

The Labour History Project: Workplace Health and Safety



From the Folks Who Brought You the Weekend: An Introduction to Labour History

Audience:
Secondary Students
Union Orientation

Activity Summary: In these two activities, participants have the opportunity to begin thinking about the history of the labour movement and workers' rights. The first is a short discussion about the depiction of workers in history, and the second asks participants to consider some of the victories in social justice that came about largely through the work of the labour movement.

Framework for Learning

This activity is rooted in several important concepts about workers and adult learners. First, two 1993 studies of teaching labour history to unionists revealed such workers were actually interested in labour history for more than pragmatic reasons (i.e. a promotion). They also sought to “improve themselves,” by learning more about their role in society. They appreciated opportunities to connect themselves as part of a larger whole: the labour movement in history. Second, this activity is also based upon the six *Principles of Adult Learners* (Andrew Knowles) who:

- *Are internally motivated and self-directed.*
- *Are goal oriented*
- *Are practical*
- *Seek relevance*
- *Bring life experiences and knowledge to the learning experience.*
- *Want to be respected.*

Materials Provided

- Handout 1: “Questions from a Worker Who Reads”
- Handout 2: “Where do you stand?”

Workshop Instructions

1. Distribute Handout 1. Read together or read in small groups and discuss Brecht’s poem.
2. Distribute Handout 2. The idea is that participants see a list of some of the achievements of the labour movement. They rank the importance of each victory, then circulate in the room to convince other members of the importance of their choices. This activity is easily adaptable for group size and interest; it could also be done as a small group or paired discussion activity.

These activities have been adapted from the Social Justice 12 Labour Studies Unit developed by the Labour Heritage Centre (2014). <http://www.labourheritagecentre.ca/> Authors: Tony Arruda and Sarah Purdy

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Handout 1

Questions from a Worker Who Reads

Who built Thebes of the seven gates?
In the books you will find the names of kings.
Did the kings haul up the lumps of rock?
And Babylon, many times demolished
Who raised it up so many times? In what houses
of gold-glittering Lima did the builders live?
Where, the evening that the Wall of China was finished
did the masons go? Great Rome
Is full of triumphal arches. Who erected them? Over whom
did the Caesars triumph? Had Byzantium, much praised in song
only palaces for its inhabitants? Even in fabled Atlantis
the night the ocean engulfed it.
The drowning still bawled for their slaves.
The young Alexander conquered India.
Was he alone?
Caesar beat the Gauls.
Did he not even have a cook with him?
Philip of Spain wept when his armada
went down. Was he the only one to weep?
Frederick the Second won the Seven Years' War.
Who else won it?
Every page a victory.
Who cooked the feast for the victors?
Every ten years a great man.
Who paid the bill?
So many reports.
So many questions.

—Bertolt Brecht (1935)

Discussion:

1. Discuss the meaning of the poem.
2. Are workers' lives represented in history classes today? How about in popular culture such as movies, music, etc?
3. Who makes history?

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Handout 2: Where do you stand?

Instructions:

1. Under the opinion column, individually give each a number between one and four in relationship to their value to Canadian society. Then, small groups can discuss and try to reach consensus.
2. When the small groups have finished a group consensus may be attempted. If participants wish to add up their opinion totals, the total might reflect their belief in social justice and workers' rights.

Using the number 1 – 4 evaluate the contribution each makes to a fair society.

1-Not important 2-Important 3-Very important 4-Essential

Opinion / Consensus

___ / ___ 1. Minimum wage laws	___ / ___ 11. Worker compensation
___ / ___ 2. Old age pension	___ / ___ 12. Laws that protect Canadians from discrimination
___ / ___ 3. Paid vacation	___ / ___ 13. Free public education
___ / ___ 4. Protective equipment supplied by management	___ / ___ 14. Free school lunch programs
___ / ___ 5. Overtime pay	___ / ___ 15. Universal health care
___ / ___ 6. The right to vote	___ / ___ 16. Affordable child care
___ / ___ 7. Employment insurance	___ / ___ 17. Right to refuse unsafe work
___ / ___ 8. Child labour laws	___ / ___ 18 Social assistance
___ / ___ 9. Free libraries	___ / ___ 19. Right to strike
___ / ___ 10. Equal pay / opportunity for women	___ / ___ 20. Training in handling hazardous materials

Post Activity Discussion:

1. Which were the most important protections in your opinion, and why?
2. Did it surprise you that the labour movement might be advocating for any of the policies? Why do you think they fight for some of these protections?
3. Are there any important protections missing in the list you want to add?
4. Which of these items on the list are still not really protected, in your opinion?