in the context of the New York City Draft Riots and the heightened concern about Copperheadism in its aftermath. The women, many of whom were surely Democrats, opposed—like



■ **Civilian casualties** Bullet presses and boxes of ammunition crowd the interior of the arsenal in Washington, D.C. An explosion killed 22 women and injured more in 1864.

the men in their families—to the Lincoln administration's embrace of emancipation, did not let Republican threats hold them back. They held public meetings, wrote resolutions and petitioned Stanton demanding the removal of the assistant quartermaster of the arsenal. They appear to have joined with seamstresses in New York also determined to hold onto government work, and formed advocacy groups and unions such as the Working Women's Protective Union and the Working Women's Union (in New York).

The petition of the "Twenty Thousand Working Women of Philadelphia" thus was part of a larger history: a wave of labor organizing among women wage workers, and especially seamstresses in Philadelphia, Cincinnati and New York in 1863 and 1864.

In their petition the Philadelphia women appealed to Stanton's generosity. They spoke about their sacrifices for their country and their vulnerability as women who are "husbandless and fatherless." But if you read the petition I think you will see that it is really a demand for justice to them as working women. They cast themselves as "giving their all to their country," and now approach the government, they

wrote, "not as beggars asking for alms, but as American matrons and daughters, asking an equitable price for the labor."

Lincoln—a man who, after all, knew about earning a living—apparently agreed. "It is certainly true in equity, that the laboring women in our employment, should be paid at least as much as they were at the beginning of the war," he wrote Stanton, instructing him to look into the issue. The Philadelphia women got their audience with the president and a raise in the piece rates paid to those in government employment.

Yet the Lincoln administration predictably evinced no willingness to regulate the conditions of work in the lucrative private sector of government contracts. The meeting with the Philadelphia women was no sooner over than Lincoln and Stanton got another petition, this time from Cincinnati seamstresses. □

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