

Using Labor Images to Arouse Inquiry into Issues of Social Justice

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Labor history is an important social studies topic often neglected in both textbooks and classrooms. We argue for the importance of including labor history in social studies and for the unique value of editorial cartoons as an educational resource to meet the challenge of making labor history relevant and engaging to students. Editorial cartoons are a unique form of visual rhetoric. To understand the meanings contemporary readers would have made from the cartoons, students need to engage both visual and written symbols that were current at the time of publication. These efforts help develop essential historical thinking skills by bridging semiotic gaps that impede meaningful understandings of history. A critical analysis of labor-related editorial cartoons not only helps students understand labor history, but also develops the skill of analyzing visual rhetoric, an invaluable tool for civic life in an information society saturated with images designed to persuade. Additionally, political cartoons that illustrate issues of exploitation, marginalization, and oppression provide unique and engaging points of entry for classroom discussions about issues of social justice, particularly as it relates to labor. To aid practicing social studies teachers, this article includes specific pedagogical approaches, resources, and examples of labor-related editorial cartoons that social studies teachers can introduce into their classrooms.

Key Words: social studies, labor history, editorial cartoons, images, visual rhetoric, instructional strategies, historical thinking

Introduction

The issue of labor is often absent or cursorily addressed in social studies textbooks (Loewen, 2007; Wade, 1993) and it is overlooked at both elementary and secondary levels (Holt, 1989). When labor is present, it is often represented in superficial or misleading ways, disconnected from major events, legislation, and movements that it powerfully influenced (The Albert Shanker Institute, 2012). The history of labor since the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 is usually entirely neglected, treating struggles for worker rights as something that “like slavery, happened long ago, and that, like slavery, was corrected long ago” (Loewen, p. 205).

Labor issues are still contested and have profound importance and immediate relevance to most students. Tax policy, worker rights, minimum wages, employee classification, immigration, wage theft, globalization, free trade, unions, income inequality, unemployment benefits, government support for education, vocational training, and other hotly contested issues intersect with historical and contemporary labor issues. A humanistic history and social studies education encourages students to make reasoned judgments that draw on their expanding views of humanity and provide exposure to topics that result in the consideration of the common good (Barton & Levstik, 2004). To adequately prepare students to engage contemporary labor issues as citizens, we need to reclaim and reposition the deep study of labor as a privileged and essential curricular mandate. It is not enough to simply identify gaps in textbook coverage, we

must also support efforts to fill them (Roberts, 2014; Wade, 1993). This article seeks to respond to that gap by providing a sound rationale for studying labor history in the classroom. It also provides concrete strategies and resources to support classroom teachers' efforts to conduct labor history lessons connecting labor's past to present-day issues, building higher-order thinking skills, and developing student competencies in historical reasoning, primary source interpretation and analysis, and normative decision making about complex and controversial social justice issues.

We position contemporary and historical labor concerns within social justice education. The definition of social justice education employed is as "the pedagogical practice of guiding students toward critically discussing, examining, and actively exploring the reasons behind social inequalities and how unjust institutional practices maintain and reproduce power and privilege that have a direct impact on students' lives" (King & Kasun, 2013, p. 1). The end goal of social justice is the "full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs" (Bell, 2013, p. 21). Social justice education is process-oriented, with a goal of undermining the systems that create exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence, all of which constitute oppression (Young, 2013).

Students are naturally interested in normative and moral issues, including questions concerning workers' rights and the expression, diminution, and fulfillment of those rights (Simon, 2001). Virtually every student will spend a great deal of his or her life as a worker, but teaching about work and labor within society can be easily discarded in standards-driven social studies classes (Grant & Horn, 2006). Even when not explicitly listed in curriculum standards, however, inclusion of labor history meets several widely recognized standards in social studies education. For example, the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) National Curriculum Standards recommend the study of "culture," "time, continuity and change," "individuals, groups, and institutions," "power, authority, and governance," "production, distribution, and consumption," "science, technology, and society," and "civic ideals and practices," (NCSS, 2010, pp. 3-4) each of which can be richly explored through the study of labor history. The pedagogical approaches we recommend collectively support the development of College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Social Studies Standards, including "(1) developing questions and planning inquiries; (2) applying disciplinary concepts and tools; (3) evaluating sources and using evidence; and (4) communicating conclusions and taking informed action" (NCSS, 2013, p. 12). Meeting these standards by employing labor history lessons can shed light on local and global current events, as well as the plight of working people everywhere (Holt, 1989). When integrated as a thematic unit, labor has rich potentiality to fulfill multiple content objectives and provides a focus that can tie together disconnected content and create linkages between the present-day conditions of students, their families, and their larger society, as well as the past. In this sense, attention to labor alters the way we think about our history (Fink, 1982) and, more importantly it has dramatic implications for the way in which we think about the present and future. Consequently, teaching and learning about labor helps us to engage in dialogue and make decisions about a range of issues of central concern to democratic citizens.

Labor in the Social Studies Curriculum

The academic study of U.S. labor history began at the turn of the 20th century in response to the growth of the Labor Movement (Brody, 1993). At first, scholarship focused chiefly on the functions of unions, wages, and policies affecting the working class. In the 1960's, labor historians began to eschew traditional economic and legal frameworks in favor of a "new labor

history” (Brody, 1979, p. 111) that pushed the field into a close association with social history. New labor historians began to explore the lives of workers, their culture, their community, and their relationships with social and political institutions (Brody, 1979; DeChenne, 1993; Haverty-Stacke & Walkowitz, 2010, see editor introduction in Haverty-Stacke & Walkowitz (2010) for a current discussion of labor historiography). The inclusion of labor history in social studies textbooks has mirrored the development of the field, albeit at a considerably slower pace. Decades ago, at a time when old labor history still dominated the academic discipline, it seemed that high school social studies textbooks were a “very near paradise for a man who was blind to economic and social facts” (Scoggins, 1966, p. vii). Part of this dystopic vision stemmed from textbooks lacking “anything that could offend, or excite, the white, middle-class youngster who may read them,” and not a single labor topic had adequate explanation or depth (Scoggins, p. 89).

In the 1970’s, after new labor history had taken root but before scholarship filtered into the Kindergarten-12 (K-12) classroom, social studies textbook editors continued to “shortchange” the field (Sloan, 1974, p. 582). The little labor history that appeared in textbooks during this time focused on three strikes—the 1877 railroad strikes, the 1892 Homestead strike, and the 1894 Pullman strike (Anyon, 1979). Moreover, textbooks generally pushed the idea that organized union strikes were expensive ventures that resulted in little other than violence (Anyon, 1979).

As new labor history found its way into textbooks and classrooms at the end of the twentieth century, treatment of labor issues slightly broadened to include brief narratives of workers’ lives. For example, curriculum focused mainly on events during the late-nineteenth century U.S. Industrial Revolution, with some thin coverage of the 1946 Employment Act (Cobble & Kessler-Harris, 1993).

Some would suggest that little has changed in the 21st century (Ravitch, 2003; The Albert Shanker Institute, 2012). Students do cover certain events in labor history, but to what extent do they engage in the normative moral issues of employee and employer? To what extent are they asked to engage questions such as:

What rights do workers have? What rights should they have?

To what extent should workers influence employer practices?

What role should and does public interest play in resolving labor disputes?

How should the government regulate labor and management?

What role should organized labor take in changing economic conditions?

What role(s) should organized labor play in our economic system? (*How schools are teaching about labor*, 1981)

Questions of this kind are certainly unpopular in some circles, but they arouse questions often unasked in the home, the classroom, and the workplace. These are questions that need extended consideration in the widening and broadening experience of the public school.

Labor-Related Editorial Cartoons

One particular teaching tool of promise is the use of labor-related editorial cartoons in the classroom. We believe this approach to be particularly well-suited for middle and high school students, due to both their higher levels of literacy and perspective taking skills (Van der Graaff et al., 2014) and because many will be entering, or preparing to enter, the workforce for the first time. Students enjoy historical images, but simply using them in a class does not necessarily lead to students gaining an understanding of the theme or the relationship of the

image to a particular era (Barton, 2001). Students can make connections to labor history through photographs and first-person narratives, but these may seem so far removed from their experiences or present condition that the linkages between the issues that undergird select historical epochs do not resonate today. According to Darnton (1985),

“when we cannot get a proverb, or a joke, or a ritual, or a poem, we know we are on to something. By picking at the document where it is most opaque, we may be able to unravel an alien system of meaning” (p. 5).

By trying to get the joke of editorial cartoons, we are engaging students in a core practice of historical study: the attempt to understand how others separated by place and time made meaning out of their world. Through their use of both humor and symbolic images, editorial cartoons are uniquely well-suited to helping students uncover and bridge the semiotic gaps that impede deep historical inquiry. In so doing, students will find rich opportunities to engage in a core process of historical thinking, that of navigating “the tension between the familiar and the strange, between feelings of proximity to and feelings of distance from the people we seek to understand” (Wineburg, 1999, p. 490).

If we want students to understand divergent perceptions about labor, historically and today, visual primary source media is often more effective than teachers explaining the tension in words (Werner, 2003). To that end, we have selected some images from the Industrial Workers of the World’s (IWW) *Industrial Worker* that can energize student-directed discussion about labor and provide a point of departure for investigating the conditions that brought forth these visceral renderings of worker attitudes (see Figures 1-3). Whether using these political cartoons or others, it is important to avoid overgeneralizations by considering the specific author, time, and intended audience. The IWW, for example, with its ties to socialist and anarchist movements, was considered far more radical than many other labor organizations, such as the American Federation of Labor (Dubofsky, 1969). After 1917, membership began to decline significantly due to several factors including government crackdowns on dissident organizations during World War I, conflicts with other labor organizations, and internal conflicts about the IWW’s relationship with Russia’s new communist government (Dubofsky, 1969).

It's Still Raining and a Bum Umbrella



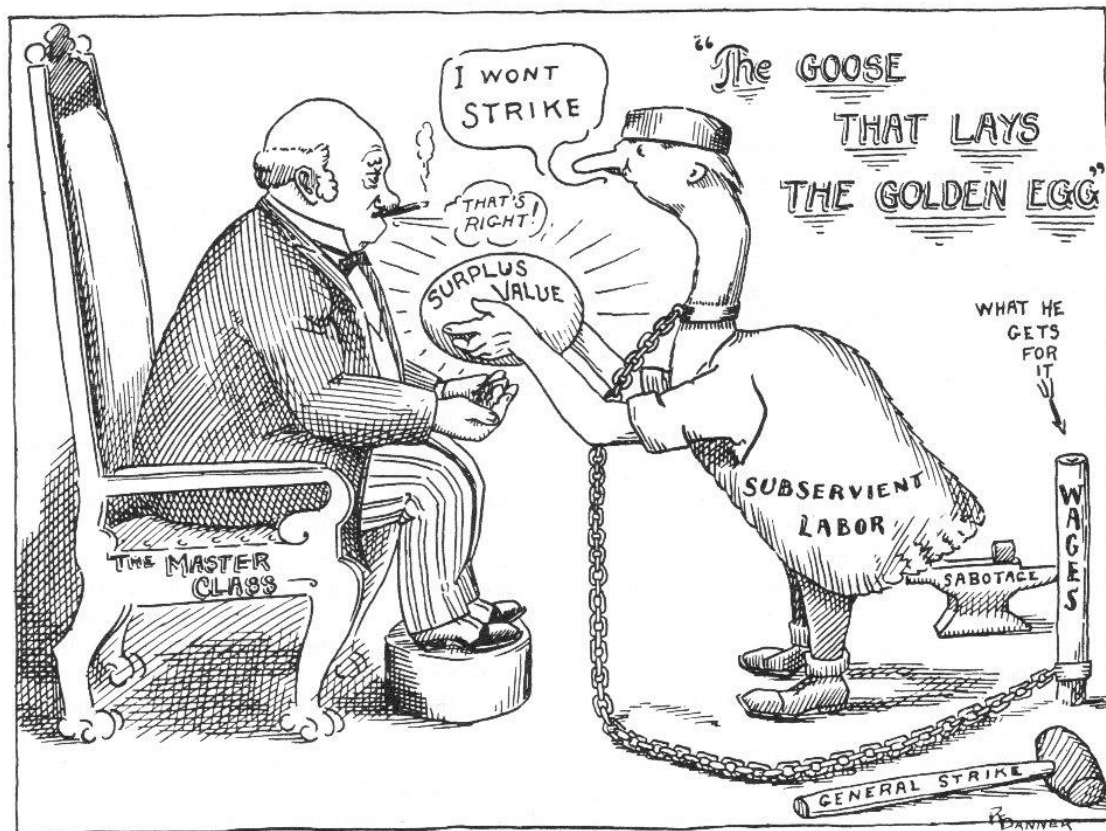
Figure 1. 1/24/1931, *Industrial Worker*

WHOOPS, MY DEAR!



Parasite: "Now, if They'd Just Leave Me Alone for Awhile, Everything Would be Just Swell!"

Figure 2. 12/14/1935, *Industrial Worker*



WHY SHOULD WORKERS PRODUCE FOR IDLERS?

Figure 3. 2/13/1913, *Industrial Worker*

These considerations might lead to questions such as: What beliefs about capitalism and worker rights might the author have held?; Who was the intended and actual audience?; Why might the viewpoints in these cartoons have been considered *radical*?; What was the IWW like at the time these cartoons were published?; How might these cartoons been different if they had been published in a more *conservative* labor organization's *periodical*? Depending on time, resources, and the level of the class, teachers might provide answers to these questions directly, have students research answers independently or collaboratively, or guide students through the process of formulating questions related to context, chronology, author, and audience.

Teaching with editorial cartoons is challenging because they rely on visual rhetoric dependent on audience assumptions and knowledge of context (Werner, 2003). Yet, students are continually brought in contact with visual rhetoric designed to persuade and inform them. Consequently, the development of a nuanced ability to critique visual rhetoric is broadly applicable to their daily lives. The use of editorial cartoons in the classroom develops this ability in the context of meaningful content and opportunities to form evaluative judgments about the past and present.

Editorial cartoons are of unique value to the social studies precisely because questions about visual rhetoric cannot be asked about written texts. When teachers build on these questions by juxtaposing these cartoons with photos, sketches, and other content forms from a particular time, such as working conditions and strikes in Harlan County, Kentucky during the

1930s (Stevens & Fogel, 1999), they can lead students to a deeper, richer, and more nuanced understanding of a particular place in time and of the ways metaphors and visual images are used to understand the contemporary world. By analyzing political cartoons, students develop awareness of the analogies, representations, and visual metaphors they use to understand labor, and how these discourses of labor have changed over time. Use of these images can take the form of writing, brainstorming, introducing current events, developing initial hypotheses, self-reflection, and assessment (National Archives and Records Administration, 2003).

Although it is outside of the scope of this article, the teaching suggestions presented here would benefit greatly from being situated within a broader unit on labor history. To help remedy the dearth of social studies textbook treatments of labor history, we recommend teachers interested in building such a unit begin with the extensive collections of resources provided by the American Labor Studies Center (ALSC) or the American Social History Project's (ASHP), *Who Built America?*. Possibilities also exist within a special issue of the Organization of American Historians (OAH) *Magazine of History*, which presents several pedagogical ideas for teaching labor history, including film, video, and song (Blatt, 1997). Additionally, recent article entitled "Listen Up: Studying the American Labor Movement through Oral Histories" (Bolick, Norberg, & Durbin, 2007) offers ideas for connecting oral histories and labor studies.

Teaching Ideas

Students already engaged in a unit on globalization, the industrial revolution, or any number of themes can generate a list of people and objects in the cartoon, identify captions and dates, and interrogate symbols and phrases of significance. By describing actions, explaining the connection of words and symbols, applying meaning to the perspective of groups who would agree or disagree with the message, and explaining the underlying message, students will engage in higher-order thinking (see references for a link to worksheets from the National Archives and Records Administration). Students can also be encouraged to think creatively about how they would alter the images to convey a different message, strengthen or complicate the argument, or adapt the cartoon to a different context (Werner, 2003). Teachers need not spend significant time interrogating these images for bias and reliability because similar to other forms of historical evidence they necessarily contain bias and are inherently reliable given their status as historical evidence (Barton, 2005) and instead the focus can be on the *kind of bias* students infer. The central aim of employing these images is for students to develop and reconsider beliefs about labor and unions that will be informed and reasoned, not prejudicial, blind, or reactionary.

Another suggestion draws on the work of Staley (2002) and Fehn (2007), which demonstrates the promise of spaces that exist between photographs and the variety of ways narrative could fill them. For example, juxtaposing images can both facilitate inquiry and serve as a form of assessing students' understandings of changing perceptions and multiple points of view. Students can draw on other documents, photographs, and artifacts to construct a visual narrative that blends particular and general features of unions and labor. The assembly and presentation of such a cluster of images and documents has promise for fellow students or audience members contesting the narrative or argument contained in the presented images (Fehn). An important caveat for students seeking additional resources to construct their image narrative is that some knowledge of the event being photographed is a necessary condition for interpreting the photograph (Struk, 2004) and situating the photograph within an appropriate temporal or contextual sequence.

Similarly, Bickford (2011a) demonstrated that middle school students can create complex editorial cartoons of their own with appropriate guidance. Engaging in discussion and interpretation of these original cartoons encourages students to develop normative views, use imagery to communicate them, and exercise higher order thinking skills. By first asking students to create concept maps and substitution lists (i.e., lists of words, images, signs, etc. that can be used to represent a more abstract concept), students will be able to create more nuanced and complex cartoons (Bickford, 2011b). Uncomplicated and readily available technology can greatly facilitate the creation process as students gather images from the internet, edit and superimpose them on each other, and easily add text to them (Bickford, 2010).

Through the creation of original cartoons, students can make connections between past and present-day labor issues. Students, for example, could be given a list of contemporary labor issues (e.g., wage theft, unpredictable hours, declining real minimum wage, international wage competition, the controversy over public sector unions), and be asked to create a political cartoon using what they have learned about visual rhetoric while studying cartoons. Such an exercise will help students understand continuity and change as they relate to labor issues, culture, and the use of visual media to make political arguments.

Whether analyzing historical or original labor cartoons, students can respond to a series of questions designed not only to make meaning about the historical or contemporary artifact, but to also make connections between history, their individual judgments and opinions, and normative considerations for work conditions in a justice-oriented global society. For example, students might respond to the following:

- What current event occasioned the cartoon?
- What visual and verbal caricature is used?
- What is the central analogy?
 - What elements in the picture are used as a metaphor for the current event?
 - How are the elements brought together (e.g., substitution, superimposition, fusion, synecdoche, juxtaposition, chiasmus, narrative)?
 - Why is the metaphor easy or difficult to recognize and interpret?
- What meanings are generated?
 - What editorial comment about the event is highlighted? What is this metaphor hiding?
 - Why do you agree or disagree with the implied meaning?
 - What alternative meanings does the metaphor also generate? (Werner, 2003)

These sorts of questions about images can spark inquiry and interest into lessons, units, and projects that focus on the recurring themes and tensions of work, labor relations, unions, and global economic relationships. Because these images are drawn from issues of the *Industrial Worker*, students and teachers alike can juxtapose these cartoons with those published at the same time in other publications. Students can analyze how these issues are portrayed in their textbooks and the media. As a result, students can engage in a more problematized and nuanced consideration of labor-related concepts and their contested contours throughout history, hone their abilities to interpret visual rhetoric in multiple contexts, and develop more reasoned and informed decisions for their own future as laborers and as consumer citizens impacting labor conditions elsewhere.

Concluding Remarks

In an attempt to confront and undermine institutions that create exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence (Young 2013), labor constitutes a critical and normative controversial issue. As such, labor should enjoy a central position among the topics and issues of most worth to teach (Van der Graaff et al., 2014). Teaching labor history within the context of democratic citizenship education can be challenging, both because the content can seem far removed from the experiences of contemporary students and because it receives scant coverage in many textbooks and standards.

Through an examination of the visual rhetoric and context of labor images, students can gain a deeper understanding of the experiences and challenges faced by laborers in the past. By comparing these cartoons with contemporary labor issues and images, and through the process of creating their own editorial cartoons, students can connect the past to the present, and gain greater critical awareness of the persuasive imagery and labor rhetoric they are sure to encounter throughout their lives. As citizens, wage-earners, consumers, and sometimes owners of capital, students will face important decisions shaping the world of work and investment for themselves and people around the world. Effective teaching of labor history through editorial cartoons within social studies education provides practical skills and perspectives for making those decisions in ways that are reasoned, justice-oriented, and well-informed by the past and present.

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