What’s missing from the textbook?: An inquiry-based lesson plan on the untold histories of labor unions.

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U.S. History textbooks and the standards they fulfill are increasingly devoid of references to such topics as labor union history in favor of a grand narrative of American military and political supremacy and the benefits of free enterprise. As social studies education is concerned with the development of democratic citizens, labor history can help develop students’ civic engagement, especially based on issues of collective action, leadership and social justice. In order to counteract this lack of labor history in textbooks, we propose a lesson plan appropriate for grade levels 8-12 and suitable for a unit devoted to labor history, or as part of a larger unit on industrialization, progressivism, the Great Depression, or other eras of large-scale working class and union collective action. This lesson asks students to identify inconsistencies and missing information in textbook accounts of labor history events, and to use this initial analysis as a springboard for their own inquiry, where they will be expected to research and create a supplementary text booklet to provide a deeper understanding of a labor event and its consequences.

Anti-labor feelings grew stronger after a bloody clash between police and strikers in Chicago’s Haymarket Square on May 4, 1886. Striking workers from the McCormick Harvester Company gathered to protest the killings of four strikers the previous day. When police ordered the crowd to break up, an unidentified person threw a bomb that killed seven police officers. Following the Haymarket Riot, many middle class Americans associated the labor movement with terrorism and disorder.

The American Journey: Building a Nation, 2000, p. 567-568

Regardless of intent, textbooks are inherently limited in the amount of information they can contain. Complex historical events, such as the Haymarket Riot, are simplified; in the above textbook excerpt, for example, the nature of the protest, the engagement between police and protestors, and the impact of the event on working class individuals is ignored. Broadly speaking, U.S. history textbooks offer an incomplete rendering, or complete erasure, of the participants, causation and contexts of important historical events; over time, textbooks have become devoid of complex treatments of topics such as labor union history. Most commonly, publishers of history textbooks provide a nationalistic view of American military and political supremacy and the benefits of free enterprise, all while focusing on a discrete set of facts that lack engagement with larger historical themes (Loewen, 2007; Zinn, 1995). The various and complex causes of labor events are often not explained, instead relying on vague explanations of purpose and outcomes. The result is that labor events are taken out of the historical circumstances that gave them meaning, which then makes it difficult for readers to recognize similar issues and connections in contemporary society. In order to counteract this lack of labor history in textbooks and encourage critical inquiry, we propose a lesson plan (Appendix A) that allows students to delve more deeply into the complexity of events in labor history. The lesson plan is appropriate for grade levels 8-12.
and suitable for a unit devoted to labor history, or as part of a larger unit on industrialization, progressivism, the Great Depression, or other eras of large-scale working class and union collective action.

In this article, we examine the way in which labor history content is limited in traditional classroom textbooks, what students can gain from the study of labor history, and end with a lesson plan for an inquiry project that teachers can use to involve their students in learning about labor history. It is important to note that while this article references ways in which textbooks are limited in their coverage of labor history, it is not meant as an in-depth textbook analysis or an exhaustive treatment of how textbooks cover labor and other working class topics. Rather, we operate from an assumption that labor history is marginalized within mainstream textbooks and present a rationale and approach for why the labor movement should be taught, especially as a basis for student inquiry.

The Role of Textbooks in Learning Labor History

In their analysis of U.S. history textbooks, the Albert Shanker Institute (2010) asserted that “American history textbooks have taken sides in the nation’s intense political debate about organized labor—and the result has been that generations of students have had little concept of labor’s role in American history and the labor movement’s contributions to American workers’ rights and quality of life” (p. 4-5). Their research found an 80-year history of textbooks being influenced by various anti-union forces. The first textbooks to come under fire were written by Harold Rugg, a professor and prominent educational theorist of the era (Moreau, 2003). Rugg’s popular social science series were targeted by anti-radicalists such as the American Legion for being “responsible for the growth of Communist youth organizations in the United States” and “trying to foment discontent against the nation’s political and economic system” (Ravitch, 2001, p. 313). Among other complaints, the books’ critics denounced Rugg’s depiction of the 1937 Flint Sit-Down Strike against General Motors Corporation because he did not try to convince readers that the strike was wrong. The stage had been set for history books to almost exclusively offer a grand narrative of the benefits of free enterprise, incorporating “businesses’ political and economic ideology” to the point where, according to Elizabeth Fones-Wolf, “a majority of Americans give uncritical support for big business and the market while growing increasingly suspicious of organized labor and government” (1994, p. 2). The consolidation of publishing power to just a few corporations and a reliance on politically-charged standards has done little to slow this trend.

In recent textbooks, the Haymarket Riot of 1886 commonly appears as a key event of the labor movement in the late 1800s. As an example, The American Journey, a middle school textbook, spends one paragraph describing the Haymarket Riot, a seminal labor event in the late 1800s. The paragraph appears in Chapter 19 The Industrial Age, in a section on Industrial Workers:

Anti-labor feelings grew stronger after a bloody clash between police and strikers in Chicago’s Haymarket Square on May 4, 1886. Striking workers from the McCormick Harvester Company gathered to protest the killings of four strikers the previous day. When police ordered the crowd to break up, an unidentified person threw a bomb that killed seven police officers. Following the Haymarket Riot, many middle class Americans associated the labor movement with terrorism and disorder. (Appleby, Brinkley, Broussard, Ritchie, & McPherson, 2009, p. 567-568)

The language chosen to describe the event at Haymarket Square avoids identifying police officers as responsible for the death of the four strikers on May 3 (Zinn, 1995) and neglects to mention that police fired on the crowd of several hundred people after the bomb exploded, killing some and wounding hundreds more (Adleman, 2010; Zinn, 1995). Further, students do not learn
that seven of the eight individuals who were punished for the bomb were not present at the meeting, nor are they informed that this event was the result of a larger national struggle for an eight-hour work day and better working conditions (Adleman, 2010). While there was reference to causal events that happened a day or two before, there was no treatment of long-term causes. The takeaway message provided by *The American Journey* implies that the only result of the event was a general disdain among the middle class for labor unions, even though the event itself and consequent executions stirred attention and support from pro-labor individuals and groups across the nation and the world, influencing the next generation of labor leaders.

**Benefits of Studying Labor History and Critically Examining Textbooks**

Social studies has long been a discipline concerned with the development of citizenship for life in a democracy. Furthermore, teachers should assist students in developing their ability to connect the past to the present, engage in historical inquiry and source analysis and consider multiple perspectives on historical events (NCSS, 2013). This lesson asks students to identify inconsistencies and missing information in textbook accounts of labor history events, and to compare the kinds of information found in textbooks with various primary sources provided by the teacher on the event. Students use this initial analysis as a springboard for their own inquiry project, where they act as agents in their own schooling on the direction their research takes to create a corrective for the inadequate coverage of labor history in contemporary textbooks.

**Conceptualizing Democracy and Citizenship**

As social studies education is concerned with the development of democratic citizens, a curricular focus on labor history is effective in developing the specific goals outlined by the state of Georgia as well as the broader goal of students’ civic engagement, especially based on issues of collective action and social justice. The Georgia Department of Education, in their Georgia Performance Standards for Social Studies (2013) referenced this point, stating that the standards were “designed to develop informed Georgia citizens.” Westheimer and Kahne (2004) outlined three kinds of citizens: personally responsible, participatory, and justice-oriented. To an extent, Westheimer and Kahne’s framework is a continuum, where the personally responsible citizen focuses on obeying laws and the development of desirable personal traits, the participatory citizen actively participates in civic groups and the various communities they inhabit, and the justice-oriented citizen actively critiques social structures and seeks to change them. Depending on the teacher, this lesson could provide an opportunity for students to consider tangible enactments of Americans’ most fundamental laws, such as the Freedom of Speech and the Freedom of Assembly, and gain greater understanding of our responsibility as a democratic nation to enact these rights, even when threatened by agents of power. The result of such work is that students can gain firsthand experience of what it means to be a citizen and can see what participation in democratic endeavors and/or social justice-oriented work to bring marginalized historical narratives to the forefront looks and feels like.

A critical examination of textbooks will develop students’ ability to connect the past to the present, engage in historical inquiry and source analysis and consider multiples perspectives on historical events (Georgia Department of Education, 2013). Students will be invited to participate in the development of a physical artifact which can be used by the students, teacher or school for years to come. If a teacher was to use this project longitudinally, the classroom (or school library) could potentially house an entire encyclopedia of supplemental booklets.

**Developing an Understanding of Grassroots Action and Leadership**
Historian Ray Raphael notes that “in the telling of history, the genesis of leadership is easily forgotten. Textbook authors and popular history writers fail to portray the great mass[es] of humanity as active players, agents on their own behalf” (2014, p. 2). By learning about labor union history, students will be provided with opportunities to question the grand narrative presented in many textbooks by producing counter-narratives about the working class, a population that is frequently misrepresented in history and present-day discourse (Loewen, 2007; Moreau, 2003; Zinn, 1995). Their work can serve as a reminder of the power of the working class and victories that have improved quality of life in the decades and centuries since. Students will not only experience working collaboratively with others, but will, given the right support, be able to recognize their own capacity for civic participation and leadership in speaking against contemporary social injustices and critically deconstructing narratives they encounter in news media and social outlets. They will also be able to recognize their own capacity for civic leadership in speaking against social injustices faced in the present day, such as police brutality and increasing income inequality.

**Contextualizing Historical Events**

The textbook excerpt provided above exemplifies that mainstream textbooks lack explanation of the various and complex causes of labor events, instead relying on vague explanations of purpose. The result is that labor events become decontextualized, taken out of the historical circumstances that gave them meaning, and relegated from the past, thus becoming isolated from contemporary connections that could help students see similar mechanisms at work in their own lives. Exposing students to multiple textbook examples, as seen in Appendix B, can help make the connection that they are not perfectly accurate reports on historical fact. Surface-level factual disparities can not only reveal the constructed nature of historical interpretation and narratives, but can also help serve as an entry point to help students interrogate texts and the representations of historical events they contain.

The study of labor history can also help students see the intersections that exist among social class, gender, race, and immigrant status. By examining the various ways different populations were valued (or not) by the business community as well as organized labor, students are able to see the complexity that surrounds the different identity markers that have been used to marginalize people throughout history. While social class is obviously a large component of the labor movement, the way in which African Americans were often excluded from labor organizations or were pitted against organized white and immigrant workers should not be ignored. Similar conversations around the labor movement, and the kinds of work and workers that are valued, can be tied into contemporary issues such as the movement to increase the minimum wage, or gender-based pay inequities. While it may seem daunting to dig into the complex relationships that thread through the labor movement, such an exploration provides students with a more complete and contextualized understanding of the past and the way in which similar mechanisms are still at play in society.

**Labor History Lesson Plan and Inquiry Project**

We propose a lesson plan appropriate for grade levels 8-12 and suitable for a unit devoted to labor history, or as part of a larger unit on industrialization, progressivism, the Great Depression, or other eras of large-scale working class and union collective action. In this lesson, students will become exposed to different perspectives in U.S. history, with a specific focus on pinnacle labor struggles. The goal is to help students develop a broader knowledge and understanding of U.S. history and the working class in particular. The lesson plan is meant to be broad, so that it is adaptable to various units and contexts, is able to accommodate student interest and be tied to local
Kean, E., & Schmitt, A.

labor history events, and possible visits to local labor history sites. Assuming that the lesson could be used to frame a short unit on labor history, five to ten days would be optimal for its implementation. If that much time is not available, aspects of the lesson could be taken out (e.g. eliminating student presentations, or engaging the entire class in a single labor event together).

This flexible structure meshes well with the Georgia Performance Standards for Social Studies (2013), as the framework could be used in an 8th grade Georgia Studies class, focusing on state-level experiences with labor history, or a high school U.S. history course, where standards specifically call for covering labor events such as the Pullman Strike, creation of the American Federation of Labor, passage of the Wagner Act, and United Farm Workers’ movement (Georgia Department of Education, 2013). This lesson framework can not only be used to teach and explore the content called for in the standards, but also as a means to expand what is covered by having students work in groups to research and present findings to their classmates. Such group work can be used as a way to provide students with the depth that comes along with personal inquiry and the breadth from sharing their findings with other research groups. The overall result of the lesson is a focus on learning content through inquiry, research and exploration, instead of solely focusing on content delivery, which can lead towards a more in-depth understanding of the contextual framing of the labor event and its outcomes.

The lesson is built around a group inquiry project where students will analyze how a labor event in American history is or is not covered in U.S. history textbooks (Appendix C). Students will be expected to research and create a supplementary text booklet to provide a deeper understanding of their labor event and its consequences. This project broadly engages in all four dimensions of the NCSS C3 Framework. Students begin by analyzing texts in order to develop questions and a research focus about the information that is missing from textbook accounts of historical events (Dimension 1). Students then work on searching for other sources in order to create a fuller representation of the historical event under study (Dimension 2). During the research process, students will be gathering and evaluating resources in order to answer their questions (Dimension 3), and they will then craft a textbook supplement to communicate their findings (Dimension 4) and help inform future students about the importance of understanding their event and labor history more broadly.

The teacher should begin the lesson by posting a discussion question that meets the needs of the overarching goal, such as “What do you think and know about the following terms: labor unions, collective action and social justice?” After discussing the introduction question, the teacher should briefly review the labor events that students will be studying. Events could include the Haymarket Affair, Homestead Strike, Pullman Strike, the Wagner Act, and the United Farm Workers’ movement. Due to flexibility of the lesson framework, local events that probably do not have coverage in a textbook could also be used, such as the actions of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union and the Atlanta Washerwomen Strike.

Once students are put into groups, the teacher should distribute copies of the Textbook Analysis worksheet to each student. Using the classroom textbook, as well as another textbook account and a primary source of the teacher’s choosing, students should work on completing their analysis worksheet. Specifically students should work on finding basic information about the event, causes of the event, and the outcomes of the event according to each source they analyze. After compiling information, there is also space for students to begin thinking about what is missing and to formulate a question about what they want to learn more about.

The teacher should also introduce classroom and digital resources that students can use to help provide information as they create their supplements (e.g., textbooks, primary sources and websites). This would be a good place to address how to evaluate resources and websites for their trustworthiness. Students should be given some time to work on collecting information for their textbook supplements and then constructing the physical book, either using a word processing program or two physical pieces of paper folded in half to create eight pages.
The assessment for this lesson is the creation of a supplementary text devoted to more specific, fleshed-out coverage of a labor history event. The assessment can be used to jigsaw learning about multiple labor history events that either occurred within the unit of study, or across time periods. As a result, this lesson lends itself well to student presentations, so students can learn from one another and groups can be asked questions to help assess the understandings they have internalized about their information. If a class wished to extend this project, text booklets can be combined into a larger anthology that can be placed in a school or classroom library for use by other students. Textbooks supplements from previous years can be used as part of the text analysis in subsequent years to help students (a) see how authority can come from outside of the textbook, and (b) prompt different student questions that can help promote further depth of research/understanding of the assigned events.

References


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Appendix A: Labor History Lesson Plan

Title
Labor History Lesson Plan and Inquiry Project

Grade Level
8-12

Time Required
5-10 class periods (can be modified for less time)

Relevant NCSS Themes
2. Time, Continuity, and Change
5. Individuals, Groups, and Institutions
6. Power, Authority, and Governance
10. Civic Ideals and Practices

Appropriate Georgia State High School Standards
1) SSUSH12: The student will analyze important consequences of American industrial growth. (b. Identify the American Federation of Labor and Samuel Gompers.)
2) SSUSH13: The student will identify major efforts to reform American society and politics in the Progressive Era.
3) SSUSH18: The student will describe Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal as a response to the depression and compare the ways governmental programs aided those in need.
4) b. Explain the Wagner Act and the rise of industrial unionism.) (e. Describe the significance of progressive reforms such as the...reform of labor laws)
5) SSUSH 24: The student will analyze the impact of social change movements and organizations of the 1960s. (d. analyze Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers’ movement)
6) ELACC11-12RH9: Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.

Overarching Lesson Goals
1. Develop an understanding and appreciation of U.S. workers’ efforts to enact democracy by organizing unions, bargaining collectively and passing laws that protect the safety and rights of the worker.
2. Develop an appreciation for the dignity of all people.
3. Learn about the use of collective action to address social problems such as increasing income inequality.

Lesson Objectives
By the end of the lesson, students will be able to...
1. Analyze text in order to find holes or inconsistencies in textbook accounts and compose their own questions to further their understanding.
2. Develop more specific knowledge of a labor history event within familiar historical contexts and use that knowledge to construct a supplementary text booklet.
3. Engage in collective action for social justice by adding to working class scholarship and contributing supplementary texts for future students to learn from.

Connection to C3 Framework
This lesson asks students to broadly engage in all four dimensions of the NCSS C3 Framework. Students begin by analyzing texts in order to develop questions and a research focus about the information that is missing from textbook accounts of historical events (Dimension 1). Students then work on searching for other sources in order to create a fuller representation of the historical event under study (Dimension 2). During the research process, students will be gathering and evaluating resources in order to answer their questions (Dimension 3), and they will then craft a textbook supplement to communicate their findings and help inform future students about the importance of understanding their event and labor history more broadly.

**Background**
This lesson is suitable for a unit devoted to labor history, or as part of a larger unit on industrialization, progressivism, the Great Depression, or other eras of large-scale working class and union collective action. It is assumed that students will have some basic knowledge of what a union is, general reasons for union organization and tactics that were/are used for gaining rights.

**Materials**
- Class set of Textbook Analysis worksheets
- Class set of American history textbooks
- Primary sources related to assigned events (selected resources can be found in Appendix D)
- Class set of Textbook Supplement Instructions
- Access to internet
- Paper
- Drawing supplies

**Procedure**

**Day 1**
1. The teacher should begin the lesson by posting the following discussion question on the board: What do you think and know about the following terms: labor unions, collective action and social justice? Note: this question can easily be changed to a different question that meets the needs of whatever the teacher’s overarching goal is.
2. After discussing the introduction question, the teacher should briefly review the labor events that students will be studying. Events could include the Haymarket Affair, Homestead Strike, Pullman Strike, 1912 Lawrence Textile Strike, and Flint Sit-Down Strike. Due to flexibility of the lesson framework, local events that probably do not have coverage in a textbook could also be used, such as the actions of the Southern Tenant Farmer’s Union and the Atlanta Washerwomen Strike.
3. Students should then either choose or be assigned to groups of three.
4. After students are situated in their groups, the teacher should distribute copies of the Textbook Analysis worksheet to each student. Using the classroom textbook, as well as another textbook account and a primary source of the teacher’s choosing, students should work on completing their analysis worksheet. Specifically students should work on finding basic information about the event, causes of the event, and the outcomes of the event according to each source they analyze. After compiling information, there is also space for students to begin thinking about what is missing and to formulate a question about what they want to learn more about.

**Day 2**
1. Students should complete their Textbook Analysis worksheets, if not completed on Day One.
2. At this point, the teacher should introduce the directions for the Textbook Supplement assignment. The teacher should address any student questions, as well as have students look at textbooks to see how they are laid out and the kinds of features they have.

3. The teacher should also introduce classroom and digital resources that students can use to help provide information as they create their supplements (e.g. textbooks, sources, websites). This would be a good place to address how to evaluate resources and websites for their trustworthiness.

4. Students should begin researching.

Days 3-5
1. Students should use this time to work on collecting information for their textbook supplements. Depending on the age/prior experience with research more or less time could be provided here.

Days 6-8
1. Students should use this time to construct their textbook supplements, either using a word processing program or two physical pieces of paper folded in half to create eight pages.

Days 9-10
1. This time could be used for students to share their work through presentations or stations

Assessment
The assessment for this lesson is the creation of a supplementary text devoted to more specific, fleshed-out coverage of a labor history event. The assessment can be used to jigsaw learning about multiple labor history events that either occurred within the unit of study, or across time periods. As a result, this lesson lends itself well to student presentations, so students can learn from one another and groups can be asked questions to help assess the understandings they have internalized about their information. In addition text booklets can be combined into a larger anthology that can be placed in a school or classroom library for use by other students.

Extension Ideas
This approach can be applied to any time period under study. In addition, textbooks supplements from one year can be used as part of the text analysis in subsequent years to help students a) see how authority can come from outside of the textbook and b) prompt different student questions that can help promote further depth of research/understanding of the assigned events.
Appendix B: Textbook Analysis Worksheet

**Directions:** Use information from each source to fill in the appropriate information. As you work, think of what information you believe to be missing and what questions you have about the information that is present.

Event:___________________________________________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source information (title, date, author, page numbers, format)</th>
<th>Textbook 1</th>
<th>Textbook 2</th>
<th>Primary Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Basic Information Who, What, When, Where, How</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Causes of the Event Why did it happen?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcomes of the Event What happened as a result?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions What information is missing, what do you want to know more about?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C: Supplementary Labor Text Booklet Project

Goal
Analyze how a labor event in American history is or is not covered in U.S. history textbooks, then research and create a supplementary text booklet to provide a deeper understanding of your labor event and its consequences.

Content Requirements
You will be working in groups of three to complete your supplementary text. Each project should include the following:

Background Information – what is the context your labor event is situated within? What were long-term and short-term causes that led to your event occurring? Who were important people involved and what were their goals?

Detailed Description – what occurred during the event? How did it take place and what is the information that has to be known to understand it? What are major events that are situated within the larger event you are looking at?

Significance – what was the outcome of your event and its impact on working class rights and the labor movement as a whole? Was the event successful, were the goals of the event fully realized? How does the event shape our understanding of American labor history and why is it important to know about today? What, if any, other issues grew out of the event?

Primary Source Integration – your supplementary text should include primary source quotes and references. Think of quotes, pictures/photos, flyers, songs, art, journals, first person testimonies, etc. that can help lead to a fuller understanding of the event as it made sense to the people who lived it?

Text Features – Use a variety of text features to help relate your event. Think about photos/illustrations to include, side-bars or other visual information that will help readers make sense of the written text.

Glossary – Include a glossary at the end of your supplement that defines any important/foundational terminology to understanding your event.

Bibliography – cite your sources and include a list at the end of your chapter.

Format Requirements
Supplementary texts should be 8 pages long with the following breakdown:
First/front page: create a cover that includes a title that draws the reader in and an image that relates to your event. Also list author names.
Second page: inside cover - blank
Third – sixth pages – information about your event.
Seventh page – glossary and bibliography
Eighth/back page – summary of your event
Appendix D: Selected Labor History Resources for Teachers and Students

Web Resources

AFL-CIO Our History
http://www.aflcio.org/About/Our-History

Digital History (University of Houston)
http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/

Historic Pullman Foundation
http://www.pullmanil.org/links.htm

University of Washington Labor History Resource Guide:
http://guides.lib.washington.edu/content.php?pid=80438&sid=596049

Zinn Education Project
http://zinnedproject.org/

Print Resources


