

# Labor's Untold Story

A Textbook Case of Neglect and Distortion



AP PHOTO/JACK THORNELL

He who controls the present, controls the past.  
He who controls the past, controls the future.<sup>1</sup>

BY THE ALBERT SHANKER INSTITUTE

Imagine opening a high school U.S. history textbook and finding no more than a brief mention of Valley Forge, the Missouri Compromise, or the League of Nations. Imagine not finding a word about Benjamin Franklin, Lewis and Clark, Sitting Bull, Andrew Carnegie, or Rosa Parks. That is what has happened to labor's part in the American story, and to most of the men and women who led the labor movement.

*The Albert Shanker Institute is committed to four fundamental principles: vibrant democracy, quality public education, a voice for working people in decisions affecting their jobs and their lives, and free and open debate about all of these issues. This article is drawn from American Labor in U.S. History Textbooks: How Labor's Story Is Distorted in High School History Textbooks, which the Institute published in 2011. Several experts in labor history contributed to this report: Paul F. Cole, director of the American Labor Studies Center; Jeff Hilgert, doctoral student in industrial and labor relations at Cornell University; Lori Megivern, Fulbright Fellow and American Councils for International Education Teacher of Excellence; and Jeff Mirel, professor of education and history at the University of Michigan. Christina Bartolomeo, a freelance writer (who has since joined the AFT staff), assisted with researching, writing, and editing.*

In the high school history textbooks our children read, too often we find that labor's role in American history—and labor's important accomplishments, which changed American life—are misrepresented, downplayed, or ignored. That is a tragedy because labor played (and continues to play) a key role in the development of American democracy and the American way of life. This article, and the more detailed report\* from which it is drawn, examines four high school textbooks developed by some of the leading publishers in the country: *The American Vision*, published by Glencoe/McGraw-Hill in 2010; *American Anthem: Modern American History*, published by Holt, Rinehart, and Winston/Harcourt in 2009; *United States History*, published by Prentice Hall/Pearson in 2010; and *The Americans*, published by McDougal Littell/Houghton Mifflin in 2009.<sup>2</sup> Together, these books represent a significant percentage of the purchasing market for high school history textbooks.

Spotty, inadequate, and slanted coverage of the labor movement in U.S. history textbooks is a problem that dates back at least to the New Deal era. By the late 1960s, a number of scholars had begun documenting the biased treatment of organized labor in high school curricula. In a 1966 study, *Labor in Learning: Public School Treatment of the World of Work*, University of California researcher and high school history teacher Will Scoggins found that the history and government textbooks used in most high



\*To read the full report, go to [www.shankerinstitute.org/publications/american-labor-in-textbooks](http://www.shankerinstitute.org/publications/american-labor-in-textbooks).

schools either ignored or inadequately treated topics such as collective bargaining, unfair labor practices, company unions, strikes, right-to-work laws, and the role of government in labor dispute mediation and conciliation.<sup>3</sup>

Scoggins and other scholars understood that high school textbooks had come to reflect a negative view about unions that was prevalent in the American business community, as well as in politics—often expressed by various business-oriented and ultra-conservative factions of the Republican Party. In a sense, as Scoggins and others found, 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.

One illustration of this trend: in the late 1930s and early 1940s, conservative, business-oriented groups launched a highly successful attack on the supposedly “left-wing” textbook series written by Harold Rugg, a professor at Columbia University’s Teachers College.<sup>4</sup> Among other complaints, the books’ critics denounced Rugg’s “positive” depiction of the 1936–1937 Flint Sit-Down Strike against the Gen-

## A Note on Methods

We selected the four leading textbook companies (Glencoe/McGraw-Hill; Holt, Rinehart, and Winston/Harcourt; Prentice Hall/Pearson; and McDougal Littell/Houghton Mifflin) and reviewed the most detailed high school U.S. history textbook from each publisher. We limited our review to the hard copy student editions. We made this decision because these editions are the actual books to which students are exposed in the classroom. We did not investigate or assess any materials from the teacher editions, nor did we review any supplemental teaching materials. All of the textbooks we examined were written for high school U.S. history classrooms.

Data on the exact market share of these books is not in the public domain, but it appears that these four publishers may have a combined market share of more than 80 percent of the U.S. high school textbook industry. In an effort to get as accurate a picture as possible, we approached representatives of each publisher at a curriculum conference in June 2009 and asked them for their company’s nationwide market share in the U.S. history textbook market. Each of the four textbook publishers’ representatives said their company’s share was greater than 25 percent of the nationwide market in U.S. history.

—ASI

eral Motors Corporation as union propaganda designed to convince students that there was nothing wrong with the sit-down strike. (The Flint Sit-Down Strike led to the unionization of the U.S. auto industry, enabling the fledgling United Automobile Workers to organize 100,000 workers almost at a stroke.<sup>5</sup>) In the early 1940s, these criticisms of Rugg gained traction and his books disappeared from public schools.<sup>6</sup>

After the Second World War, the business community continued to devote significant resources to the development and promotion of a high school social studies curriculum that promoted its vision of society and its perspective on U.S. history. This vision was skeptical of government programs and wary of organized labor.<sup>7</sup>

More recent studies of organized labor’s treatment in U.S. textbooks have found similar biases.<sup>8</sup> For example, in a 2002 article in *Labor History*, labor historian Robert Shaffer found that U.S. history textbooks totally ignored the

organization of public employee unions, one of the most important union trends in the past half century. Shaffer declared that there is an “absence in virtually all survey textbooks, as well as in textbooks of the recent (post-1945) U.S., of any mention of the upsurge in public employee



Left: Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., in Memphis to support the striking sanitation workers just a few days before he was assassinated, believed labor and civil rights were inextricably linked. Above: Participants in the Flint Sit-Down Strike, which led to the unionization of the auto industry, living in a Fischer plant. Right: The Women’s Trade Union League, which encouraged women to form unions, counted Eleanor Roosevelt (sixth from the left) as a member.



COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION

unionism in the 1960s and 1970s. This silence serves all of our students poorly, and reflects a lack of perspective about what has been one of the more important legacies of the 1960s to contemporary life.”<sup>9</sup>

Public employee unionism has been a focus of intense political conflict and media attention in recent months, with attacks on public employees’ union rights and the public sector labor movement arising in Wisconsin, Michigan, Florida, New Hampshire, Ohio, and other states. Because of the lack of information in history textbooks, most citizens are probably not prepared to fully understand these attacks.

### How Today’s Leading Textbooks Shortchange Labor

Today’s major high school history texts do not ignore unions and the labor movement altogether. Each of the books we reviewed presents a modicum of important information, including facts about organizations such as the Knights of Labor, the American Federation of Labor (AFL), and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). We should note that there are several instances in which the textbooks get it right—for example, two of the textbooks include descriptions of the too-often-forgotten Women’s Trade Union League, which encouraged women to form trade unions, fought for laws to protect the rights of women factory workers, and is credited with establishing the nation’s first strike fund.<sup>10</sup> Another example: *The Americans* contains an excellent two-page spread on *NLRB v. Jones and Laughlin Steel Corp.*, the 1937 Supreme Court case that affirmed the authority of the National Labor Relations Board and gave some protection to workers’ right to organize.<sup>11</sup>

Still, these textbooks provide what we believe to be a narrow and sometimes seriously misleading view of what unions

are and have done in the past; they neglect the labor movement’s role in shaping and defending American democracy, and they pay hardly any attention to organized labor in the past half century.

The textbooks fall short in their coverage of labor in three specific ways. First, they devote little space to the labor movement and the development of unions generally. Second, when they do cover the development of unions, the textbooks’ accounts are often biased against the positive contributions of unions to American history, focusing instead on strikes and “labor unrest.” Third,



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## Working for Freedom

For a more balanced discussion of the role of labor during industrialization, see “Working for Freedom,” which is webisode 9 in *Freedom: A History of US*. Created by PBS based on Joy Hakim’s *A History of US* textbooks (see [www.joyhakim.com/works.htm](http://www.joyhakim.com/works.htm)), this 16-webisode series makes the struggle for freedom the central topic in American history.

For the series homepage—and links to extensive teaching guides, photos, timelines, and other resources—see [www.pbs.org/wnet/historyofus/index.html](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/historyofus/index.html). To jump to labor during industrialization, see segments 6–8 of “Working for Freedom” at [www.pbs.org/wnet/historyofus/web09/segment6.html](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/historyofus/web09/segment6.html).

—EDITORS



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Above left: Members of the Transportation Workers Union, who were employees of New York's Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority, picket the office of the New York City construction coordinator in 1950. Left: The president of the American Federation of Labor, William Green, testifies in favor of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Economic Security Bill, which became the Social Security Act of 1935. Above: Child laborers, like these Pennsylvania coal miners in 1911, were quite common before unions helped win passage of child labor laws.

their discussions of other important social, political, and economic movements (such as the civil rights movement or the Progressive movement) and their gains often downplay or ignore the important role unions and their members played in these movements.

The following are some of the most significant examples of these problems, drawn from the four textbooks. The books:

- often implicitly (and, at times, explicitly) represent labor organizing and labor disputes as inherently violent;
- virtually ignore the vital role of organized labor in winning broad social protections, such as child labor laws, Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, and the Environmental Protection Agency;
- ignore the important role that organized labor played in the civil rights movement; and
- pay scant attention to unionism after the 1950s, thus completely ignoring the rise of public sector unionization, which brought generations of Americans into the middle class and gave new rights to public employees.

Giving the union movement its proper place in the teaching of our history is not simply special pleading for the cause of labor, as some critics might assert. Our central argument is that the study of American history itself is incomplete and inaccurate without labor history. Regardless of their personal values, serious scholars of American history do not deny that the labor movement has played a major role in our nation's development.

Whether in light of labor's championship of universal social programs or its formative role in the industrial and postindustrial workplace, labor has changed our nation's history, its economy,

and the development of the American social structure as it exists today. There is little disputing that the labor movement has been a key actor in our country's history, inarguably as important as scores of other figures and movements that cross the stage in history class, from Whigs to prohibitionists, from Daniel Boone to Joe McCarthy.

Here are five specific reasons why not telling labor's story deprives students of the real American story and leaves them ignorant of forces that continue to shape their lives today.

1. *Labor played a vital role in the establishment and growth of democracy in America.* Few high school history textbooks demonstrate that

the labor movement in America sprang directly from the movement's understanding of Americans' constitutional rights. For example, the Bill of Rights protects "the right of the people peaceably to assemble." From this right to freedom of assembly arises workers' claim to the right of freedom of association—the crucial right to meet together, to organize a union. Along with the right to bargain contracts with employers, freedom of association is a central element of both American and international labor rights and standards.\*

Unfortunately, not one of the American history textbooks we reviewed illustrates that the right to freedom of association springs directly from the right to freedom of assembly—i.e., that labor rights spring from constitutional and human rights as envisioned by the Founders.

Labor activists understood this principle from the movement's earliest days. In the 1830s, female textile mill workers in Lowell, Massachusetts (often known as the Lowell Mill Girls), fought for a living wage and a 10-hour day. In an 1834 proclamation urging other mill workers to join them in a walkout to protest a wage cut, the women wrote:<sup>12</sup>

Our present object is to have union and exertion, and we remain in possession of our unquestionable rights. We circulate this paper wishing to obtain the names of all who imbibe the spirit of our Patriotic Ancestors, who preferred privation to bondage, and parted with all that renders life desirable—and even life itself—to procure independence for their children.

All the textbooks we assessed provide extensive coverage of the formulation and adoption of the Constitution and enactment  
*(Continued on page 36)*

\*Labor's source of inspiration from the First Amendment right of association is aspirational. The rights contained in the First Amendment provide protection against government action that would limit the exercise of the right of association. The First Amendment does not apply to the actions of private parties. Nonetheless, many of the values imbedded in the First Amendment right of association became the foundation for the National Labor Relations Act, which was adopted by Congress and does apply to the private sector. See *Jacksonville Bulk Terminals, Inc., et al. v. International Longshoremen's Association, et al.*, 457 U.S. 702 (1982).

# Distorting the Historical Record

## One Detailed Example from the Albert Shanker Institute's Report

Perhaps the most glaring error in these textbooks is the treatment of the role that unions and labor activists played as key participants in the civil rights movement. For example, while coverage is thin on the relationship between organized labor and the civil rights movement in the 1940s, it is virtually nonexistent from the 1950s on.

In general, the textbook coverage of the civil rights movement is quite good, but the omission of organized labor's contribution to that movement is deeply problematic

and organized the United Rubber Workers during and after World War II.<sup>5</sup>

can workers into nonsegregated unions. In addition, organized labor provided crucial support to the civil rights movement from the 1940s through the 1960s, most of which the textbooks ignore.

The textbooks do mention A. Philip Randolph (the founding president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, who led the union's 12-year fight for recognition by the Pullman Company and won the union entry into the AFL) as both a union leader and a civil rights leader.<sup>4</sup> The books

Likewise, none of the textbooks mentions E. D. Nixon, a leader in the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and an associate of A. Philip Randolph. Nixon was also a leader of the NAACP in Alabama and the initial organizer of the Montgomery bus boycott and the Montgomery Improvement Association, which managed the boycott. There is no mention in the textbooks of the role of union support for the boycott.<sup>6</sup> Finally, none of these texts introduces students to Bayard Rustin, a master strategist and hero of both the labor and civil rights movements, and the chief organizer of the 1963 March on Washington. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, and into the '80s, Rustin was instrumental in linking organized labor and the civil rights movement.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, the textbooks simply fail to reflect the extent and depth of organized labor's support for the civil rights movement, and how closely the two movements—labor rights and civil rights—were intertwined. This close relationship between labor and civil rights is often called “civil rights unionism.”<sup>8</sup>

Just a few examples of omitted content on labor and civil rights can demonstrate the extent to which textbooks ignore labor's contributions to the modern civil rights struggle. Consider the contributions of just a few of the many unions that supported civil rights that are not covered in history textbooks. For example, the United Auto Workers (UAW) sent money to support the Montgomery bus boycott led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., endorsed a national boycott of Woolworth stores to integrate their lunch counters, and funded voter registration drives in predominantly black areas. In 1963 alone, the union donated \$100,000 to King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference.<sup>9</sup> King worked out of the national UAW headquarters when he and Rustin were planning the March on Washington. Two months before the March, some 150,000 supporters of civil rights marched in Detroit, led by UAW President Walter Reuther and King. UAW members bused in large numbers of marchers.<sup>10</sup>

Early in its history, the International Brotherhood of Teamsters would not allow Southern locals to follow the practice of segregation, and threatened to pull charters in cases where this rule was



Above: As these signs remind us, the 1963 March on Washington was for jobs and freedom. The ties between labor and civil rights were so strong that while planning the march, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. worked in the United Auto Workers' headquarters in Detroit.

and seriously distorts the historical record. To be sure, unions have their own troubled history of racial discrimination,<sup>1</sup> with many unions banning the inclusion of African American members through the 19th and early 20th centuries.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, African American workers understood quite well that they needed to organize to protect their rights. Accordingly, in New York City in 1850, black workers formed the American League of Colored Laborers, the first organization of black workers.<sup>3</sup>

Beginning in the 1930s, however, most large unions began to recruit African Ameri-

concentrate on Randolph's 1941 plan for a march on Washington to protest racial discrimination in the military industries and to propose the desegregation of the American armed forces, which led to the Fair Employment Act, an early success for civil rights advocates. When the textbooks move into the 1950s, however, they ignore other strong links between leaders of organized labor and the civil rights movement.

The textbooks do not cover the extent to which many civil rights activists were also labor activists and leaders, and how closely intertwined the struggle for African American workers' labor rights was with the struggle for civil rights. Consider union leaders such as Clarence Coe, who played a key role in building the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in Memphis in the 1930s, worked at Firestone Tire and Rubber Company,



Above: Bayard Rustin, the architect of the March on Washington, joins Albert Shanker, president of New York City's United Federation of Teachers, for a rally in support of paraprofessionals in 1970.

violated. By 1906, editorials in the *Teamsters'* magazine were making impassioned pleas for all local unions, but especially those in the South, to organize African American workers. The union supported the work of King and provided money and supplies to many civil rights groups, including more than 700 families living in "Freedom Village," who faced retribution for registering to vote in 1960.<sup>11</sup> And, few Americans today know of Viola Liuzzo, a civil rights activist and the wife of a Teamster business agent; Liuzzo was shot and killed on March 25, 1965, by Ku Klux Klansmen while driving a Selma marcher home. King, Teamster leaders (including Teamster General President James R. Hoffa, who offered a \$5,000 reward for the capture and conviction of those who murdered Liuzzo),<sup>12</sup> and other labor and civil rights leaders attended her funeral.<sup>13</sup>

Another example of union support for the civil rights movement: in 1960, when the Woolworth store sit-ins began in the South, the New York Central Labor Council organized picketing at the Woolworth

stores in New York City. Such unions as the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union contributed upward of 800 picketers per day.<sup>14</sup>

There are many more examples of union participation in the area of civil rights. For instance, the American Federation of Teachers and its locals supported the civil rights movement in many ways, including by filing an amicus brief in support of *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, by actively supporting the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, and by giving King more than \$40,000 worth of station wagons to be used in the voter registration drive in Selma, Alabama. In 1963, AFL-

CIO President George Meany paid \$160,000 in bail to release King and 2,000 protesters being held in a Birmingham jail.

Other omissions reveal selective bias quite clearly. One glaring example: King was murdered in Memphis in 1968 while he was aiding a unionization effort of black Memphis sanitation workers under the auspices of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference made the Memphis struggle a focal point of its Southern cities organization effort. King believed that unionization was a key part of the struggle for civil rights. Yet, while the textbooks mention the reason why King was in Memphis, none mentions the specific union involved in the strike—clearly a central actor—by name. Worse, not one mentions King's strong belief that labor rights and civil rights were inextricably linked.

In 1961, King spoke to the AFL-CIO on the shared values of the organized labor and civil rights movements. This speech should be included in all U.S. history textbooks. In the speech, King declared:<sup>15</sup>

Negroes in the United States read the history of labor and find it mirrors their own experience. We are confronted by powerful forces telling us to rely on the goodwill and understanding of

those who profit by exploiting us. They deplore our discontent, they resent our will to organize, so that we may guarantee that humanity will prevail and equality will be exacted. They are shocked that action organizations, sit-ins, civil disobedience and protests are becoming our everyday tools, just as strikes, demonstrations and union organization became yours to insure that bargaining power genuinely existed on both sides of the table.

We want to rely upon the goodwill of those who oppose us. Indeed, we have brought forward the method of nonviolence to give an example of unilateral goodwill in an effort to evoke it in those who have not yet felt it in their hearts. But we know that if we are not simultaneously organizing our strength we will have no means to move forward. If we do not advance, the crushing burden of centuries of neglect and economic deprivation will destroy our will, our spirits and our hope. In this way, labor's historic tradition of moving forward to create vital people as consumers and citizens has become our own tradition, and for the same reasons.

Finally, there is no mention in the textbooks of labor's role in supporting the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.<sup>16</sup> In short, the picture painted by U.S. history textbooks simply airbrushes labor out of this vital historical period and, in the process, paints an incomplete picture of both the labor and civil rights movements. □

## Endnotes

1. As Wade Henderson, president and CEO of the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, put it in congressional testimony: "Although many unions attempted to defy workplace racial hierarchies, others acquiesced and focused primarily on organizing white workers, while either neglecting African Americans or relegating them to the worst job classifications. Notably, the United Auto Workers (UAW) stood bravely athwart some of its own members in demanding equal treatment of African-American workers within Detroit's auto plants." See Wade Henderson, "A Strong Labor Movement Is Critical to the Continuing Advancement of Civil Rights in Our Nation" (testimony before the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions, March 10, 2009).
2. For example, the American Railway Union, which was at the center of the 1894 Pullman strike, did not admit black railway workers. See Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2001). See also James Gilbert Cassidy, "African Americans and the American Labor Movement," *Prologue* 29, no. 2 (Summer 1997).
3. For more on the American League of Colored Laborers, see "American League of Colored Laborers (1850-?)," [www.blackpast.org/?q=aah/american-league-colored-laborers-1850](http://www.blackpast.org/?q=aah/american-league-colored-laborers-1850).
4. For a biography of A. Philip Randolph, see "Gentle Warrior: A. Philip Randolph (1889-1979)," *A. Philip Randolph Institute*, [www.apri.org/html/d/sp/1/225/pid/225](http://www.apri.org/html/d/sp/1/225/pid/225).
5. See William P. Jones, "Black Workers, Organized Labor, and the Struggle for Civil Rights," *Left History* 8, no. 2 (2003), 145-154.
6. For a biography of E. D. Nixon, see "E. D. Nixon," *Encyclopedia of Alabama* online, [www.encyclopediaofalabama.org/face/Article.jsp?id=h-1355](http://www.encyclopediaofalabama.org/face/Article.jsp?id=h-1355).

(Continued on page 40)

(Continued from page 33)

of the Bill of Rights, and the importance of rights like free speech as America's democracy developed. Yet, not a single textbook provides an analysis of the relationship of freedom of association to freedom of assembly as articulated in the First Amendment. Nor do the textbooks cover the labor movement's long history of fighting corporate and government attempts to deprive American workers of their constitutional rights to freedom of assembly, freedom of speech, and due process. Without this aspect of labor's history, students lose a key narrative about how our democracy was shaped and tested.



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Labor unions were strong supporters of Solidarity, the trade union movement that brought freedom to Poland. Above: In 1980, Lane Kirkland, president of the AFL-CIO, receives a movement T-shirt from Stanislaw Walesa, the stepfather of the movement's head, Lech Walesa. Left: A Solidarity rally in Warsaw in 1982.

AP PHOTO

2. *Labor has been a crucial force for social progress in America.* As a result of the glaring deficiencies in how labor is treated in standard high school U.S. history textbooks, students are likely not to understand that unions have played a crucial role—far beyond benefiting their own members—in helping to achieve decent living standards and vital social programs for all Americans. Most textbooks cover significant social legislation but rarely mention the contribution of the labor movement in its advocacy and adoption.

American labor was central to winning child labor protections, unemployment insurance, workers' injury compensation, Social Security benefits, the minimum hourly wage, the eight-hour day and other limits on working hours, the Occupational Safety and Health Act, the Family and Medical Leave Act, Medicare, and Medicaid. Yet the textbooks are largely silent on labor's role in these achievements. For example, no mention is made of continual union advocacy efforts on behalf of the Social Security Act of 1935, a key social reform of the second New Deal establishing old-age pensions, unemployment insurance, and disability relief. In the textbooks, these laws are credited essentially to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, not portrayed as the result of diligent, nationwide, grass-roots mobilization of American workers and their unions. For example, *The Americans* notes: "During the Second New Deal, Roosevelt, with the help of Congress, brought

about important reforms in the areas of labor relations."<sup>13</sup> The passage goes on to discuss the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) of 1938, in which the 40-hour week was finally achieved for many workers. Labor was the key player in the fight for the 40-hour week, and supported the FLSA, but is given no credit for decades of advocacy and activism.

Through their role in winning progressive social legislation, unions brought generations of American families into the middle class and kept many Americans out of poverty.<sup>14</sup> Yet the central facts about unions' economic and social contributions to American life are given short shrift in high school history textbooks. If, while driving to school, students happen to see the bumper sticker "Unions: The Folks Who Brought You the Weekend," that may be more exposure to American labor's historic role as a force for social progress than they will ever get in the classroom.

3. *Labor has been a leader in the fight for human rights at home and abroad.* U.S. labor has a long-standing history of supporting human rights in our country and globally, but little of that history is acknowledged in high school textbooks. Perhaps the most glaring error in the textbooks we reviewed is their failure to cover the role that American unions and labor activists played as key participants in the civil rights movement. While labor leader and Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters founder and president A. Philip Randolph is mentioned as an inspiration for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in two of the books,<sup>15</sup> nowhere else in the textbooks do we see a description of the remarkable support that labor then poured into the civil rights movement. (For details on how labor supported the civil rights movement, see page 34.)

The textbooks also fail to mention the many other contributions made by American labor to the human rights struggle around the world—from the work of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) with the Jewish Labor Committee and its outspoken opposition to the Nazi terror, to the active role played in the 1930s and 1940s by organized labor in the United States in fighting against totalitarian regimes abroad (both Communist and Fascist), to unions' and the AFL-CIO's active support for the Solidarity trade union movement in Poland in the late 1980s, to the labor movement's efforts to aid anti-apartheid groups in South Africa. In its account of President Ronald Reagan's opposition to the Soviet empire, *American Anthem* describes the success of the Solidarity movement in Poland, for example, but

fails to mention the extensive support American labor unions gave to Solidarity.<sup>16</sup>

Today, the American labor movement continues to fight for human rights worldwide: for the rights of oppressed workers, women, children, trade unionists, and journalists, from Iran to China to El Salvador. This story largely fails to make it into the high school history classroom.<sup>17</sup>

4. *Labor is one of the major American political and social forces of the 19th and 20th centuries—and continues to be a political and social force today.* High school history textbooks also simply do not convey the scale and significance of labor as a political and social force in American society for two centuries, and as a continuing force in those areas today. Many students will never learn that, as recently as the late 1960s, around 30 percent of nonagricultural workers in America were union members,<sup>18</sup> and an American might identify him- or herself as a Teamster, Ironworker, or ILGWU member just as readily as he or she might self-identify as a Democrat or a Methodist. Many American communities once centered around the union hall as much as they did around the church or the town hall. Yet the textbooks, which cover other social institutions and movements with some detail, from the American film industry to the conservation movement, give short shrift to labor's decades-long centrality and continuing importance in American life.

The textbooks also fail to portray the role of labor as a political force: as a decisive force in electing presidents, in passing legislation, in energizing political parties, in shaping events in our political history. For example, the American labor movement played a key role in supporting the Marshall Plan in the late 1940s. It supported U.S. efforts in two world wars. It helped pass the Civil Rights Act. And, despite a decline in membership, organized labor's political voice is still strong. For example, in the 2008 election, 21 percent of voters were from union households—despite the fact that organized labor represented only 12.4 percent of workers. Yet, in the textbooks, the labor movement virtually disap-

pears in chapters covering the decades since 1950, except (in three of the textbooks) for a brief and in some cases admiring mention of how Reagan fired air traffic controllers in the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization strike of 1981.

5. *Learning about labor is part of students' civic education.* "In every democracy, the people get the government they deserve," wrote Alexis de Tocqueville, a famous early observer of the fledgling American democracy. History class is one place where students learn what it means to be a citizen of our democracy—and teaching labor history is a way to educate students to be questioning, active citizens in that democracy.

Labor unions possess an encompassing vision of an authentically democratic life that is arguably broader and more inclusive than almost any other force or constituency in American society, and they have worked hard to realize that vision for members and nonmembers alike. When we give students a full and accurate account of labor's history, we are illustrating that it is possible to challenge established social and economic systems and structures and act collectively to bring about change—just as when we teach them about the American Revolution, the Progressive and Populist movements, the civil rights struggle, and the fight for women's suffrage. The textbooks cover all these in detail, but too often leave out the accomplishments and struggles of American labor. This is unfortunate because labor is a strand without which the American narrative of principled dissidence and the struggle for social progress by activist citizens is incomplete.

**W**e undertook this review in a spirit of hope that American history textbook publishers will meet the challenge of covering the labor movement more fairly, accurately, and extensively going forward. We have seen the textbook publishing industry make similar changes in other key areas of American history. For example, as a result of demands from leaders of the civil rights movement and others over the last 40 years, textbook publishers today produce books that more accurately reflect the contributions of Americans of all races and origins to the country's narrative, history, and life. We urge them to consider textbooks' coverage of labor in the same critical light, to ask the same questions about labor's contribution to the American story: Are there voices missing? Are there key American events and great American themes being left out? □

### Endnotes

1. A paraphrase of George Orwell's famous line in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1949): " 'Who controls the past,' ran the Party slogan, 'controls the future: who controls the present controls the past.' "

2. Joyce Appleby, Alan Brinkley, Albert S. Broussard, James M. McPherson, and Donald A. Ritchie, *The American Vision* (New York: Glencoe/McGraw-Hill, 2010); Edward L. Ayers, Robert D. Schulzinger, Jesús F. de la Teja, and Deborah Gray White, *American Anthem: Modern American History* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston/Harcourt, 2009); Emma J. Lapsansky-Werner, Peter B. Levy, Randy Roberts, and Alan Taylor, *United States History* (Boston: Prentice Hall/Pearson, 2010); and Gerald A. Danzer, J. Jorge Klor de Alva, Larry S. Krieger, Louis E. Wilson, and Nancy Woloch, *The Americans* (New York: McDougal Littell/Houghton Mifflin, 2009). Note: McDougal Littell/Houghton Mifflin and Holt, Rinehart, and Winston/Harcourt are now Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

3. Will Scoggins, *Labor in Learning: Public School Treatment of the World of Work* (Los Angeles: Institute of Industrial Relations, 1966).

(Continued on page 40)



Above: Nelson Mandela in Chicago in 1993, just a year before he was elected president of South Africa, at a union-sponsored rally in support of his tireless efforts for free multiracial elections.

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# Why Teach a 100-Year-Old Strike?

## The “Bread and Roses” Centenary

BY NORM DIAMOND

Today’s movement in support of the 99 percent is a reminder that throughout U.S. history, a major engine of change has been grass-roots organizing and solidarity. As an old Industrial Workers of the World song goes:\*

“An injury to one, we say’s an injury to all,  
United we’re unbeatable, divided, we must fall.”

Major history textbooks, however, downplay the role of ordinary people in shaping events—especially those who formed labor unions and used the strike to assert their rights. One of the most significant strikes in U.S. history occurred 100 years ago, in the Lawrence, Massachusetts, textile mills, and yet it merits barely a mention in the most widely used U.S. history textbooks.

It was known as the “Bread and Roses” strike because underlying the demand for adequate wages (“bread”) was a demand for dignity on the job and in life more generally (“roses”).

Until this strike, the U.S. Congress was indifferent to working conditions. The Wool Trust was as powerful as the Oil Trust and the Steel Trust. William Madison Wood, chairman of the American Woolen Company, was mentioned in the same breath as John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, and J. P. Morgan. With the largest and most modern textile mills in the world and more than 30,000 workers, Lawrence was the epicenter and symbol of the new industrialization.

It had been founded only six decades earlier, a planned city derived from a utopian vision. The mills themselves were to provide cultural opportunities and education, refining the young women and men

attracted from surrounding farmsteads and rural communities. Housing was to be airy and spacious, with grass yards and limits on the number of tenants, and wages were to be adequate for a healthy diet.

By 1912, the drive for profits had destroyed the vision. Workers lived in fetid, crowded tenements. Working nine- and ten-hour days, six days a week, their main meal was usually little more than bread and molasses. The drinking water inside the mills was foul; supervisors developed a lucrative sideline selling water that was actually potable. Life expectancy for mill workers was 22 years less than for non-mill worker residents of Lawrence.

“If the women of this country knew how the cloth was made in Lawrence and at what price of human life they would never buy another yard,” said Vida Dutton Scudder, a professor at Wellesley College who spoke at one of the strikers’ rallies.

The workforce was one that unions and bosses alike thought impossible to organize. Mostly unskilled, a majority of them women, kept apart by more than a dozen languages, mill workers were both vanguard and victims of the new U.S. industrialization. The textile industry was the first to use new sources of power to drive its machines. It led the way in subdividing jobs into limited, repetitive movements, making workers interchangeable and replaceable.

Hundreds of thousands were enticed from poor areas of Europe by posters and postcards showing happy mill hands leaving work with smiles and sacks of gold. But once mill owners had a surplus of workers desperate for jobs, they drove down wages and sped up the work.

They also experimented with different techniques to divide workers. In some mills, they deliberately placed workers together who spoke different languages. In others,

they allocated work by ethnicity so that particular jobs were given only to Lithuanians, or to French Canadians, or to the Irish. Supervisors used ethnic and racial slurs and sexual harassment as intentional means of control.

When individual states attempted regulation, companies threatened to move. There was a race to the bottom (which is being repeated today on an international scale), with states competing to offer companies the best deal, the least oversight. Companies claimed they could not act to improve conditions on their own; doing so would put them at a competitive



**Above:** When conditions became especially difficult, with food and heating fuel scarce and attacks by hired thugs and the state militia increasing, strikers sent some children to families of supporters in New York and Boston.

disadvantage. The responsibility, their spokespeople said, was not theirs: it was that of the economic system that bound them together and produced all the marvels of modern life.

### The Strike Begins

On January 12, 1912, the owners of all the Lawrence companies suddenly cut workers’ pay, and this seemingly docile workforce walked out. With no preparation and little prior organization, 23,000 workers went on strike. They set up communal kitchens and

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\*“Dublin Dan” Liston, “The Portland Revolution.” See Joyce L. Kornbluh, ed., *Rebel Voices: An IWW Anthology* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Publishing, 1998), 34.

created a committee structure responsible to daily mass meetings that took place in each of the ethnic constituencies.

In the beginning, men led the strike committees as well as the picketing and demonstrations. As the strike wore on, some of those early leaders faltered while women's participation and confidence grew. Sometimes having to overcome resistance from their husbands and fathers, women joined strategy discussions, chaired committees, and took the lead in picketing.

And they sang, women and men alike. Songs became a common language, the means of uplifting their spirits and forging solidarity. For those who couldn't read, singing provided a political education, a way of learning about the world and putting their own struggles in a larger

context. Composer and singer Bernice Johnson Reagon called songs of the civil rights movement "the language that focused the energy of the people who filled the streets."<sup>†</sup> The same was true in Lawrence.

About 14,000 mill workers, half the workforce, held firm for nine and a half weeks. Despite repression, cold, and hunger, they won. They gained a raise in pay, with the largest increases for the lowest paid workers, as well as a higher rate for working overtime and a fairer system for calculating wages. After one last joyous march, on March 18 they went back to work.

They won because the mills couldn't function with so many workers showing no signs of coming back. They won because

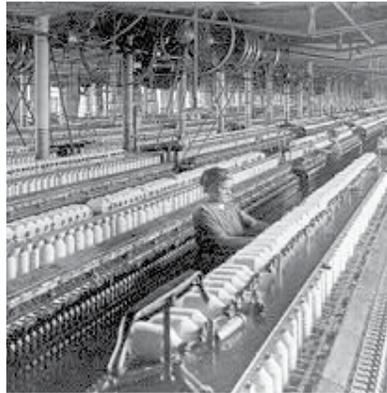
they forced congressional hearings and focused national outrage on living and working conditions and child labor. They won because wool industry profits were based on a tariff against foreign competitors, and mill owners feared that public outrage would prevent Congress from renewing the tariff. Most of all, they won because of their own solidarity.

## Lasting Lessons

Historic change is continuous but seldom smooth. More often, it happens the way tectonic plates grind together, lock under increasing tension into seeming stability, then spasm into a new configuration. It is in these times of spasm when people find

their old ways of understanding the world around them no longer making sense. These are the times when people reach for new ideas and new forms of social organization. These are the times we learn most about human aspiration and capability.

The Lawrence strike of 1912, the "singing strike," was an exceptional product



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**Left: A woman spins yarn in a Lawrence mill. Above: The state militia guards the approach to Lawrence's textile mills.**

of them had joined the chorus and personally participated.

For the workers, the strike was also about experiencing democracy in their own lives and awakening the nation's conscience to the exploitation of children and other vulnerable workers. It was about new and effective tactics: "We will win this strike by keeping our hands in our pockets," said one of their leaders, meaning that the strikers should ignore provocations and not respond to violence with violence. And it was about defending labor rights under attack. When a striker was killed—eyewitnesses said by a policeman—two of the strike leaders were charged as accomplices in her murder, even though the prosecution acknowledged they had been addressing a rally miles away at the time. According to the prosecutor, it was their militant pro-union speech that incited the crime. When a Lawrence jury found those leaders not guilty, all who value the First Amendment's provisions for free speech and freedom of assembly were the beneficiaries.

of one of those times. We should teach Lawrence because it opened possibilities that continue to resonate. Because it was important in building some of our freedoms that are now endangered. And because there are parallels and lessons for the challenges we face today.

There were dueling narratives during the strike, with some of the attacks on strikers framed in ways familiar to us a hundred years later. According to the Lawrence Citizens' Association, formed during the strike and composed of the local business and political elite, outside agitators were to blame for riling up the otherwise docile and responsible workforce. (Their actual words were "godless, unpatriotic outsiders.") Somewhat in contradiction with that characterization, they also faulted their own workers, calling them "illegal immigrants" who had come to this country just to ship their rich wages back to their families abroad.

For the workers, the story was different. It was about human solidarity across race, ethnicity, and gender. It was about community support and the possibility of new forms of workplace organizing. The industrial-type unions we have today, founded in the 1930s and '40s, grew directly out of the struggle in Lawrence. Not only did later union activists take inspiration from the "singing strike," some

We should teach Lawrence for its victorious solidarity and for its contributions to democracy. We should teach it because it is the gritty underpinning for topics that we do teach: populism, the Progressive Era, settlement houses, immigration, female suffrage, movements for public health and civil rights, and naturalism and realism in literature. Most of all, we should teach Lawrence because it was an exceptional historical event whose lessons still reverberate. In this time of renewed popular activism, we must revisit this country's rich history of social movements, labor struggle, and solidarity. □

<sup>†</sup>Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 261.



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### Labor's Untold Story

(Continued from page 37)

4. See Joseph Moreau, *Schoolbook Nation: Conflicts over American History Textbooks from the Civil War to the Present* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2003).
5. During the strike, corporate and police brutality against the strikers led Michigan Governor Frank Murphy to send in the National Guard, not to attack strikers or to evict them from the GM plant they had occupied (ways in which the National Guard was often used against strikers), but rather to protect them, both from the police, who used tear gas against the strikers, and from corporate strikebreakers.
6. Moreau, *Schoolbook Nation*, 245.
7. Elizabeth A. Fones-Wolf, *Selling Free Enterprise: The Business Assault on Labor and Liberalism, 1945–60* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994).
8. For example, Jon Bekken's 1994 analysis of journalism curricula found unions to be neglected or unrepresented. See Jon Bekken, "The Portrayal of Labor in Reporting Textbooks: Critical Absences, Hostile Voices" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Atlanta, GA, August 10–13, 1994), [www.eric.ed.gov/PDFS/ED375414.pdf](http://www.eric.ed.gov/PDFS/ED375414.pdf).
9. Robert Shaffer, "Where Are the Organized Public Employees? The Absence of Public Employee Unionism from U.S. History Textbooks, and Why It Matters," *Labor History* 43, no. 3 (2002): 315.
10. See Appleby et al., *The American Vision*, 435; and Lapsansky-Werner et al., *United States History*, 558.
11. See Danzer et al., *The Americans*, 708–709.
12. From the proclamation, printed in the Boston *Evening Transcript*, February 18, 1834. See also, Thomas Dublin, "Women, Work, and Protest in the Early Lowell Mills: 'The Oppressing Hand of Avarice Would Enslave Us,'" *Labor History* 16 (1975): 99–116, [www.invention.smithsonian.org/centerpieces/whole\\_cloth/u2ei/u2materials/dublin.html](http://www.invention.smithsonian.org/centerpieces/whole_cloth/u2ei/u2materials/dublin.html). As Dublin notes, "At several points in the proclamation the women drew on their Yankee heritage. Connecting their turn-out with the efforts of their 'Patriotic Ancestors' to secure independence from England, they interpreted the

wage cuts as an effort to 'enslave' them—to deprive them of the independent status as 'daughters of freemen.'" Dublin points out that this proclamation (and, we believe, many of the group's other writings) makes clear that the women saw their right to band together to fight for better pay and working conditions as a natural outgrowth of the rights defended by their ancestors in the American Revolution and enshrined in the Constitution.

13. Danzer et al., *The Americans*, 705.
14. See David Madland, Karla Walter, and Nick Bunker, *Unions Make the Middle Class: Without Unions, the Middle Class Withers* (Washington, DC: Center for American Progress, April 2011).
15. Appleby et al., *The American Vision*, 864; and Danzer et al., *The Americans*, 911.
16. Ayers et al., *American Anthem*, 703.
17. For examples, see the international labor activism website LabourStart at [www.laborstart.org](http://www.laborstart.org).
18. For a chart of union membership rates historically, in the United States and several other countries, see Gerald Friedman, "Labor Unions in the United States," *EH.Net Encyclopedia of Economic and Business History*, ed. Robert Whaples, March 16, 2008, [www.eh.net/encyclopedia/article/friedman.unions.us](http://www.eh.net/encyclopedia/article/friedman.unions.us).

### Distorting the Record

(Continued from page 35)

7. For more on Bayard Rustin's life and the new award-winning documentary *Brother Outsider: The Life of Bayard Rustin*, see [www.rustin.org](http://www.rustin.org).
8. For an analysis of civil rights unionism and the forces that shaped it, see Michael Honey, "A Dream Deferred," *The Nation*, May 3, 2004. Honey, a professor at the University of Washington, writes: "It is crucial to remember that *Brown* was as much the product as the precipitator of mass movements. Yes, the decision resulted from the incredibly hard-working and astute battle led by Charles Houston, Thurgood Marshall and others in the NAACP. But it also resulted from mass movements and a vast shift in status among poor and working-class African-Americans, millions of whom moved out of rural areas and into cities and mass-production industries in the 1930s and '40s. They created an expanding membership base for the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), the NAACP and an American left that challenged segregation at every level. Domestic workers, sharecroppers, day laborers, factory workers and other poor people, especially the women among them, organized economic boycotts, picket lines, marches, sit-ins, strikes, church and community groups, unions, consumer cooperatives and mass meetings. Their role as workers, soldiers and activists in the fight against white supremacy at home and fascism abroad created vast social changes that set the stage for *Brown*. As one example, in the Deep South city of Memphis, African-Americans, who had been organizing unions since after the Civil War, provided the main support that made the rise of the CIO possible, at a time when supporting a union could cost one's life. The purge of the interracial left from the CIO during the cold war undermined civil rights unionism, yet a number of black industrial unionists continued to challenge white supremacy in the 1950s and '60s. Union wages also made it more possible to send children to college, and some of those students led sit-ins and demonstrations against Jim Crow."
9. For a more detailed account of the UAW's history in supporting civil rights, see "UAW History," United Auto Workers, [www.uaw.org/page/uaw-history](http://www.uaw.org/page/uaw-history).
10. Kevin Boyle, *The UAW and the Heyday of American Liberalism, 1945–1968* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 176.
11. For more on the Teamsters' support of civil rights, see "Teamsters and Civil Rights," International Brotherhood of Teamsters, [www.teamster.org/history/teamster-history/civil-rights](http://www.teamster.org/history/teamster-history/civil-rights). See also [www.teamster.org/content/teamsters-honor-black-history-month](http://www.teamster.org/content/teamsters-honor-black-history-month).
12. See "This Day in History," International Brotherhood of Teamsters, [www.teamstermagazine.com/day-history](http://www.teamstermagazine.com/day-history).
13. An all-white jury acquitted the men accused in Viola Liuzzo's slaying. For more on Liuzzo, see "Civil Rights Martyr Viola Liuzzo," International Brotherhood of Teamsters, March 11, 2010, [www.teamster.org/content/civil-rights-martyr-viola-liuzzo](http://www.teamster.org/content/civil-rights-martyr-viola-liuzzo).
14. Peter B. Levy, *The New Left and Labor in the 1960s* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 17.
15. James M. Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 202–203.
16. See "Major Features of the Civil Rights Act of 1964" on the CongressLink website, available at [www.congresslink.org/print\\_basics\\_histmats\\_civilrights64text.htm](http://www.congresslink.org/print_basics_histmats_civilrights64text.htm).