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INTRODUCTION

APPROACH AND RATIONALE

The National Center for History in the Schools (NCHS) and the Organization of American Historians (OAH) have developed the following collection of lessons for teaching with primary sources. They represent specific “dramatic episodes” in history from which you and your students can pause to delve into the deeper meanings of selected landmark events and explore their wider context in the great historical narrative. By studying a crucial turning-point in history, the student becomes aware that choices had to be made by real human beings, that those decisions were the result of specific factors, and that they set in motion a series of historical consequences. We have selected dramatic moments that best bring alive that decision-making process. We hope that through this approach, your students will realize that history is an ongoing, open-ended process, and that the decisions they make today create the conditions of tomorrow’s history.

Our teaching units are based on **primary sources**, taken from documents, artifacts, journals, diaries, newspapers and literature from the period under study. What we hope to achieve using primary source documents in these lessons is to remove the distance that students feel from historical events and to connect them more intimately with the past. In this way we hope to recreate for your students a sense of “being there,” a sense of seeing history through the eyes of the very people who were making decisions. This will help your students develop historical empathy, to realize that history is not an impersonal process divorced from real people like themselves. At the same time, by analyzing primary sources, students will actually practice the historian’s craft, discovering for themselves how to analyze evidence, establish a valid interpretation, and construct a coherent narrative in which all the relevant factors play a part.

CONTENT AND ORGANIZATION

Within this unit, you will find: Teacher Background Materials, including Unit Overview, Unit Context, Correlation to the National Standards for United States History, Unit Objectives, and Lesson Plans with Student Resources. This unit should be used as a supplement to your customary course materials. Although these lessons are recommended for grades 7-12, they can be adapted for other grade levels.

The Teacher Background section should provide you with a good overview of the entire unit and with the historical information and context necessary to link the specific dramatic episode to the larger historical narrative. You may consult it for your own use, and you may choose to share it with students if they are of a sufficient grade level to understand the materials.

The Lesson Plans include a variety of ideas and approaches for the teacher which can be elaborated upon or cut as you see the need. These lesson plans contain student resources which accompany each lesson. The resources consist of primary source documents, any hand-outs or student background materials, and a bibliography.

In our series of teaching units, each collection can be taught in several ways. You can teach all of the lessons offered on any given topic, or you can select and adapt the ones that best support your particular course needs. We have not attempted to be comprehensive or prescriptive in our offerings, but rather to give you an array of enticing possibilities for in-depth study, at varying grade levels. We hope that you will find the lesson plans exciting and stimulating for your classes. We also hope that your students will never again see history as a boring sweep of inevitable facts and meaningless dates but rather as an endless treasure of real life stories and an exercise in analysis and reconstruction.

TEACHER BACKGROUND MATERIALS

I. UNIT OVERVIEW

Industrial expansion by 1900 created multiple problems for American wage earners. Women, in particular, were disadvantaged in the unskilled jobs which they were limited to by managers and factory owners. Most women, many of whom were immigrants, worked to keep themselves and their families alive. In 1890, 3.7 million women and 18 percent of the population of working age were employed. By 1900, 5,319,397 women, or one in five, worked. In New York City alone, more than 350,000 women were employed; 132,535 were making clothing items of which the bulk were shirtwaists (blouses). Most of the women were between fourteen and twenty-five years of age. They worked thirteen to fourteen hour days, six days a week during peak production seasons with wages averaging \$3.00 to \$6.00 a week. Their pay could be altered for lateness, breakage, misuse of machinery, thread, needles or mistakes. Discrimination was common as women received 68.5 percent of a man's salary and were considered expendable.

Little skill was required to work in the sweatshops of garment production. Young girls hired as learners could pick threads, carry materials, and be on call to fetch piece goods. Workrooms were poorly lit, overcrowded, unsafe and unhealthy. The passage of legislation in New York to prevent fires was often ignored or adjusted to circumstances as witnessed by the tragic Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in 1911. The bizarre circumstances which resulted in that fire had been widely publicized during the lengthy strike of women shirtwaist workers in the winter of 1909-10. The death of 145 young women, mostly single immigrant Jews and Italians, forced state authorities to investigate the outcries for change made by women workers. At the same time, nearly thirty thousand women throughout the garment district picketed and shut down most of the industry. When the strike halted, many industry promises to improve conditions turned out to be just promises.

Coinciding with the sweated work of women in factories was that of untold numbers of married women who worked around the clock in overcrowded tenements mainly on the city's East Side. While homebound workers did not strike, they sometimes protested low payments by withholding material and taking longer to finish their work. They also employed their children to increase their production, and this effectively eliminated childhood for many.

A study of the conditions under which mainly immigrant women were exploited in factories and at home can reveal the factors that drove key women to fight for change for their sweating sisters in the labor force. Descriptions of working conditions found in public records, speeches, and personal antidotes depict the rationale behind union organization and lengthy strikes to draw the attention of lawmakers and the public to their poor working conditions, low pay, and long hours.

Teacher Background Materials

Graphic photos had even greater impact. This unit is designed to involve students in the human element of early twentieth-century mass production. To know that women, considered to be the heart of the home, were frequently ignored for the price they paid to add a few dollars to the family income in order to survive, is momentous. The role of women in the labor picture, generally downplayed, needs exploration and understanding for full comprehension of societal complexities facing the nation in the twentieth century. Only when their predicaments are presented within the broader context of the Progressive Movement and the attempted advancement of labor can students discern the need to obtain a decent living wage for both men and women.

The evolution of laws today protecting men, women and children are a direct result of legislation and court decisions resulting from actions taken by women when faced with the conditions presented in these lessons. The primary materials which follow forcefully illustrate their impact.

*Based upon testimony, New York State Factory Investigating Commission, *Fourth Report*, Vol.5, p. 2810.

II. UNIT CONTEXT

This unit should be coordinated with a study of the Progressive Movement of 1900–1920. These lessons provide insight into the working conditions of women in the metropolitan area of New York City in the early twentieth century. Through an analysis of these documents students should be able to empathize with the personal circumstances of women in factories and at home as they sweated over garment production. An understanding of working conditions will better enable them to appreciate the more immediate needs of women workers that Progressives attempted to meet through legislation and court decisions.

III. CORRELATION WITH THE NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR UNITED STATES HISTORY

The Hardest Struggle: Women and Sweated Industrial Labor offers teachers opportunities to use primary sources in examining political, economic, and social aspects of women in the industrial work force in early twentieth-century America. The unit provides teaching materials that specifically address **Standard 3** of **Era 6**, Development of the Industrial United States (1870–1900) and **Standard 1** of **Era 7**, The Emergence of Modern America (1890–1930), *National Standards for United States History, Basic Edition* (Los Angeles, National Center for History in the Schools, 1996). Students investigate working conditions of women within factories and tenements, analyze problems leading to strikes, unionization and legal interpretations, and draw their own conclusions regarding women’s accomplishments in the labor sphere.

The unit requires students to engage in historical thinking; to raise questions and to marshal evidence in support of their answers; to go beyond the facts presented in textbooks and examine the historical record for themselves. Students analyze cause-and-effect relationships, interrogate historical data by uncovering the so-

Teacher Background Materials

cial and political context in which it was created, and compare and contrast different sets of ideas and values. The documents presented in this unit help students to better appreciate historical perspectives by describing the past on its own terms through the eyes and experiences of those who were there. The unit challenges students to compare competing historical narratives and to hold interpretations of history as tentative, subject to change as new information is uncovered and new voices are heard.

IV. UNIT OBJECTIVES

- ◆ To understand the price paid by women workers on their jobs in order to advance industrialization.
- ◆ To experience vicariously the ways women workers reacted to conditions imposed upon them by industrialization.
- ◆ To comprehend attempts made by immigrant women workers to improve conditions through strikes, unionization, and the law, and why those attempts failed.
- ◆ To deepen the appreciation of the plight of women workers through the use of primary source documents and photographs.

V. LESSON PLANS

Lesson One	Working Conditions
Lesson Two	Women Workers Fight for Reform
Lesson Three	Progressives Make Reforms

VI. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Progressivism combined ideals of social justice with concepts of efficiency in an attempt to alleviate the dislocations of capitalist development. With roots in the social gospel and the language of religion, it was a movement of the new white professional and managerial class that hoped for democracy and the re-making of community in an urban, ethnically diverse world. Early twentieth-century reform thus appeared as a crusade against the forces of evil as much as a legislative agenda to promote labor standards and clean government, Americanize immigrants, replace tenements, and rationalize business. The wage-earning woman, whether factory girl or home-bound mother, stood at the center of the Progressive imagination as a victim of long hours and low wages, even as actual laboring women rejected being labeled “downtrodden.” Through cross-class organizations and their own collective action, often through unions, working-class women strove to improve living and laboring environments for themselves, their families, and their neighborhoods.

Progressives had inherited an ideal of domesticity that associated women with the home and assigned nurturing, intimacy, care, and morality to the female sex. Men were to be breadwinners, and women to be breadgivers. Women were to be

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