

# HEROES OF AMERICAN LABOR



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## **EDUCATING AMERICAN STUDENTS ABOUT THE HISTORY OF LABOR**

In the last 20 years, American educators have made great strides to include elements of our nation's history that were long downgraded or ignored. Today, the contributions of women and minorities are regularly included in classroom instruction. It is now time to insure that the roles played by organized laborers and professional workers in the United States are also presented. The inclusion of labor union history in the classroom curriculum is recommended or required by nearly every one of the states. But, the information is too often presented in bits and pieces.

It is useful for students and teachers to see, by way of a timeline continuum, the overall effort of working women and men to better their lives. From slavery and indentured servitude to the unionization of modern professional workers, the union story deserves its own emphasis in America's classrooms.

The timeline, teaching guide, and historic portraits presented in *Heroes of American Labor* are intended to provide a useful supplement to classroom teachers. Since the materials are of an introductory nature, educators will no doubt wish to add information and create their own projects as well. We welcome your additions and suggestions for the *Heroes of American Labor* project. Feel free to contact our Saturn-UAW Union Partnership Initiative team at (800) 738-1817 or at [www.saturnuaw.com](http://www.saturnuaw.com).

## INTRODUCTION

The fact that people feel passionate about a subject or differ intensely about the issues involved does not mean that educators or the public-at-large should avoid them. Aristotle once said, "to live is to be political." The Founding Fathers of the American Republic recognized that a healthy nation would result only from the give-and-take of people's opinions and self-interests. They knew too that the American "experiment" has the best chance of serving and protecting its citizens when our people learn the all-important value of compromise and tolerance.

That the interests of business and labor should differ, and often differ intensely, is natural. The "bottom line" of business profitability will frequently come into conflict with the needs and ambitions of working professionals and laborers. These differences are intensified when the people involved are organized for the purpose of influence and power.

Nearly every state in the U.S. has required, as part of its public education objectives, the exposure of young minds to the history and politics of the labor movement. The struggle for social and economic justice in our country is an ongoing part of our history and everyday life. This is as much a part of the American experience as the great benefits, or negative consequences, of industrialization and commercial enterprise.

The history of labor in America is filled with successes, setbacks and failures, just as is the history of business. The story of America's unions and guilds is a history of visionaries, selfless volunteerism, and even martyrs. But, the history of labor has its share of those who used power for their own corrupt and even criminal interests. Alas, this is true of our government and business leadership as well.

We encourage you to visit your state's educational goals and curriculum guidelines. You will most certainly find that teaching girls and boys (and adults as well) about their inheritance from the union movement will enrich their lives and make for a stronger future for all Americans.

Gerald R. Fecht, Ph.D.  
Professor of History, Moorpark College (California)

## HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

The materials included in this teaching guide for *Heroes of American Labor* were created under the curriculum standards presented by the history and civics standards of the National Council for Social Studies. Under the direction of Dr. Gerald R. Fecht and with the contributions of Dr. Rick Gregory, noted labor historian, this guide was created chiefly for grades 6-12, but the *Heroes* program elements can be used in virtually any classroom.

The guide provides materials upon which teachers can build lessons that include the roles of unions in American history and stimulate student discussions, research and discovery. This is a practical resource tool that will help you address the very adult issues of social justice and civil rights. Use this guide as a personal resource for ideas, classroom activities, and student assignments, as well as an addition to your teaching strategies.

This guide also suggests ways the teaching professional can use portrait images of American labor heroes to stimulate student interest in the issues involved in the creation of unions and the issues that brought (and continue to bring) them into existence.

This guide also provides the teaching professional with ideas for student exercises, a basis for classroom discussions, and a basis for student reports and case studies. It also presents an opportunity to interview family members and other adults about work, family needs, and the presence of unions in their society. References to online resources and library materials have also been included in the Bibliography.

Students and teachers may also use the Saturn-UAW Web site ([www.saturnuaw.com](http://www.saturnuaw.com)) to explore the issues of labor education further, with additional activities as well as Web site and reference resources. We at Saturn and the United Auto Workers want your students to enjoy their study of American Labor history. Feel free to use this guide as you wish. Consider this guide, the timeline, the portraits, and the Saturn-UAW Web site as an ongoing resource for your classroom.

## PORTRAITS AND PROFILES

Twelve portraits and biographical profiles have been provided as part of the *Heroes of American Labor* package. Nine are of men and women whose efforts made a big difference during their lifetimes and in the lives of generations yet to come. Two images of child laborers and one of a teachers' group have also been included.

These photos, and those on the timeline, plus biographical and historical information were generously contributed by a number of organizations, including:

- A. Philip Randolph Institute;
- American Federation of Teachers;
- The George Meany Memorial Archives;
- Indiana State University Library;
- Library of Congress/American Memory Collections;
- National Education Association;
- Photography Collections, University of Maryland Baltimore County;
- Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University;
- UNITE Archives, Kheel Center, Cornell University.

## **Cesar Chavez, 1927-1993**

### **United Farm Workers**

"It's ironic that those who till the soil, cultivate and harvest the fruits, vegetables and other foods that fill your tables with abundance have nothing left for themselves."



Photo: Walter P. Reuther Library,  
Wayne State University

Born in 1927 to Mexican immigrant parents in Yuma, Arizona, Cesar Chavez began toiling in the fields as a young boy. In 1939, his family moved to California and like migrant workers throughout the country, followed the harvests up and down the state. In 1952, Cesar Chavez began working for the Community Service Organization, conducting voter registration drives and battling racial and economic discrimination against Chicanos. However, his passion and commitment belonged to those working in the fields, and in 1962, Chavez founded the National Farm Workers Association, which became the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee (UFW) within the AFL-CIO in 1965.

Building upon his Catholic upbringing and his adherence to the teachings of Gandhi and the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., Chavez successfully brought together religious organizations, labor unions, students, minority organizations, and consumers in a five-year grape boycott. His efforts turned the nation's attention to the dismal working conditions of the farm workers. In 1975, California Governor Jerry Brown signed the Agricultural Labor Relations Act, a collective bargaining law for farm workers. By the early 1980s, tens of thousands of farm workers were under UFW contracts, and realized higher pay, family health coverage, pension benefits, and other protections.

#### Teacher Notes



Photos: Photography Collections, University of Maryland Baltimore County

## Child Laborers

The portraits of these two child laborers, and their accompanying captions, were the work of photographer Lewis Hine (1874-1940). From 1908 to 1912, Hine traveled throughout America as an investigative photographer for the National Child Labor Committee, a group focusing on the exploitation of American children. The following descriptions are taken directly from his notes.

### **Girl Textile Worker**

"One of the spinners in Whitnel (North Carolina) Cotton Mill. She was 51 inches high. Has been in the mill one year. Sometimes works at night. Runs 4 sides - 48 cents a day. When asked how old she was, she hesitated, then said, "I don't remember," then added confidentially, "I'm not old enough to work, but do just the same." Out of 50 employees, there were ten children about her size."

### **Boy Mine Worker**

"Harley Bruce, a young coupling-boy at Indian Mine. He appears to be 12 or 14 years old and says he has been working there about a year. It is hard work and dangerous. Near Jellico, Tenn."

### Teacher Notes



## **Eugene Victor Debs, 1855-1926** **American Railway Union**

"While there is a lower class, I am in it, while there is a criminal element, I am of it, and while there is a soul in prison, I am not free."

Photo: Indiana State University Library

Eugene V. Debs began working in the railroad shops in his hometown of Terre Haute, Indiana, as a young man. Debs served as a national union officer, an elected city official and an Indiana legislator before 1893 when he launched the American Railway Union, an industrial union of railroad workers. After serving time in prison for his participation in the Pullman Strike of 1894, Debs emerged with two unbendable beliefs: industrial unions rather than trade unions gave the workers the power needed to combat America's corporations, and for him, Socialism was the best political choice for workers.

Debs fought tirelessly for then "radical" workers' rights now considered standard, workmen's compensation, pensions and social security, and for social causes including women's suffrage. He helped found the Industrial Workers of the World along with Big Bill Haywood and Mother Mary Harris Jones in 1905, but soon withdrew from that movement. Debs ran five times as a Socialist Party presidential candidate, from 1900-1920. His last campaign was run from a federal prison in Atlanta, where he served 32 months of a 10-year sentence for violating The Espionage Act, by publicly opposing America's involvement in World War I. Even so, Debs received nearly a million votes.

(Note to teachers: the Debs portrait photo was taken outside of the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary.)

Teacher Notes



Photo: The George Meany Memorial Archives

## **Samuel Gompers, 1850-1924 American Federation of Labor**

"To be free, the workers must have choice. To have choice, they must retain in their own hands the right to determine under what conditions they will work."

Born into a Jewish working-class family in London, Samuel Gompers became a shoemaker's apprentice at the age of 10 and then changed his trade to cigar making. In 1863 his family migrated to New York City, where he continued to work as a cigar maker. Influenced by his father's and British trade union principles, Gompers believed in a strong, centralized trade union that fosters the growth and directs the activity of local unions. He helped restructure the Cigar Makers International Union in this manner.

Gompers used this blueprint as co-founder and first president of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), founded in 1886. He also believed that unions should be partners with industry to build a strong nation. The AFL's membership consisted of craft unions or those made up of skilled workers. Since skilled workers controlled important aspects of manufacturing, the AFL membership thrived, and by 1904, ten percent of all nonagricultural wageworkers belonged. Because of the emphasis on skilled workers, the number of AFL's members began to drop, since more and more workers were unskilled labor. Since the AFL's member unions had complete autonomy, Gompers was unable to use his position as president to broaden their organizing efforts to include unskilled workers. This was not accomplished until after his death.

### Teacher Notes



**Mary Harris (Mother) Jones**  
**1830-1930**  
**United Mine Workers of America**

"Pray for the dead and fight like hell for the living."

Photo: The George Meany Memorial Archives

Fondly referred to as "Mother Jones" and the "Miner's Angel," Mary Harris Jones was a champion of the country's weakest and neediest during America's great industrial growth. Born in Cork, Ireland in 1830, Jones and her family came to America in 1835 fleeing the fighting between British soldiers and Irish freedom fighters. (Her father's father, a freedom fighter, was hanged.) Jones learned much about unions and the workingmen's plights from her husband George E. Jones, a member of the Iron Molders' Union in Memphis, Tennessee. Tragedy struck in 1867 when a yellow fever epidemic struck Memphis, claiming the lives of her husband and four small children.

Mother Jones returned to Chicago to work as a dressmaker, and there she began working with the Knights of Labor. Looking prim, proper and very motherly, she was known for fiery speaking skills, an undying support of the coal miners whom she called "her boys," the fight on behalf of child laborers, and a flair for generating publicity. In 1903, Mother Jones organized a weeklong march of child mill workers from Pennsylvania to the New York home of President Theodore Roosevelt. Her time in jails in the mining areas of West Virginia and Colorado drew public protests on her behalf and attention to the miners' cause.

Teacher Notes



Photo: National Education Association

## **National Education Association, 1857 to the present**

The National Education Association is America's oldest and largest organization committed to advancing the cause of public education. Founded in 1857 in Philadelphia and now headquartered in Washington, D.C., the NEA has about 2.6 million members who work at every level of education, from pre-school to university graduate programs. The NEA has affiliates in every state as well as in over 13,000 local communities across the United States.

The NEA's annual representative assembly (RA) draws more than 10,000 delegates who vote on the organization's policies, making it one of the largest deliberative bodies in the world. At the local level, the NEA conducts professional workshops as well as negotiates contracts for school district employees.

### Teacher Notes



Photo: UNITE Archives, Kheel Center, Cornell University

## **Pauline Newman, circa 1890-1986**

### **International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union**

"The corner of a shop would resemble a kindergarten because we were young, eight, nine and ten years old. It was a world of greed; the human being didn't mean anything."

Like most garment workers at the turn of the 20th Century, Pauline Newman was a young girl and a recent immigrant. Just 10-years-old and newly arrived from Lithuania, she made \$1.50 for a seven-day workweek at the Triangle Shirtwaist Company in 1901. In 1909, Pauline Newman spoke at the Shirtwaist Makers Strike or the "Uprising of the Twenty Thousand," organized by Newman and her co-workers.

Pauline Newman became the first full-time woman organizer for the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, working in the northeast and midwest where she played a role in numerous major strikes. She was no longer at the Triangle Shirtwaist Company when the factory burst into flames on March 25, 1911, killing 146 workers. But that tragedy brought the garment workers' working conditions to the public's attention, and tens of thousands of striking workers eventually won higher pay, a shorter day, and a weekend.

(Note to teachers: the words on this photo read, "P.M. Newman, 1912, entertaining the Kalamazoo strikers!")

#### Teacher Notes



Photo: The George Meany Memorial Archives

## **Frances Perkins, 1882-1965** **U.S. Secretary of Labor**

"I came to Washington to work for God, FDR, and the millions of forgotten, plain common workingmen."

Born to a middle-class Republican family in Massachusetts, Frances Perkins became dedicated to social reform during the time she worked at Hull House (a social settlement) in Illinois in 1904. Starting in 1910, Perkins began to hold a number of advocacy group jobs and official positions in New York State, many dealing with labor legislation. As secretary of the New York Consumers' League, she investigated labor conditions and successfully lobbied the state legislature for a law to restrict the hours of women workers to 55 hours a week.

By 1928, Frances Perkins was the industrial commissioner of the state of New York, and in 1929, she was reappointed by Governor Franklin Delano Roosevelt, retaining that position until her appointment to U.S. Secretary of Labor by Roosevelt in 1933. As the first female cabinet member in U.S. history, Perkins was instrumental in groundbreaking labor laws, which served as the cornerstones of the New Deal. The Social Security Act and the Fair Labor Standards Act are monuments to her political prowess and her personal dedication to the workers.

### Teachers Notes

## **A. Philip Randolph, 1889-1979**

### **Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters**

"Freedom is never granted; it is won. Justice is never given; it is exacted. Freedom and justice must be struggled for by the oppressed of all lands and races..."



Photo: A. Philip Randolph Institute

Acknowledged as the greatest black labor leader in American history, A. Philip Randolph was born in Crescent City, Florida, to parents who were descendants of slaves. Randolph, like many southern blacks at the time, moved north to New York's Harlem, where he first hoped to become an actor but instead attended City College. In 1917, Randolph co-founded *The Messenger*, a radical Harlem magazine.

In the 1920s, after federal control of the railroads ended, the Pullman Company began a company union to curtail any outside organizing efforts. The Pullman porters turned to Randolph because of his excellent speaking skills, his fight for rights of African Americans, and since Randolph was not a porter, he was immune from Pullman's vengeance. In 1925 The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters was launched. It was not until 1937, after years of struggle and New Deal legislation, that the Pullman Company recognized the union, resulting in the first contract ever between a company and a black union. Starting in the 1940s, Randolph became actively involved in the Civil Rights Movement and helped organize the March for Jobs and Freedom in Washington, D.C., in 1963.

Teacher Notes



## **Walter P. Reuther, 1907-1970**

### **United Auto Workers**

"There is no greater calling than to serve your fellow men. There is no greater contribution than to help the weak. There is no greater satisfaction than to have done it well."

Photo: Walter P. Reuther Library,  
Wayne State University

Walter P. Reuther's commitment to unionism and social issues was nurtured by his father, a brewery-wagon driver and union leader in Wheeling, West Virginia. Like many young men of the time, Reuther moved to Detroit to become part of the growing automobile industry, and he and his brother Victor soon became involved in the United Auto Workers. Reuther first came to the nation's attention in 1937 as a young UAW official who orchestrated the historic sit-down strikes, winning recognition of the UAW by automobile companies and factories. By 1946, Reuther emerged as the UAW's president.

Walter Reuther's vision went well beyond his UAW work for higher wages, better working conditions, and benefits. He favored active support of World War II by labor and created a plan in 1940 to utilize automobile plants for airplane production, a year before Pearl Harbor and America's entering the war. He was also actively involved in the Civil Rights Movement and financially supported the United Farm Workers in its early years. Along with George Meany, Reuther engineered the merger of the American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organizations in 1955, but he led the UAW out of the AFL-CIO in 1968 after a dispute with Meany.

#### Teacher Notes



Photo: American Federation of Teachers

## **Albert Shanker, 1928-1997** **American Federation of Teachers**

"My general philosophy of education is that it must be available to all students on an equal basis. How to achieve this is a product of dialogue."

Albert Shanker, the son of Russian-Jewish immigrants, was born on Manhattan's Lower East Side in 1928. His father delivered newspapers from a pushcart. His mother, who worked in a sweatshop as a sewing machine operator, taught Shanker a deep appreciation of trade unionism and a love of spirited debate. In the early 1950s, he found a "lousy job" as a per-diem substitute teacher at PS 179 in East Harlem and launched a career as an educator and a trade union leader.

Shanker joined the New York Teachers' Guild, and before long he was organizing full-time for the American Federation of Teachers. Shanker got his members to walk the picket line during a High School Teachers Association strike, and eventually the two groups merged to form the United Federation of Teachers which won the teachers the right to negotiate. As president of the American Federation of Teachers from 1974 to 1997, he became known as a strong and courageous advocate for labor and for education reform, including support for charter schools and national standards.

Teacher Notes

## Labor Figures for Case Studies

The following persons offer an interesting study for students of labor history:

Jane Addams  
John P. Altgeld  
Sarah Bagely  
Leonora Bagley  
Thomas Hart Benton  
Mary McCloud Bethune  
Harry Bridges  
Joseph Buchanan  
Ralph Chapin  
Tennessee Claflin  
The Clancy Brothers  
Jennie Curtis  
Clarence Darrow  
Dorothy Day  
Mary Dreier  
Elizabeth Gurley Flynn - "the Rebel Girl"  
John Fitzpatrick  
William Z. Foster  
Douglas Fraser  
William L. Garrison - Abolitionism  
William Green  
Woody Guthrie  
Bill Haywood  
William Heighton  
Sidney Hillman  
Joe Hill or Joe Hillstrom  
Lewis Hine  
Jimmy Hoffa  
Dolores Huerta  
Mary Morton Kehew  
Florence Kelly  
Martin Luther King, Jr.  
John L. Lewis  
Frank Little  
Peter Maurin  
Peter J. McGuire  
George Meany  
Chico Mendes  
Phillip Murray  
Isaac Myers  
Agnes Nester  
Robert Owen - Utopian Communities

Albert Parsons  
Lucy Parsons  
Rose Pesotta  
Terence Powderly  
Gabriel Prosser - Slave Revolt of 1800  
Diego Rivera  
Elizabeth Rogers  
Eleanor Roosevelt  
Franklin Delano Roosevelt  
Theodore Roosevelt - breaking corporate trusts  
Upton Sinclair  
August Spies  
John Steinbeck  
Alzina Stevens  
Ira Steward  
Adolph Strasser  
Lizzie Swank  
William Sylvis  
Harry S. Truman - struggle with unions after World War II  
Denmark Vesey  
Carrie Wilson  
William B. Wilson  
Victoria Woodhull  
Levenia Wright

## MAKING USE OF THE TIMELINE

The historic timeline of the *Heroes of American Labor* is divided into four centuries (17th through 20th). It also includes some general directions of organized labor in the 21st century. The timeline also presents major historical areas of struggle, including: slavery and indentured servitude, abuse of women workers, child labor, immigrant exploitation, growth of labor organizations, relations with the courts, and the modern era.

The following are some of the ways that educators might use these topics:

### SLAVERY - THE ULTIMATE ABUSE OF THE WORKERS

#### Slaves from Africa

The massive forests and vast swamps of the "new world" presented an enormous challenge to colonists who desired to "tame" the land for traditional European agriculture. Very early in colonial history, slaves were imported against their will from West Africa.

#### Research Questions:

Was there slavery in America before the arrival of Europeans?

Are there nations in which slavery exists today?

When was slavery last recorded in America?

What constitutes slave labor?

Have your students explore recent slavery cases (such as enslaved farm workers in Ventura County, California)

#### Note to teachers:

Slavery existed in North America among many Native American tribes, especially in the Pacific Northwest and in Mexico.

#### Class Discussion:

Is there slavery today in American sweatshops? How can people get trapped in low paying and abusive jobs?

## **INDENTURED SERVITUDE**

During the colonial era, orphaned and "illegitimate" children were forced into compulsory servitude on the pretext of being given training in vital occupational skills. Apprenticeships, from ages 14 to 21, were supposed to provide food, clothing and shelter in return for labor related to learning one's craft.

Servant ships were also filled with a cargo of "impressed" people: the poor, debtors, prisoners, and kidnapped children.

### **Research Questions:**

Have students investigate life for a boy or girl servant in the colonial era.

Have your students investigate the reasons for, and events surrounding, the running away of the indentured servant Benjamin Franklin in 1723.

The following were complaints that "masters" issued in courts against their indentured servants. What did colonial "masters" do to overcome a servant's:

Insolence?

Negligence?

Laziness?

Stolen food?

Stolen alcohol?

Parties?

Desire to marry or have a relationship?

Pregnancy?

Running away?

What kinds of modern consumer products are made by convict labor?

### **Class Discussion:**

When immigrants are brought to the U.S., they are often required by their transporters to pay off expenses for their travel, etc. How can this situation lead to involuntary servitude or even slavery?

How is the use of prisoner-labor (convict-labor) in this and other countries similar, or dissimilar, to indentured servitude?

## **CHILD LABOR**

By the turn of the 20th century, according to the writer-activist John Spargo, there were over 1,800,000 boys and girls under the age of 16 in the American work force. Unions supported the creation of high schools and middle schools, in part, as a way of getting children out of dangerous mills and mines.

"The golf links lie so near the mill, that almost everyday -  
the laboring children can look out, to see the men at play."

Sarah N. Cleghorn, 1876-1956

### **Student Assignments:**

Have your students define these child labor-related terms:

- "Breakers" (coal mining)
- "Newsies" (newspaper boys)
- "Bobbin Boys" (textile industry)
- "Loom Girls" (textile industry)

Have your students read: "Mark the Match Boy" (by Horatio Alger) and compare Alger's outcomes with those of "The Little Match Girl" by Hans Christian Andersen.

### **Research Questions:**

Find out how and for what reasons the following organizations were started:

- YMCA
- Boys' Town (Father Flanigan's home in Nebraska)
- SPCC (Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children)

Reports might be made on America's Child Labor Laws and the present international exploitation of children in the work force.

What kinds of businesses in the U.S. today rely upon the work of children?

What was it like for working children before the Occupational Safety and Health Administration?

Is there still an abuse of child labor in this or other countries? Where? What kinds of products do they make? How much do they earn?

### **Class Discussion:**

Is it okay for students to have jobs? What kind of work is all right for students or wrong for students? Can jobs interfere with studies? Discuss work conditions, hours, exposure to dangers, etc.

## **EXPLOITATION OF WOMEN WORKERS**

By the 1890s, women workers were playing a major role in American industry. Since the earliest industrialization centered on textile mills and most mill workers were women, the majority of industrial workers were women. Women were paid, in many cases, half the wages of men for the same work. By 1900 more than 2,000,000 women were in the work force.

Until the 1920s nearly all teachers and nurses were women and grossly underpaid, creating one of the largest groups of abused workers in human history. And, since women had no political power, they had little or no recourse but organizing and demonstration. In addition to exploitation in the workplace, women were expected to form the basis of the nation's charity and religious volunteerism as well.

### **Research Questions:**

Have students find out about the great Triangle Shirtwaist Fire. (Note to teachers: Cornell University's Kheel Center and UNITE Archives provide a terrific Web site of information at: <http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire>.)

What is a "sweatshop" and how do such jobs exploit female labor?

How does "piece work" exploit the female worker?

How can consumers find out about how products are made, and if women or children are exploited in the manufacturing process?

### **Class Discussion:**

When manufacturing is taken "off shore," American labor laws do not apply. How can we as consumers make sure that the things we buy are not made by abused workers? Do we have moral or ethical responsibilities in our purchases?

## THE IMMIGRANTS' DREAM

Ask your students to define America's "Golden Door" as described in the poem by Emma Lazarus, written in 1888:

"Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the tempest-tossed to me.  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door."

### Research Questions:

What were some immigrant families' actual experiences when they came to the United States?

- Lack of Jobs
- Job Replacements for American Workers
  - "Scab Labor"
  - "Sweatshops"
  - "Intimidation"
- Language Barriers
- Public Fear of Foreigners
- Lack of Police Protection
- Differences in Religion
- Racial or Ethnic Discrimination
- Education
- Housing

Are modern immigrants free from work exploitation?

Why were organized workers in the United States so often opposed to immigrant families?

How did some business leaders exploit fear of foreigners as a way to prevent workers from gaining political and economic power?

### Class Discussion:

Ask students to discuss anti-immigrant comments they have heard.

Why are people fearful of workers who form a major economic platform for American wealth?

## **WAGE SLAVERY**

"Divide and Conquer" was a tactic developed by the ancient Romans, but it has long worked to oppress working women and men as well. Racism, xenophobia, and sexism can be examined as tools of exploitation as well as social wrongs.

Frederick Douglas, the great African-American thinker at the time of the American Civil War, once worked as a "caulker" in a Baltimore, Maryland, shipyard. Later he wrote about the resentment of white workers there expressed against black slaves:

"In the country, this conflict is not so apparent; but, in cities, such as Baltimore, Richmond, New Orleans, Mobile, etc; it is seen pretty clearly. The slave-holder with a craftiness peculiar to themselves, by encouraging the enmity of the poor, labouring white men against the blacks, succeeds in making the said white men almost as much a slave as the black slave himself. The difference between the white slave, and the black slave, is this: the latter belongs to ONE slave-holder, and the former belongs to ALL the slave-holders, collectively. The white slave has taken from his, by indirection, what the black slave had taken from him, directly, and without ceremony. Both are plundered, and by the same plunderers."

### **Research Questions:**

Have students define: company stores, payment in script, corporate "goon squads."

Ask your students to define the differences between "wage slavery" and "involuntary servitude."

In what ways are company towns and script wages like traditional slavery? In what ways are they different?

### **Class Discussion:**

Can working people with families get caught in economic circumstances that prevent them from moving, taking better jobs elsewhere, and accepting less than decent working conditions?

How can credit cards and buying-on-time create wage slaves?

How can racism, sexism, homophobia, and xenophobia be tools for the oppression of working families?

## **WHAT DID THE UNIONS WANT? QUOTES FROM LABOR LEADERS**

### **Class Discussion:**

What is right or wrong with these quotes and with these sentiments?

"I am not blind to the shortcomings of our own people. I am not unaware that leaders betray, and sell out, and play false. But this knowledge does not outweigh the fact that my class, the working class, is exploited, driven, fought back with the weapon of starvation, with guns and with venal courts whenever they strike for conditions more human, more civilized for their children, and for their children's children."

**Mary Harris "Mother" Jones**

"My friends, the only thing the working people need besides the necessities of life, is time. Time. Time with which our lives begin; time with which our lives close; time to cultivate the better nature within us; time to brighten our homes. Time, which brings us from the lowest condition up to the highest civilization; time, so that we can raise men to a higher plane."

**Samuel Gompers**  
**In an 1890 speech during the campaign for the 8-hour workday**

"What does labor want? We want more schoolhouses and less jails, more books and less arsenals, more learning and less vice, more constant work and less crime, more leisure and less greed, more justice and less revenge. In fact more of the opportunities to cultivate our better natures to make manhood more noble, womanhood more beautiful and childhood more happy and bright."

**Samuel Gompers**

"We are not going to operate as a narrow economic pressure which says 'we are going to get ours and the public be damned or the consumer be damned.' We say that we want to make progress with the community and not at the expense of the community."

**Walter Reuther**

"We do not hate you or rejoice to see your industry destroyed; we hate the agribusiness system that seeks to keep us enslaved and we shall overcome and change it not by retaliation or bloodshed but by a determined nonviolent struggle carried on by those masses of farm workers who intend to be free and human."

**Cesar Chavez**  
**in "Open Letter to the Grape Industry"**

## STUDENT ACTIVITIES/CLASSROOM DISCUSSIONS

### EXPERIENCING SOLIDARITY

#### Classroom Experiment:

Give a "team" of your students an assignment that requires a group-effort and limited time to complete. Explain that all of the students will receive the same grade. Have students record their group's discussions on the fair assignment of work.

Who does what?

What happens when one member of the group fails to do his or her part? What do you do if one of your classmates gets sick or for some reason doesn't make it to class?

### WHAT MAKES A GREAT LABOR LEADER?

Why are the following important qualities for a union leader or negotiator? What classes can students take in school or in college that will strengthen these skills?

- Powerful public speaking abilities and experience
- Strong vocabulary - command of the English language
- Command of the major languages spoken by the union's members
- Ability to make decisions under fire
- Intelligence
- Sense of humor - overall friendliness
- Likable personality
- Open-mindedness - ability to really listen to others
- Proven integrity and reliability
- Endurance - patience - stamina
- Good health - good health habits

#### Class Discussion:

What are the qualities of a leader?

How can a leader be undermined by those with whom he or she is negotiating?

Can a leader be undermined by his/her own people?

Consider the issue of "burnout." What can be done to keep a leader strong and effective?

## **FACING UP TO CORRUPTION**

President Thomas Jefferson worried about the fact that power corrupts; in fact, he went as far to say, "absolute power corrupts absolutely." All human organizations and individuals can be corrupted, and that is why checks and balances are part of the American way of life.

### **Research Assignment:**

Have your students investigate historical incidents of corruption in unions.

Compare that corruption with abuses going on in corporations, government, and organizations during the same era.

### **Class Discussion:**

How do you keep labor organizations honest or clean?

Is there a role for government here?

## **THE UNION CONTRACT**

### **THE WORKING PROFESSIONALS' COLLECTIVE VOICE**

When we take a good look at the timeline of labor history in the United States, we can see clearly that item-by-item each element of the union contract was won by enormous sacrifice.

### **Research Assignment:**

Have your students identify on the timeline and through their own research when these elements in a union contract were established:

1. Fair Wages for Fair Work - Terms of Wages
2. Hours Worked Each Day - Each Week
3. Payment For Overtime Hours
4. Length of Contract - Duration of the Agreement
5. Rights of Management - Prerogatives of the Employer
6. Discipline Matters
7. Rights of Workers - Grievances
8. Seniority Matters

## INTERVIEWING A UNION MEMBER

### Research Assignment:

Students select a person in their family, or among their family's friends, who belongs to a labor union.

Note to teachers: The better the students prepare for their interviews, the better their results will be. Students can give a written or oral presentation of their findings. They may also be asked to discuss their findings with their class.

Students prepare for an Interview:

Create a list of interview questions. Remember, the student should be prepared to have responses to questions that lead to follow-up questions.

### What's in an Interview File?

1. Background Research
  - i) Subject's Personal Data
    - Name
    - Age
    - Family information - Married - Children
    - Current residence
  - ii) Subject's Occupation
    - Skills needed
    - Formal education
      - Schools attended - Degrees
    - Vocational training
      - Work experience - History
      - Related work experience
  - iii) Company or organization for which he or she works
  - iv) Name of Person's Union or Craft Guild
    - Has interviewee belonged to any other union or craft guild?

### Note to Students:

Ask yourself, how will I record the information that I am learning? Have the questions written out with lots of space to record your findings. Your interviewee may allow you to tape record the session - always ask permission to tape-record or to take photographs. Interviewing people without their permission is usually against the law.

2. The Interview Meeting (questions and response probes)
  - i) What was your first job experience?
  - ii) Who did you work for?
  - iii) If you are not working for the person who hired you for your first job, why not? If conditions were different, would you still have the same first job?
    - Pay scale
    - Working conditions
    - Nature of the work
  - iv) Do you belong to a labor union or craft guild?
  - v) How did you join this union or craft guild?
  - vi) How much do you pay in union/guild dues each month?
  - vii) What are the benefits of belonging to your union/guild?
  - viii) Were you given special job training by your union/guild?
  - ix) Do you think your job conditions would be different if you didn't belong to a union/guild?
  - x) What are the good and bad points about your experience as a union/guild member?
  - xi) What are your career hopes for the future?

## **ARTS AND THE UNION MOVEMENT**

Over the years, much interesting art (visual and performing) and literature have been produced in support of, and sometimes in opposition to, the union movement. Exploring "Union Art" is a terrific way to create an interest in labor history by art students.

**Research Topics** in "Union Art" history might include:

- The role of printmakers
- The role of photographers
- The role of songwriters
- The role of filmmakers
- The role of poets
- The role of painters
- The role of writers/playwrights

Also, many individual artists had played, and continue to play, important roles in the labor movement. Their lives make ideal research assignments:

- Thomas Hart Benton
- Ralph Chaplin
- The Clancy Brothers
- Woody Guthrie
- Joe Hill or Joe Hillstrom
- Winslow Homer
- Diego Rivera
- Upton Sinclair
- John Steinbeck

## **STRIKES AND WORK ACTIONS**

Since the very earliest days of the American Republic, strikes and labor slowdowns have been part of our history. One of the few tools working women and men have is the withholding of their labor or professional services. Many of our nation's strikes have resulted in violence, often as much the responsibility of workers as managers.

To the public-at-large, strikes are the most visible tool of unions and guilds. There are many opportunities for students to learn about working conditions and the issues involved through the study of both contemporary and historic strikes.

### **Research Assignment:**

Have your students follow an impending strike, a work action or strike in the media.

Select an organization and union that are engaged in pre-strike situations, follow the activities of both labor and management until the labor dispute is resolved.

How does the National Labor Relations Board work with the parties in a strike?

Have students examine the PATCO (Professional Air Traffic Controllers Association) strike and President Reagan's role in breaking that union. What was the impact on the overall labor movement in the 1980s?

### **Classroom Discussion:**

What happens when a union loses a strike?

What are the pressures on unions *not* to strike?

### **Historic Strikes to Examine:**

Flint Sit-Down Strike of 1937

Homestead Steel Strike

Lawrence Strike

Lowell Mills Strike

Ludlow Massacre

Memorial Day Massacre of 1937

Patterson Silk Strike

Pullman Strike of 1894

Railroad Strike of 1877

### **More Recent Strikes to Examine:**

Air Traffic Controllers Strike (1981)

Frontier Hotel in Las Vegas (1991)

Major League Baseball (1994)

Screen Actors Guild Commercial Actors (2000)

## **UNDERSTANDING GRIEVANCES**

### **Classroom Discussion:**

Have students discuss bad experiences they have had as workers.

What was your first job?

What were you paid?

Describe working conditions:

Clean work place?

Reasonable hours?

Fair pay?

Sexual harassment?

Have students discuss what working conditions are acceptable / unacceptable:

Health and health insurance

Safety and toxic dangers

Sick leave

Maternity/paternity leave

Hours per week

Days off per week

Bereavement leave

Retirement

What is the grievance process for a firing without cause in a union shop?

What recourse does a worker have in a non-union shop?

## UNIONS TODAY AND IN THE FUTURE

"Not surprisingly, union membership has slid from a high of 40 percent of the private sector work force in the late 1950s to 9.8 percent last year (1997), the first time it has sunk to single digits since the 1930s.

"Should this steep drop in union membership matter to most Americans? Yes, a great deal. For one thing, unions paved the road to the middle class for millions of working families.

"U.S. economic success in this century has depended on the ability of workers to buy the products they produce. It took the emergence of mass-based unions in the 1930s to institutionalize the revolutionary principle that Henry Ford had pioneered: Workers ought to share in the productivity improvements that they help create. This simple idea - linking rising productivity to rising wages - led us into what many have called the golden years of the U.S. economy.

"From the early 1970s on, however, the decline of unions has fueled the decline of real wages. We began building exit ramps rather than entrances to the middle-class highway, leaving the United States with the distinction of having the most unequal income distribution in the industrial world."

**Harley Shaiken, University of California, Berkley**  
*From The Tennessean, Sunday, March 15, 1998*

### **Research Assignment:**

Have your students research the change in union membership. Which unions are growing fastest? What type of work (jobs) do they represent? Which unions are losing membership? What type of work (jobs) do they represent? Is membership of unions in the private sector increasing or decreasing? Is membership of unions in the public sector (government jobs) increasing or decreasing?

Are unions remaining trade/job specific, e.g., do the United Auto Workers only represent autoworkers?

Are there "new" unions (either brand new or as the result of mergers)?

Why are unions losing ground? Do they have a purpose in today's workplace?

How does union membership impact America's working families?

### **Classroom Discussion:**

Why are doctors, IT workers and dot.com workers organizing?

There were many protestors -- both union members and environmentalists -- at recent World Trade Organization meetings (most recently in North America in Seattle and Toronto). Why were they protesting? What were the issues?

What do you see as unions' roles in the future?

## **LOOKING FOR THE UNION LABEL**

### **Research Assignment:**

Have your students research how many unions/guilds were involved in:

- Making their tennis shoes/clothing?
- Making the most recent movie they saw?
- Manufacturing their sports equipment?
- Manufacturing their computers?
- Manufacturing their car/their family's car?
- Presenting the local news broadcast?
- Creating their favorite TV show?
- Presenting the last music concert they saw?
- Flying the last plane they were on?
- Their school day (from bus driver, janitor, cafeteria worker to teacher)?

## **THE COMPANY'S RIGHTS**

### **Classroom Discussion:**

Ask your students to discuss the question of "loyalty" of a worker to his or her employer.

Do unions want their companies or organizations to be successful?

Do unions undermine a company's competitiveness?

Do unions make sense for "professional workers?"

Do students understand that both labor and management have rights?

What behaviors from workers are reasonable for management?

- Effort
- Cleanliness
- Punctuality
- Honesty
- Cooperation

Can a working person be part of a union and a loyal employee of a company or organization at the same time?

## CONGRESS AND THE COURTS

### **Research Assignment:**

Explore U.S. Supreme Court cases and acts of Congress that define the rights of workers and their unions.

Some of these acts and cases include:

- Age Discrimination in Employment Act
- Civil Rights Act
- Clayton Act
- Commonwealth vs. Hunt
- Davis - Bacon Act
- Equal Pay Act
- Exclusion Act of 1882
- Fair Labor Standards Act
- Japanese Exclusion Law of 1924
- Landrum - Griffin Act
- National Industrial Recovery Act
- National Labor Relations Act - 1935
- Norris - La Guardia Act
- Occupational Safety and Health Act
- Railway Labor Act - 1926
- Taft-Hartley Act
- Wagner Act

## UNION TERMS

Have students choose one of the following terms and look up the word in a standard dictionary. If the dictionary does not have a labor-oriented definition of the word, have students seek other sources. Explain how the control of language affects the control of thought. Why don't we hear more about unions and their activities?

Agency Shop  
Anti-Trust  
Arbitration  
Bargaining Agent  
Benefits - Fringe Benefits  
Black Listing  
Boycott  
Business Agent  
Certification  
Collective Bargaining  
Company Union  
Company Town  
Craft Guilds  
Employee - Employer  
Fact Finding  
Feather Bedding  
Federation  
Grievance  
Immigrant  
Job Action  
Layoff  
Local - Local Union  
Lockout  
Mediation  
Minimum Wage  
Pickets - Picketing  
Piece Work  
Production  
Raiding  
Recognition  
Right-to-Work Laws  
Salary  
Scab  
Shop Steward  
Shutout  
Seniority  
Skilled/Unskilled Workers  
Slowdown - Work Slowdown  
Solidarity

Speed Up  
Strike  
Sweatshops  
Sweetheart Contract  
Sympathy Strike  
Union Dues  
Union Label  
Union Security Agreement  
Union Shop  
Walkout  
Wildcat Strike  
Work Rules  
Yellow Dog Contracts

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