

Working People: A History of Labour in BC

Lesson: Miners vs. Dunsmuirs

Document 1: BC Coal Miner Biography Lesson Plan/Strategy

This lesson is designed to be taught in conjunction with a grade 9 unit on the development of BC and its history in the late Victorian period. Students should already have some familiarity with the early industries of BC and the reasons behind its decision to join Confederation. It is recommended that the class have read [Working Class History: English Canada](#) | [The Canadian Encyclopedia](#) prior to the lesson.

The teacher should give a brief intro to the topic of coal mining on Vancouver Island and the growing demand for coal in the world due to new steam power and coal fueled technologies. The teacher should also mention Robert Dunsmuir, a powerful and wealthy coal mine owner in BC in the late 1800s. Dunsmuir controlled several mines in BC and the workers in these mines worked in very dangerous conditions for little pay, while mine owners like Dunsmuir profited enormously.

Body of the Lesson

Hand out the biography handout for Robert Dunsmuir and ask the class to read it. After the students have read the handout, the teacher should then play the video vignette “Miners vs. Dunsmuir” for the class, asking them to pay particular attention to the conditions the workers in the mines faced and the reasons they chose to organize unions and strike.

Once the video is finished the teacher can solicit some class discussion with the following prompts: “Why did the workers strike? What was Dunsmuir’s reaction to the strike? Why do you think many industrialists like Dunsmuir punished workers for unionizing and did their best to destroy unions?”

The teacher then can hand out the information sheets to the students containing the lesson source material to the students. It’s recommended that the teacher read one or two of the different sources with the class and discuss some of the information about coal mining and BC history that can be gleaned from the sources.

Explain that there is a tendency in history to often document and record the accomplishments and lives of the rich, powerful and influential, but that often the lives of the common person is neglected. It is important, however to understand why regular people did what they did, after all, they compose the majority and have a huge influence on history. To gain a better understanding of this, tell the class, that they will be making a short biography, similar to the Dunsmuir biography handed out earlier, on a fictional coal worker from the 1880s. The teacher will then distribute “BC Coal Miner Biography” handouts, explain the assignment and assign worker names (see BC Coal Miner Biography Criteria). The teacher may wish to require the use of a certain number of primary and secondary sources. Give the students the rest of the class to work on the assignment and assign a due date. It is recommended that out of class time be given to complete assignment as well.

Closure:

Teacher should circulate to assist students with the assignment and answer questions. Before the end of class, the teacher should highlight the importance of being able to use the sources to back up the details of their character’s life story.

Assessment Strategies

Assess and evaluate student understanding based on the level of success in fulfilling the criteria of the assignment and the selection of source material for the biography.

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