

The Labor Movement Mixer

These roles were developed by the Teaching for Change staff to supplement a lesson by Katy Swallel featured in this Rethinking Schools article: [Strike! Teaching labor history in a right-to-work state](#). They were used in a [2017 workshop at the National Portrait Gallery](#).

Triangle Factory Fire (1911)

Background:

The Triangle Waist Company was located in the Ash Building of Manhattan, New York. Max Blanck and Isaac Harris, the owners, hired subcontractors who then sought employees and took a percentage of the proceeds. Subcontractors set rates for wages and often paid the workers poorly. The unsafe and unhygienic environment of the factory combined with the long working hours and low wages made the Triangle Waist Factory a sweatshop. Owners claimed ignorance about the exploitation of the workers arguing they were unaware of how much their workers were paid or the working conditions of the factory. Women who worked in the clothing trade were organized with The International Ladies' Garment Workers Union. Prior to 1911, many garment workers were not members of the union; in part because they were young recently arrived female immigrants who were unfamiliar with New York City. However, some garment workers who were frustrated with their meager working conditions wanted to take action. In 1909, four hundred individuals walked out of the Ash Building after an incident occurred at the factory. The Women's Trade Union League, a club for middle class white women, assisted the workers in fending off police harassment. Clara Lemlich's galvanized support from thousands of garment workers in a meeting at Cooper Union for a general shirtwaist strike that began in November of 1909. The strike lasted until 1910 when an agreement, establishing a system for garment workers to express their grievances, was reached. However, many factories were still under the control of negligent owners who did not care about upholding workers rights or keeping them safe on the job. Dangerous working conditions and unregulated labor codes led to a tragic fire on the afternoon of March 25, 1911 in the Ash Building where the Triangle Waist Company was located. Approximately 146 of the 500 workers were killed by the inferno. Following the fire, the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union and the Women's Trade Union League sought to secure legislation for improved working conditions and other protections for the garment workers.

Sources: Orleck, Annelise. "Pauline Newman." *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*. 20 March 2009. Jewish Women's Archive. April 17, 2010.

Kheel Center, Cornell University. *The 1911 Triangle Factory Fire*, accessed February 13, 2014, <http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/index.html>

Role:

You are Pauline Newman. You immigrated to the United States from Russia and started working at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory when you were about thirteen years of age. When you realized that many of your co-workers were unable to read you organized a study group that took place in the evening. During these sessions you not only provided a space for your colleagues to learn to read but also a space for them to talk about labor and politics. You were extremely involved in the shirtwaist strike of 1909 and the Women's Trade Union League. After seven years of working at the factory you left to become an organizer with the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union. Many of your friends died in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire and you became rather depressed following their tragic death. After the fire, New York State created the Factory Investigation Commission which was a government agency responsible for regulating worker safety conditions in factories. You became one of the first inspectors for FIC and fought to ensure better working conditions for factory employees.

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Longshore Strike (1934)

Background:

Once the Great Depression hit Portland in the early 1930's, the Longshoremen decided they had had enough. Years of declining working conditions, continuously lowering wages, and less work coming in put the dock workers over the edge. On a day to day basis, Longshoremen waited at the hiring hall in hopes to get work assigned. Many days though, they left without any assignments to show for. Most of the time, older men and union workers were overlooked, and were at the bottom of the ladder. First in line was the shipping companies, which hired Waterfront Employers to take care of all of the shipping in Portland. The Waterfront Employers' Association hired foremen who were responsible for hiring longshoremen. This system led to a decent amount of turmoil due to the uncertainty and unorganization. Longshoremen went from working eighty hours in a week to five hours, and sometimes, no work at all. The extra hours took men away from their families and would leave them without sleep, resulting in several work related injuries and deaths. Foremen, who were also called gang bosses, had incredible power that they oftentimes abused. When choosing longshoremen, they went for the strongest workers and even then would often times take in the ones who offered bribes in forms of whiskey or money. Perhaps the worst part of this was the low wages. From 1930 to 1933, pay was cut from \$.90 to \$.75 an hour while they were increasing the workload. Cargo was up three times in just a few years. The Longshoremen felt that after years of being mistreated, a strike was the only valid option to gain suitable working conditions. Their demands were clear, they asked for increased wages, their union to be recognized, to control hiring, and six hour work days. Waterfront Employers had not dealt with unions since the early 1920's and the depression was hurting them as much as the longshoremen, due to the decreased number of shipments. The strike was coastwide, stretching up and down the pacific, and several other maritime employees joined to help grow the movement. Over 12,000 workers went on strike for 83 days, ending only when the revolt grew massively throughout the coast. The strike resulted in workplace democracy, a victory for those who fought. This strike is remembered as the first major shipping strike in U.S. history and brought power to unions, specifically on the West coast.

Source:

Bigelow, Bill, and Norm Diamond. "The 1934 West Coast Longshore Strike." *Zinn Education Project*, zinnedproject.org/materials/1934-west-coast-longshore-strike/.

Role:

You are William, an older longshoreman working to support your family. You joined the union after your best friend suffered from an injury after the gang boss made your group work for 16 hours in a row. Since joining, no gang boss has chosen you and you cannot afford to bribe him. You are lucky if you pick up even three hours. The union recently went on strike, and this has left you struggling more than ever. While we are on strike the Gang Bosses are taking in younger and newer longshoremen who are not unionized. There is talk that the strike is going to continue, and even escalate. Either way you are not getting the treatment you desire, but to fight the Waterfront Enterprise would perhaps hurt you even more. Nonetheless, you begin to fight even more, joining the riots taking place up and down the coast.

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Domestic Workers United (2000)

Background:

Domestic Workers United was founded in 2007 with the motivation of protecting, respecting and recognizing domestic labor workers such as housekeepers, nannies, and elder care providers. The idea began after the recognition of the injustice domestic workers face. These workers are excluded from the protections granted by the Fair Labor Standards Act, such as minimum wage, overtime, or paid time off. Many workers live without access to healthcare, and do not earn a high enough wage to live off of, and the fact that they work within others' homes hides them from the spotlight that this issue deserves. This alliance is supported by affiliated organizations and local chapters throughout the United States, including Atlanta and New York. NDWA not only works to win improved working conditions, but also pushes movement forward for rights and dignity for domestic workers, immigrants, women and their families.

Source:

"About the National Domestic Workers Alliance." *National Domestic Workers Alliance*, www.domesticworkers.org/.

Role:

You are Ai-Jen Poo. In 2000, you began organizing the numerous domestic workers spread out around the country. Most people agreed that you were taking on a futile job, due to the scattering of workers among countless homes. But the first advance for the National Domestic Workers Alliance happened on July 1st, 2010. The New York state legislature passed the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights, which legitimized domestic workers. This gave the workers the same lawful rights as any other type of worker or employee, such as vacation time and overtime pay. This was a major success for you, but that didn't stop the ball from rolling. You and the NDWA continued to expand operations to 11 states and 17 cities, and still today, work is still being done to fight for domestic worker justice.

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New York Chinatown Strike (1982)

Background:

In 1970's New York, the majority of industrial garment sewers were made up of immigrant women from China. Chinatown was packed with factories after the 1965 change in immigration policy, allowing male Asian immigrants wives and children to join them in the states. Most of these immigrants were poor and the garment industry was one of the only options for them. As rent money and utilities costs kept growing, cheap labor and accepting manufacturers that were not from the union were the best solution to rising competition. But immigration also kept growing, leading to more workers at these factories. The conditions were bleak. Hours were long and workers got paid close to nothing, workers were paid based on how much they sewed. Factories saw the positives in relocating to cheaper areas who focus less on creating unions, and began moving away from the United States. American production slowed and workers were being laid-off. When it came time to negotiate for a new contract, employers and workers did not see eye to eye. Employers demanded already low wage and benefit cutbacks and an increase in hours, but the workers union requested an increase in wages, less time, and more benefits. Workers began to organize against the employers and what came next was a strike bigger than any Chinatown had seen. More than 20,000 immigrant garment workers organized to fight for their rights in the workplace, and were met with success. Bilingual staff was hired, wage cuts were withdrawn, and respect the union was won.

Sources:

http://laborcenter.berkeley.edu/pdf/2009/quan_amerasia09.pdf

<http://ilgwu.ilr.cornell.edu/announcements/oneLongAnnouncementFromDB.html?announcementID=5>

Role:

You are May Chen. You recently moved to New York City and were inspired by the fight for labor workers rights, so you began working for the Local 23-25 and the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union. Here, you helped organize the strike of thousands of factory workers and assisted immigrant workers in the union legally. You helped labor workers apply for citizenship and sponsored petitions for them. Although you were never an underpaid and overworked factory worker, you continued the fight for workplace rights in the Coalition of Labor Union Women, the Asian Labor Committee of the New York City Central Labor Council, and the AFL-CIO's Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance.