

Steel, Solidarity, and Supply-Side Politics: Illinois Labor in the Reagan Era: *To what extent did Reagan-era policies support or undermine the interests of American workers and labor unions?*

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Suggested Grade Level Range: 11-12

Connections to U.S. History Curriculum

This lesson explores the economic and political shifts of the 1980s through the lens of Illinois labor history. Students analyze union culture, the decline of industrial work, and Reagan-era economic policies using speeches, images, and legislation. The lesson fosters critical thinking about how national policies impacted working-class communities and shaped modern labor debates.

Local Context

Illinois, especially Chicago's South Side, was home to one of the nation's largest steel industries. Through the life and activism of union leader Ed Sadlowski and the decline of South Works, students explore how Reagan-era deregulation, trade policies, and anti-union sentiments affected local workers and communities.

Student Learning Objectives

- *I can evaluate how Reagan's economic policies impacted Illinois workers and unions*
- *I can analyze political speeches and legislation to assess shifting views on labor*
- *I can connect local labor history to national political and economic changes*

Standards Addressed

- SS.H.2.9-12: Analyze change and continuity in historical eras
- SS.EC.2.9-12: Analyze the role of government policy in the economy
- SS.CV.7.9-12: Evaluate how historical movements influenced policy and civic engagement

Materials Used

Sources for Supporting Question 1	Sources for Supporting Question 2	Sources for Supporting Question 3
● Source A: Ed Sadlowski and South Works: Union Life Exhibit	● Source A: Remarks on Signing the Trade and Tariff Act of 1984	● Source A: Remarks at a Reagan-Bush Rally in Springfield, Illinois

Procedure

Anticipatory Set/ Staging the Compelling Question

- Begin by dividing the class into groups of four. Each group receives a different primary source image related to Illinois labor during the Reagan era (found on *PSR website Reagan Era Primary Sources*):
 - Local Union No. 183 in parade
 - Progressive Steel Workers Union Membership Card
 - Ed Sadlowski campaigners with posters
 - Ed Sadlowski in 1976
- Students analyze the image using the following guiding questions:
 - What do you see?
 - What time period do you think this image comes from?
 - What is happening in the image?
 - Who are the people involved, and what might their purpose be?
 - What might this image reveal about labor identity, solidarity, or political action?
- After group discussion, each team presents their findings briefly to the class. Use this activity to introduce broader themes of labor pride, community, and the shifting landscape of the 1980s
- Use students' observations to pose the essential question: *To what extent did Reagan-era policies support or undermine the interests of American workers and labor unions?*

Supporting Question/Activity 1: Union Life Visual Analysis

- Students analyze historical photographs from the South Works exhibit in groups of 2. Each group gets a different primary source
- Guiding Questions:
 - What do these images reveal about union culture and worker identity?
 - What role did solidarity and pride play in labor communities?
 - What do these photos suggest about daily life and community for union workers?
 - How might these workers have responded to major changes in economic policy?

Supporting Question/Activity 2: Reagan and Economic Policy

- **Reading/Analyzing Sources:** Read excerpts from Reagan's Trade and Tariff Act remarks
- **Performance Task:** Discuss the impact of free trade and deregulation on the steel industry and unions
- **Guided Questions:**
 - What does Reagan say about the importance of trade and economic recovery?
 - How might the Trade and Tariff Act have benefited corporations versus unions?
 - For steelworkers and union members, what challenges or opportunities would this act create?
 - How do Reagan's remarks reflect his administration's approach to labor and industry?
 - In what ways could this policy have contributed to the decline of union power in industrial areas?

Supporting Question/Activity 3: Rhetoric and Reality, Reagan in Springfield

- **Reading/Analyzing Sources:** Analyze Reagan's campaign speech in Springfield, IL
- **Performance Task:** Compare his messaging to the lived experiences of Illinois workers at the time. Link to modern political discourse on labor and the working class
- **Guided Questions:**
 - How does Reagan frame his administration's accomplishments in this speech?
 - What specific appeals does he make to workers, farmers, and voters in Illinois?
 - How might union members or steelworkers have reacted to this speech in 1984?
 - How might people react to this speech today?
 - Compare Reagan's rhetoric to today's political discussions about labor and economic policy

- How are the challenges faced by workers then similar or different from those faced by workers now?
- What lessons can be learned from comparing Reagan's policies to current labor issues?

Assessment Options

Debate or argumentative essay. Students argue or reflect on the essential question: *Did Reagan-era policies support or undermine American workers?* They must use at least two sources (exhibit photos, speeches, policy documents) to support their position.

Informed Action

Students create a digital "Then and Now" labor exhibit comparing 1980s union struggles with present-day labor movements in Illinois. Exhibits may include photos, quotes, and interviews with local workers or union representatives.