

# Lessons in Labor History

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*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.*

1893

SAMUEL GOMPERS, PRESIDENT,  
*American Federation of Labor.*

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# Preface

Almost no one in America is immune to work. As Americans, most of us spend the greatest portion of our lives at work for a series of employers, accepting and expecting the benefits, customs, and responsibilities of the workplace. We look forward to paid vacation time, allowances for paid sick days, health benefits, and retirement plans. We expect to be relatively safe in the work environment, to be free of harassment, and to be paid reasonably for our work. It is seldom that we think about the hard-fought history behind those benefits, customs, and responsibilities.

The materials, resources, and lessons included herein are designed to assist teachers and students alike to think about a variety of historic social and economic events, circumstances, laws, and forces that helped to shape today's workplace. Use of these materials will lead to an expanded labor history knowledge base and a greater appreciation of the role of organized labor in this country's growth. Labor history in the United States is filled with examples of monumental bravery, abject poverty, hideous working conditions, unconscionable greed, graft, the exploitation of children and immigrants, and the indomitable spirit of American workers. Those workers believed in the promise of democracy, unilaterally supported free public education for all, and wanted an end to class privilege—particularly the practice that allowed the wealthy to buy their way out of military service—and a halt to the practice of jailing debtors.

Wisconsin's labor past is wrapped around those same issues. More than one citizen gave up their lives to improve the lot of fellow workers. They hoped to reshape the work world into a more compassionate one by establishing the standards of the eight-hour day and the 40-hour week, and by making foundries, factories, shipyards, mills, mines, railroads, print shops, and workshops of all kinds safer. They worked on railroads, made tires, furniture, bricks, and shoes; they worked deep in dark, dank mines, sweated in overheated foundries; they lost arms, hands, and feet in cramped shops and mills.

The lessons of the past have significant meaning today. In underdeveloped countries around the world, the same kinds of exploitation and safety issues have surfaced alongside issues of entrepreneurial and industrial economics. Among industrialized nations, the United States appears to be losing ground. American workers work longer hours and have less vacation time and fewer parental benefits than their counterparts in Europe and Japan. In addition, jobs that once supported thousands of American workers have been exported to underdeveloped countries, forcing many Americans to work two or more poorly paid jobs to support themselves and their families.

Making sound decisions for the future depends, in part, on understanding the implications of the past. The materials offered here are designed to begin a discussion of the role of labor in general and of organized labor in particular as they pertain to our own lives and the lives of those who have not yet entered the workplace.

# How to Use

## *Lessons in Labor History*

Wisconsin's labor history is fascinating, often colorful, and—regrettably—on occasion tragic. While all of the materials provided in this document are not Wisconsin-specific, students who begin to explore the issues will soon learn that Wisconsin has been a leader in establishing progressive working conditions, benefits, and wages. In 1999 the Wisconsin AFL-CIO provided each middle and high school with a copy of the book *Workers and Unions in Wisconsin*, written by Darryl Holter. In this book, you and your students will find a moving, personal, and informative overview of the development of union movement in this state.

Nearly everyone finds him or herself working one or more jobs during a lifetime. Knowing something about how work works can help individuals understand employer expectations, recognize the benefits that accrue to various jobs, and exercise their rights as employees. In addition, looking at the historical record gives all of us a greater appreciation for those who helped shape today's work world.

A variety of study suggestions, performance tasks, scoring rubrics, and lesson plans are provided in this document. Using them will introduce students to significant labor history concepts, events, personalities, and practices. You are invited by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, the Wisconsin State AFL-CIO, the Wisconsin Federation of Teachers, and the Wisconsin Education Association Council to use the materials to enhance the instruction you currently provide.

The material is arranged in seven sections. The first three sections are intended to be used specifically for instruction. They have been designed to be used independently or as a series. Individual lessons within each section may be used independently or combined with one or more of the other lessons to meet your instructional goals.

Selected labor history milestones and markers are also included. Exploration of the milestones and markers and the events leading up to them or following them are other ways of expanding the study of labor history.

The next two sections, the time line and the glossary, are designed as supplements to provide accurate, instant information that is relevant to the study of unions and their growth. Either section might serve as an instructional tool on its own. Section six, a listing of resources and materials that relate to one or more of the performance tasks or lesson plans, provides a starting point for labor history research. Seven, the final section, provides the text of related Wisconsin Model Academic Standards.

## SECTION ONE

### **INTRODUCTION: WHAT ARE UNIONS? How DID THEY DEVELOP IN THE UNITED STATES? WHY ARE THEY IMPORTANT TODAY?**

This section will be useful to those who wish to provide a longitudinal overview of the development of unions. It suggests six study topics that may be used in the sequence presented, independently, or in some other combination based on your curriculum goals and objectives. Use of this section will raise awareness about what union-won benefits most employees enjoy and about the price paid by early unionists and their families to achieve those benefits.

## SECTION TWO

### **PERFORMANCE TASKS**

This section presents eight performance tasks based on issues that have concerned unions and workers since early times. The issues include workplace and worker health and safety, wages, job security, political action, women and minorities, benefits including the eight-hour day, collective bargaining, and child labor. The tasks are designed to open meaningful discussion with your students and lead the way to a deeper study and appreciation of the important role unions have played in American history.

Each task provides background information, scoring rubrics, connections to the Wisconsin's Model Academic Standards, and a list of related milestones or markers in Wisconsin and national labor history. The amount of time that each task takes will vary greatly, particularly if the task is treated as a supplemental assignment or one provided as a gifted/talented opportunity. The tasks may be used as a series or as individual learning experiences.

You are encouraged to identify and explore other labor-related stories, issues, and resources that address your specific area. For example, a large body of music dedicated to labor issues exists. Music teachers may wish to explore that area specifically or expand one of the tasks to include labor-related music.

## SECTION THREE

### **TEN LESSONS: THE MODERN UNION MOVEMENT**

This section provides a closer look at the development of the modern union movement, beginning with the industrialization of the United States. Each of the 10 lessons provides background information, links to Wisconsin's Model Academic Standards, objectives, themes, discussion topics, suggested instructional strategies, and a list of print and other resources. The lessons were designed by Dr. James J. Lorence, UW-Marathon County professor of history.

The lessons in this section provide for a more profound study of the circumstances and events that shaped today's trade and industrial unions. Set against major historical events, the lessons permit students to look at the growth of unions in relation to what was happening in the nation and in Wisconsin. From Wisconsin's progressive heritage to the women's movement and the Civil Rights Act, these lessons provide texture and insight to the study of contemporary unions.

## SECTION FOUR

### AMERICAN LABOR HISTORY TIME LINE

The time line identifies some significant dates and events in national and in Wisconsin labor history. The time line may be used alone as an individual instructional device.

## SECTION FIVE

### LABOR HISTORY GLOSSARY

The glossary provides a handy guide to labor-related vocabulary, events, and individuals. As with the time line, the glossary may be used as a stand-alone instructional device.

## SECTION SIX

### RESOURCES AND MATERIALS

This section provides a listing of resources and materials related to the topics, times, issues, and individuals presented in this guide.

## SECTION SEVEN

### RELATED WISCONSIN'S MODEL ACADEMIC STANDARDS

The standards provide a framework for instruction around labor-history related events and issues. Academic standards for subjects assessed on the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examination are provided.