

1A.1: Actors in the Labor Drama



1. Introduce the idea of labor history.

Display the following quotation by labor historian William Cahn:

“The history of America has been largely created by the deeds of its working people and their organizations.”

Ask students:

- What does this statement mean to you?
- How do you believe working people might contribute to history?

Possible answers: helping to build and create things of importance, voting and organizing voters, protesting, improving their communities

Tell students that in this unit they are going to look at a period of history from the perspective of working people, along with the issues that affect people in their daily lives.

Write the word *labor* on the board. Explain that *labor* is another word for work and that the history of work and of working people is known as labor history. Explain that studying labor history will help students to understand the role of individuals and groups in shaping history.

2. Have students examine the portrayal of workers in movies and TV.

Tell students that they are going to watch two clips from movies and/or TV that portray people working. Distribute **Handout 1: Worker Portrayal in Media**. Explain that students will answer a set of questions for each clip.

Show the clips and have students write their responses on the handout.

Note: You may want to define *blue collar* and *white collar workers* before students view the clips. You can use the definitions given on **Handout 2: Unit Overview**.

3. Discuss the two portrayals.

Discuss student responses to the questions on Handout 1 for each video clip.

Begin a list titled “Workplace Issues” and post it prominently in the classroom. Write on it the issues students identify from the clips. Tell students the class will add to this list over the course of the unit.

Teacher's Notes: Sample Analyses of Video Clips

The following are sample analyses of worker portrayals in the animated film *Spirited Away* and the classic film *On the Waterfront*. Time codes are given for each scene.

Spirited Away ("Finding Work at the Bathhouse": 22:30–34:12)

- **What is the dramatic action? Describe it in a sentence or two.**
Chihiro comes to the boiler room to ask for a job. A strange-looking four-armed man is running the boiler, while dozens of tiny creatures scurry around throwing coal into the boiler.
- **What is the workplace environment where the action takes place? How is it portrayed? (For example, fair, safe, dangerous, relaxed, tense)**
The workplace is dark and sinister, with lots of shadows. The boiler is spewing fire and steam. The walls and ceilings are high and ominous looking.
- **What workplace roles can you identify? (For example, blue collar or white collar worker, manager, boss, owner, police)**
The four-armed character runs the boiler and functions as a sort of manager. He has cast a spell on dozens of pieces of soot, who are the workers bringing coal to the boiler. There are also the patrons of the bath, who drop tickets down into the boiler room.
- **Is there a particular issue or issues related to the workplace that is being confronted in the clip? If so, what is it?**
Chihiro asks for a job and is refused because the manager has all the workers he needs at his command. The workers look frightened and overworked, and the working conditions look very unsafe. At one point, a worker gets trapped under the piece of coal it is carrying, and the worker is crushed. Chihiro rescues the worker.

On the Waterfront (12:14–20:05)

- **What is the dramatic action? Describe it in a sentence or two.**
Workers hoping to get work are congregating on a dock at the waterfront. Someone is writing on a board the number of work gangs that are needed for the day. A foreman calls out the names of people who will be allowed to work. A large number of workers are left without work, and a fight breaks out.

- ***What is the workplace environment where the action takes place? How is it portrayed? (For example, fair, safe, dangerous, relaxed, tense)***

The environment is hostile and tense. The scene shows the loading dock where workers are gathering, and a ship in the distance.

- ***What workplace roles can you identify? (For example, blue collar or white collar worker, manager, boss, owner, police)***

Most of the characters portrayed are longshoremen, workers who unload the ships. There is also the man whose job it is to write the work order on the board and the foreman who calls out the names. A priest talks about forming a union.

- ***Is there a particular issue or issues related to the workplace that is being confronted in the clip? If so, what is it?***

One issue is fairness over who has the right to work. The process is shown to be arbitrary, with the suggestion that a worker has to please the boss in order to work. One worker has come to the dock for five straight mornings looking for work—the workers are powerless. Another issue is tension related to control of the union by organized crime.

4. Introduce the unit project.

Tell students that for their unit project they will create characters for an animated movie based on working people from a particular period in history. Explain that students are going to portray characters that are historically accurate, well rounded, and engaging.

Distribute **Handout 2: Unit Overview and Assessment Checklist: Character Biographies**. Have students read the overview and answer any questions they may have. Point out the vocabulary terms and tell students they can refer to this list whenever they encounter unfamiliar terms in the unit.

Explain that the Assessment Checklist includes the criteria for their unit project.

Teacher's Notes: Why Animation?

You may wish to point out that animated portrayals of working people, particularly realistic portrayals, are rare. Based on their observations of the media clips, ask students what learning opportunities the medium of animation opens up for a young audience. Some possible points of discussion are given below.

- Animated stories are accessible and engaging for younger audiences.

- Situations can be exaggerated to make them more dramatic and exciting.
- Characters can look any way you want them to.
- The animation can be visually exciting.
- Animation offers the opportunity to deal with real-world issues in fantastical situations.
- Young people are also used to seeing animated realism in video games.

5. Have students write about a portrayal of work in a TV show or movie.

Distribute **Handout 3: Journal Assignments**. Have students complete Journal 1.

Journal 1

Choose a TV show that you regularly watch or a movie (different from the clips seen in class) that shows characters in a situation involving workplace issues.

Respond to the following questions:

- What workplace conflict or controversy do the characters face?
- Who are the major characters or groups affected by this conflict or controversy? List them.
- How and why do their perspectives on this issue differ? Write a sentence or two describing the situation from the point of view of each character or group and why you think each feels that way.
- How do the actions of each of these major characters or groups reflect their perspectives and interests as employers or employees?

Have students share their journal entries with the class.

Teacher's Notes: Optional Extension—The Poetry of Work

To give students a different perspective on media portrayals of workers, have them read poems that describe a person or people at work. Walt Whitman and Martín Espada have written poems about working people. **Appendix A: "I Hear America Singing"** gives the text of one of Whitman's poems. You can find other poetry suggestions in *Additional Resources for Teachers*.

Ask students to write a poem from the perspective of someone they know or have seen working in a modern-day profession. Alternatively, you can have students find photographs of people at work and then speak in the voice of a person in the photo. You may wish to collaborate with English teachers for this activity.



Handout 1: Worker Portrayal in Media

Answer the questions below as you watch each video clip shown by your teacher.

Clip 1:

- What is the dramatic action? Describe it in a sentence or two.
- What is the workplace environment where the action takes place? How is it portrayed? (For example, *fair, safe, dangerous, relaxed, tense*)
- What workplace roles can you identify? (For example, *blue collar or white collar worker, manager, boss, owner, police*)
- Is there a particular issue or issues related to the workplace that is being confronted in the clip? If so, what is it?

Clip 2:

- What is the dramatic action? Describe it in a sentence or two.
- What is the workplace environment where the action takes place? How is it portrayed? (For example, *fair, safe, dangerous, relaxed, tense*)
- What workplace roles can you identify? (For example, *blue collar or white collar worker, manager, boss, owner, police*)
- Is there a particular issue or issues related to the workplace that is being confronted in the clip? If so, what is it?



Handout 1: Unit Overview

Animating Labor History

Throughout most of U.S. history, workers had no guaranteed rights. People had to fight for fair wages, limits on the number of work hours, time off, and safe working conditions. When industrialization swept the country in the nineteenth century, workers in some industries began to organize and exercise power, using methods such as strikes and boycotts. Eventually, large labor groups emerged and became powerful and influential forces in society. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, the federal government took on a greater role in the lives of American workers. Today, the government continues to remain involved in the workplace and the economy.

In this unit, you will work as part of a team to develop characters for an animated movie set during an important event in labor history. You will research the challenges that workers faced and the tools and institutions workers used to achieve their goals. You will learn about the roles of unions, contracts, and regulations, as well as the courageous actions of individuals. The knowledge you gain about the history of labor will be a valuable tool as you enter the world of work to begin your own career.

Your work in this unit will revolve around the following questions:

- What is labor history?
- How do the actions and decisions of everyday people shape history?
- How has government's role in economic policy changed since the beginning of the Great Depression?

What You Will Do in This Unit

Examine portrayals of workers and the workplace in media. Analyze how working people are portrayed in movies and TV.

Simulate conflicts of interest between workers, employers, and the unemployed. Participate in a role-playing game that parallels working conditions in an early twentieth-century factory.

Explore the case history of the autoworkers' strike in Flint, Michigan. Take the parts of characters in a pivotal strike case and argue your point of view in court.

Develop character biographies for an animated movie. Choose a significant event in labor history and explore the attitudes and actions of the individuals who were involved.

Present your character research. Present character biographies and an event timeline to your classmates.





Unit Project Description: Developing Character Biographies

You are a member of a research team for an animated movie based on an event in labor history. Your movie is aimed at young people. Your team will follow the steps below:

- Step 1.** As a team, choose an event in labor history as the basis for your movie.
- Step 2.** Research your event, identifying all major roles, including both historical characters and character types who represent key stakeholders in the event.
- Step 3.** Create character biographies to inform character designers about the appearance, dress, actions, and daily lives of the main characters.

Each character biography should include:

- Primary source documents, including first person narratives
- Annotated photos of events and people in everyday life
- An information sheet summarizing the character's background, traits, and role in the event
- A letter or diary entry written in the voice of the character

In addition, your team will:

- Create an annotated timeline of your chosen event
- Present your annotated timeline and character biographies to the class

Vocabulary Used in This Unit

AFL (American Federation of Labor): One of the first federations of unions, founded in 1886 to organize workers by craft or trade. Samuel Gompers was its first president. A rivalry between the AFL and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), which organized workers by industry, ended in their joining together as the AFL-CIO in 1955.

Blue collar workers: A term used to refer to a class of workers whose duties often require manual labor and the wearing of a uniform or protective clothing. The term originated from the fact that the color of many workers' shirts and coveralls was blue.

Boycott: To refuse to have dealings with a person, business, or organization, usually to express disapproval or to force acceptance of certain conditions.

Braceros: Mexican workers who were brought into the U.S. to fulfill a demand for manual labor under a 1942 agreement between the U.S. and Mexico. This sometimes controversial program continued until the 1960s. Labor unions saw the Bracero program as an obstacle to improving wages for domestic farm workers.

CIO (Congress of Industrial Organizations): A federation of unions founded in 1935 by John L. Lewis to organize workers in mass production by industry rather than by trade. For example, the entire auto industry was organized, rather than separately organizing specific crafts, such as welders and machinists. CIO supporters believed industry-wide organization would give workers more leverage. Originally composed of eight industrial unions within the American Federation of Labor (AFL), the CIO became independent of the AFL in 1938, then rejoined to form the AFL-CIO in 1955.





Collective bargaining: The negotiations between an employer and a labor union, usually regarding wages, hours, or other aspects of work conditions. The term refers to the fact that when unions negotiate or *bargain* for all of the workers collectively, workers have more power—and thus a greater chance of achieving their goals—than when workers negotiate individually.

Contract: A legally binding agreement between two people or groups. A contract between an employee and an employer specifies the work to be performed and the compensation that is provided.

Gilded Age: The period of rapid economic and industrial growth in the U.S. during the late nineteenth century. Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner first used the term in their 1873 book, *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today*. The term refers to the class of people who accumulated such wealth as to appear to be living lives that were “gilded,” or coated with gold.

Great Depression: A decade-long period of extreme economic hardship and poverty following the 1929 stock market crash. At the height of the Depression, unemployment rose to 25 percent, and the government started to regulate and provide poverty relief to a greater extent than at any previous time in U.S. history.

Laissez-faire: The practice of allowing business to operate free from government regulation or control. The term comes from the French verbs, *laisser* and *faire*, meaning “to leave” and “to do,” respectively.

Longshoreman: A person who loads and unloads ships in port.

Migrant worker: An agricultural worker who makes a living picking seasonal crops so that he or she must move with the harvest to pick produce.

New Deal: A series of federal laws and programs started by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in response to the economic collapse and poverty of the Great Depression.

Oral history: Spoken memories or personal recollections of historical significance, usually obtained through recorded interviews.

Organize: To get together with other workers in order to attain common workplace goals, such as better pay, shorter hours, or safer working conditions. Organized workers form what is known as a union.

Picket line: A group of striking workers who form a line around the outside of a workplace or place of business. The purpose of a picket line is to keep people from working at the workplace or from patronizing the business.

Primary sources: Original materials from a time period or event which have not been compiled or interpreted. Examples of primary sources include letters, diaries, newspaper articles, original objects or artifacts from a place or time, songs, photographs, and live video recordings.

Progressive Era: The decades from 1890 to 1920, in which social reformers, including President Theodore Roosevelt, worked to respond to the economic and social problems brought on by unchecked industrialization and corporate growth.

Reform: An improvement to a previous situation, often brought about by making laws.

Scab: A derogatory term for a strikebreaker, someone who continues to work or who replaces regular workers during a strike.

Secondary sources: Compilations or interpretations of primary sources written after the fact. Examples of secondary sources include textbooks, journal articles, Web sites, and biographies. Historians often use secondary sources for an overview of a topic and to find references to primary sources or people to interview.



Sit-down strike: A strike tactic in which employees stop work but stay at their jobs and occupy the place of business. Sit-down strikes are more difficult to end because the business is reluctant to use force that might damage its own equipment or property.

Stakeholder: A person, group, or organization that is affected by an action or situation.

Strike: A form of workplace protest in which employees stop work in order to express grievances and bargain for better working conditions.

Strikebreaker: A person who continues to work after a strike has been called. An employer may hire temporary or replacement strikebreakers if the number of regular employees on strike interferes with the ability to continue business.

Teamster: A person who drives a truck as an occupation. The term derives from its original use for a person who drove a *team* of horses or other livestock to haul loads.

Union: An organization formed by workers to advance the goals of its members with respect to working conditions such as safety, wages, hours, or other benefits.

Wages: Money paid in return for work.

White collar workers: A term used to refer to a class of workers who perform office jobs rather than manual labor and whose duties do not require specialized work clothes. The term originated from the fact that office workers traditionally dressed more formally, wearing white shirts as well as ties.

Wildcat strike: A strike conducted independently of the authority of the union.





Assessment Checklist: Character Biographies

Use this assessment to help you develop the character biographies for your animated movie. Make sure to include all the requirements. Your teacher will use this assessment to evaluate your work.

Requirements	Percentage of Total Grade	Comments	
Character Biographies (Individual)			
		Student Comments	Teacher Comments
Includes at least one excerpt from primary source documents or one oral history audio clip with explanatory paragraph.	15%		
Includes two annotated photos of events and people in everyday life.	15%		
Includes character information sheet with background, traits, and the character's role in the event.	30%		
Includes a letter or diary entry written in the character's voice.	10%		
Individual subtotal	70%		
Character Biographies (Team)			
		Student Comments	Teacher Comments
Annotated timeline includes significant occurrences for the chosen event.	20%		
Team presentation clearly explains the annotated timeline and all character biographies related to the event.	10%		
Team subtotal	30%		
Total	100%		





Handout 3: Journal Assignments

Journal 1

Choose a TV show that you regularly watch or a movie (different from the clips seen in class) that shows characters in a dramatic situation involving workplace issues.

Respond to the following questions:

- What workplace conflict or controversy do the characters face?
- Who are the major characters or groups affected by this conflict or controversy? List them.
- How and why do their perspectives on this issue differ? Write a sentence or two describing the situation from the point of view of each character or group and why you think each feels that way.
- How do the actions of each of these major characters or groups reflect their perspectives and interests as employers or employees?

Journal 2

Consider the workplace simulation you just completed. Answer the questions below.

- What power did the employees have? What rights did they have?
- What power/rights did the Employer have?
- What power or rights do you think each group should have?
- What, if anything, do you think this simulation has in common with real work situations?

Read the quotation below. Do you agree or disagree? Explain your views.

“It seems to me to be equally plain that no business which depends for existence on paying less than living wages to its workers has any right to continue in this country. By ‘business’ I mean the whole of commerce as well as the whole of industry; by workers I mean all workers, the white collar class as well as the men in overalls; and by living wages I mean more than a bare subsistence level—I mean the wages of decent living.”

Franklin Delano Roosevelt

Journal 3

You have learned about some of the laws governing employers and employees and how the laws were established. Think about how labor laws might apply to a job that you or a family member have worked or are working now.

- Which aspects of the job, if any, are regulated? Consider such issues as pay, age requirements, safety, hours, time off, or other benefits.
- How do you think the job conditions might be different if there were no laws regulating the workplace?
- If you think that no aspects of the job are regulated, explain why that is so.
- Is there anything about the job that you think should be regulated, but, as far as you know, isn't? Explain.





Journal 4

Think about the voice of Phil Stallings in "The Maker" from *Working* by Studs Terkel, as he told about a specific incident at his factory and what he thought about it.

Now write in the voice of your own character. Choose a date along your team's event timeline. Write a diary entry or a letter to a family member or friend on that date. Write from your character's perspective. Before you write, think about the following questions:

- How do you feel about your situation at this point in time?
- What do you hope for?
- What do you fear?
- Who might take advantage of you and whom do you trust?

Include appropriate and accurate historical details, such as where you live, where you work and what you do (if applicable), what you wear, what you eat, what you read, and what was actually happening at the time.

