

## The Great Depression: Labor Relations

- The Great Depression resulted in the unprecedented involvement of the Federal Government in labor-management relations.
- The Great Depression was devastating to the common working man but saw dramatic growth in the labor movement.
- Use of the sit down strike strategy brought recognition of unions in several large industries including the auto industry.

### Lesson Abstract

In an earlier unit “Early Response to Industrialism: Labor Movement” students learned about efforts by American workers to promote “collective bargaining” and methods of organization, the political and social obstacles encountered.

In this lesson students first explore the harsh working condition of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Then they will read two excerpts presenting different views on unions in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Next the students are presented with information on The National Industrial Recovery Act and Wagner Act and an overview of the Flint Sit-Down Strike. Students will fill in a graphic organizer with Core Democratic Values and Economic Principles relating to the Flint Sit-Down Strikes. After students share their graphic organizers in small groups, the teacher leads a discussion comparing the two perspectives of the event. The lesson concludes with students writing how they would create a class union and the changes they would fight to make.

### Content Expectations or Standards

#### **USHG 7.1 Global or Cross-temporal Expectations**

USHG 7.1.3 **The New Deal** – Explain and evaluate Roosevelt’s New Deal Policies including

- expanding the federal government’s responsibilities to protect the environment (e.g., Dust Bowl and the Tennessee Valley), meet challenges of unemployment, address the needs of workers, farmers, poor, and elderly (*National Geography Standard 14, p. 212*)

#### **C 3.1 Structure, Functions, and Enumerated Powers of National Government**

3.1.1 Analyze the purposes, organization, functions, and processes of the legislative branch as enumerated in Article I of the Constitution.

3.1.2 Analyze the purposes, organization, functions, and processes of the executive branch as enumerated in Article II of the Constitution.

#### **E 1.4 Role of Government in the Market**

E 1.4.4 **Functions of Government** – Explain the various functions of government in a market economy including the provision of public goods and services, the creation of currency, the establishment of property rights, the enforcement of contracts, correcting for externalities and market failures, the redistribution of income and wealth, regulation of labor (e.g., minimum wage, child labor, working conditions), and the promotion of economic growth and security.

### Key Concept(s)      collective bargaining

#### **Instructional Resources**

- Westinghouse factory QuickTime movie
- *Going to Work* print
- “Bill Knox Advises Young Workers About Unions”
- “Savage Blames Labor Unions for the Great Depression”
- *Autoworkers’ houses* print
- General Motors CEO
- \* “Songs and Yells of Steel Workers”

## Lesson Sequence

### Beginning of Class:

- Have a scene from the Westinghouse factory playing while students are entering the classroom. The included scenes are 3-4 minutes in length each. With them loaded into your media player they can run from class change through the first few minutes of class.
- Also have the image *Going to Work*, 1941 projected on the board. *Going to Work* conveys the dignified poverty of two workers.
- The students should analyze the photo and film and answer the following questions on a sheet of paper:
  - How are these two media similar?
  - Based on what you have observed, what are three things you might infer about working conditions in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century?
  - What questions do these images raise in your mind?
- **DISCUSS** with the students their opinions and explain what they have learned.

1. Review the previous unit on the labor movement during the American Industrialism Era (disparity of wealth, industrialization, labor movements and mechanization). Explain what the working conditions of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Here are some overview notes that will help:

Although some improvements had been made, working conditions were harsh at the beginning of the 20th century. During these early years of the century, pay was low, workweeks were long, business conditions were volatile, competition for jobs was intense (due, in part, to immigration) and employees were unquestionably subject to the doctrine of employment-at-will. Also, there was little compensation beyond the paycheck. For example, retirement income depended almost exclusively on what one saved during one's working life, and there was no government or employer aid if workers suffered job-related injuries or lost their jobs. Job insecurity, low pay, and poor working conditions led to labor unrest, as indicated by the growth in union membership and by several major strikes.

2. Display the image *Autoworkers' houses Flint, Michigan*. Pass out the attached graphic organizer. Explain to the students the Flint Sit-Down Strikes. The following notes may be helpful:

Working on the line at General Motors in Flint was a job many men needed desperately in the 1930's, but it was also tremendously difficult. Terrible working conditions, combined with unfair and devious payroll practices, made the auto plants of Depression-era Flint into ripe locations for union organization.

Nevertheless, the true legacy of the 1936-37 sit-down strike is that over the next forty years the UAW won for its membership some of the broadest and most significant benefits of any union in the country: full health coverage, generous pensions, and even 90% pay during lay-offs in some cases. While some may argue that this had the effect of weakening the automobile industry in America, a more persuasive argument would be that it created a model of industrial employment that has been emulated all over the world.

Guide the students in filling out the graphic organizer.

3. Read the included article General Motors CEO. Have the students reflect on the government's role in the regulation of labor (e.g., minimum wage, child labor, working conditions), and the promotion of economic growth and security as it relates to GM and the Flint Strikes and the 2009 Bailout. Ask the students to answer the questions "What would have happened in both situations if the government had not intervened"?

## Assessment

The students need to write a short essay titled *Creating a Classroom Union*. Have them choose three conditions of the classroom or school that need to change. They should have an explanation of what they hope to gain from each change and how they would go about promoting the change.

## Possible Extensions

- **CLASS DEBATE:** Divide the class into two sides Labor and Owner. Have them prepare three positions for their own side to argue for and one rebuttal against the other.
- **UNION SONG:** Show the students the attached song “Songs and Yells of Steel Workers”. Have the students write their own song for their created class union.

## Instructional Resources

[Westinghouse Air Brake Co. Westinghouse Co. works \(casting scene\) /](#)  
[Westinghouse Air Brake Co. Westinghouse Co. works \(moulding scene\) /](#)

[Going to Work](#), 1941.

*Going to Work* conveys the dignified poverty of two workers through such narrative detail as ill-fitting clothing and shabby housing.



### [Bill Knox Advises Young Workers About Unions](#)

"Well kiddo, it don't make much difference to me. I don't work in the shop no more. But I hate to see the workin' man ground down, and I can't see where he's got a chance these days unless he organizes. You got to fight for everything you git. The old knifemakers knew that, a long time ago, but they were reasonable about it, kiddo. When they figgered they deserved more money they asked for it, and if they didn't git it they went on strike, but they usually got it. Because they stuck together. The big fellas couldn't break a knifemakers' strike. They couldn't git the help, and they couldn't make knives with greenhorn labor."

### [Savage Blames Labor Unions for the Great Depression](#)

Most of the men employed in large manufacturing plants, including the railroads, joined in with some union so they could compel the companies they worked for to pay them higher wages. Right there, the good feeling was destroyed between the men that did the hiring and the men that worked for them. They commenced to have strikes, stand up strikes and sit down strikes. That wasn't good either for labor or for the owners of the mills, who had millions invested in their buildings and railroads. Both the laboring man and the financier spent their time figuring how they could beat each other instead of having good feeling. The owners began to pay out their money for all kinds of new machinery to do away with having so many men working.

### [Autoworkers' houses. Flint, Michigan](#)



Autoworkers' houses. These houses rent for twenty-five to thirty dollars and have stoves, but water is drawn from a commercial well. Flint, Michigan.

### Songs and Yells of Steel Workers

(Tune: "Over There")

C. I. O. -- C. I. O.

Here we go, we will grow, that we know,  
For our ranks are stronger,  
We're weak no longer  
We'll win our fight against the foe,  
C. I. O. -- C. I. O.  
In the mills, in the shops, mines below,  
We know what's wise now, we'll organize now  
Into one big union  
The C. I. O.

(Tune: "Polly Wolly Doodle")

To win our strike and our demands  
Come and picket on the picket line,  
In one strong union we'll join hands  
Come and picket on the picket line.  
On the line, On the line  
Come and picket on the picket line,  
We will shout and yell and fight like hell  
Come and picket on the picket line.

(Tune: "Put On Your Old Gray Bonnet")

Put on your old gray bonnet  
With your Union button on it,  
And we don't care what the bosses say,  
We'll be in clover when the strike is over,  
And we get a Union pay.

(To the tune of: "Jingle Bells")

C. I. O., C. I. O.

Hear the union cry,  
Everyone begins to see,  
We mean to do or die.  
C. I. O., C. I. O.  
Sing it good and loud,  
Union everyone of us  
We're free and brave and proud.

## CORE DEMOCRATIC VALUES

**Life:** A person's right to life can't be violated except if your life or the lives of others is threatened.

**Liberty:** This includes personal freedom, political freedom, and economic freedom. This is the freedom for people to gather in groups. They have their own beliefs, ideas and opinions. People also have the right to express their opinions in public.

- Personal Freedom - the right to think and act without government control.
- Political Freedom - the right to participate in political process.
- Economic Freedom - the right to buy, sell and trade private property and the right to employment without the government interfering.

**The Pursuit of Happiness:** As long as you don't interfere with others you have the right to seek happiness in your own way.

**Common Good:** Working together for the welfare of the community or the benefit of all.

**Justice:** All people should be treated fairly in both the benefits and the obligations of society. No individual or group should be favored over another person or group.

**Equality:** Everyone has the right to Political, Legal, Social and Economic Equality. Everyone has the right to the same treatment regardless of race, sex, religion, heritage, or economic status.

**Diversity:** The differences in culture, dress, language, heritage and religion are not just tolerated, but celebrated as a strength.

**Truth:** They should expect and demand that the government not lie to them and the government should disclose information to the people. The government and its people should not lie.

**Popular Sovereignty:** The power of the government comes from the people. The people are the ultimate authority over the government.

**Patriotism:** The people or citizens show a love and devotion for their country and the values. They can show this by words or by actions.

Lesson plan developed from project facilitated through the Michigan Council for History Education and the Genesee Intermediate School District, funded by Library of Congress grant through the Midwest Center for Teaching with Primary Sources, Milner Library, Illinois State University, Summer 2009.

<p><b>NAME</b> Either the labor union or the owners of the factory.</p>	<p><b>CDV</b> Name the specific Core Democratic Value</p>	<p><b>DESCRIPTION</b> Explain how this CDV is either represented or violated for the group of people.</p>
<p><i><b>Example:</b> Factory Owners</i></p>	<p><i>Equality</i></p>	<p><i>The factory owners are protected under the 5<sup>th</sup> Amendment, from not having the union illegally seizing their property and the government supporting it.</i></p>

## General Motors CEO Resigns as Part of Bailout Deal

Departure of General Motors' CEO part of government's bailout strategy  
GM's president and chief operating officer, Fritz Henderson, to replace Rick Wagoner  
GM to get 60 days of financing; Chrysler could get \$6 billion

**(CNN)** -- General Motors CEO Rick Wagoner announced his resignation early Monday -- the latest change for the troubled automaker.

White House and GM sources had told CNN Sunday that Wagoner would resign as part of the federal government's bailout strategy for the troubled automaker.

"On Friday I was in Washington for a meeting with Administration officials. In the course of that meeting, they requested that I 'step aside' as CEO of GM, and so I have," Wagoner said in a statement posted to the GM Web site.

He is being replaced by GM's president and chief operating officer, Fritz Henderson. Kent Kresa will serve as interim chairman.

"Having worked closely with Fritz for many years, I know that he is the ideal person to lead the company through the completion of our restructuring efforts. His knowledge of the global industry and the company are exceptional, and he has the intellect, energy, and support among GM'ers worldwide to succeed," Wagoner said.

The Obama administration gave General Motors and [Chrysler](#) failing grades Monday for their turnaround efforts and promised a sweeping overhaul of the troubled companies. The government plans to give the automakers more money, but it is also holding out the threat of a "structured bankruptcy."

The federal government will provide operating funds for both automakers for several weeks, during which time the companies will have to undergo significant restructuring, administration officials said late Sunday night.

President [Obama](#) is expected to make a formal announcement Monday morning about his plans for the companies, which have already been given \$17.4 billion.

GM will get 60 days and Chrysler 30 days in which to make a final push toward proving they can run viable businesses. If Chrysler succeeds, it will receive a \$6 billion loan. In GM's case, the officials would not specify how much money the carmaker might receive. In the case of both companies, the officials said, stakeholders -- and particularly debt holders in both companies -- had not done enough to relieve the automakers of ongoing financial burdens.

"We have made very clear that we expect a very, very substantial reduction in liability for both companies," one official said.

The administration held out the possibility of a so-called structured bankruptcy as an option.

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