

Lesson Plan: China’s Rising Labor Movement

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Introduction

In their project, “China’s Rising Labor Movement” (<http://pulitzercenter.org/projects/china-migrant-workers-labor-movement-pearl-river-delta>) Pulitzer Center journalists Adam Matthews and Jocelyn Baun examine the growth of a labor movement in China’s factory workforce. As workers begin to demand wage increases, pay for overtime work, safe working conditions, and collective bargaining rights, the dynamic between the Chinese labor force, government and international companies based in urban and rural China is shifting dramatically.

This lesson examines this changing relationship and encourages students to think about the lives of many Chinese factory workers, the likelihood of unionization and the reasons why some Chinese workers might not want to change the system.

Specific Subject-Area Connections

Social Studies

- Civil Rights
- Prejudice, discrimination, and stigma
- Impact of global trade on regional civilizations
- Industrial revolution
- The political and social conditions of developing nations

Common Core State Standards: Social Studies

Key Ideas and Details

1. Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationship among the key details and ideas.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

1. Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.
2. Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources

Curricular Connection

The discussion of factory conditions and unionization in China corresponds especially well to a study of the American Industrial Revolution and the progressive social movement that grew during the same time period.

The Library of Congress offers teachers an outstanding free resource, including primary sources from the time period, to help teachers use the American Industrial Revolution as a starting (or ending) point for a discussion about the growth of China’s labor movement.

http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/primarysourcesets/industrial-revolution/pdf/teacher_guide.pdf

Additionally, this lesson on China’s rising labor movement could accompany a study of Upton Sinclair’s novel, The Jungle that examines the life of one immigrant family trying to make a living in the Chicago meat-packing industry in the early 1900s, during American industrialization. The story explores the horrible work and living conditions and the significant crime and corruption surrounding the community and meat-packing industry.

Background on China

Begin this lesson by providing students with some background information on the country of China, focusing on the people and the country’s history using the State Department’s Country Profile Page: <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/18902.htm>

To help students understand the statistics presented in the “People” Section, it may be useful to compare similar data in the United States or your home country. You may choose to break students into groups to research the different statistics or divide them by country.

	China	Your country/state/region
Population		
Infant mortality rate		
Life expectancy (M/F)		
Religion		
Language		
Education		

If you’d prefer, your students can read the different sections of the “People” section and answer questions included below:

1. Population: What is the largest ethnic group in China? How much of the population do they comprise? How is that similar to/different from the United States or your home country? What do you believe are the social and political impacts of one group comprising such a large portion of the population?
2. Language: What is the predominant Chinese dialect spoken in China? About how much of the population uses this dialect? What effect do you believe the use of this language in schools and government has on the other ethnic groups in the country? (Are groups who do not use this same dialect more/less isolated? Dependent/independent? Etc.)
3. The Pinyin System: What is the pinyin system of Romanization? What, do you feel is the significance of the Chinese government officially adopting a system of Roman letters to spell Chinese names and locations?
4. Religion: What is the predominant religion in China? Freedom of religion is asserted in the constitution, according to the article, is it a reality for all Chinese? Why do you believe this discrepancy exists?

The “History” section of the article briefly tracks Chinese history from the Qing Dynasty to today.

You may choose to have students read and answer questions about the various time periods highlighted in the article, or assign students different sections and ask them to summarize and contribute to a class-wide timeline. As students read the different sections, ask them to focus on the important people or organizations mentioned as well as reforms or shifts (social/political) apparent during different regimes.

Project Introduction

Once students are familiar with basic Chinese history, culture, and politics, ask them to open Matthews and Baun’s Pulitzer Center project: “China’s Rising Labor Movement” (<http://pulitzercenter.org/projects/china-migrant-workers-labor-movement-pearl-river-delta>) and read the introduction on the project homepage.

After reading the introduction, ask students to draw connections to events taking place in the country today or in American or global history. (American/European Industrial Revolution; growth of unions and organized labor in the U.S., civil rights movements, etc.) Additionally, ask them to discuss how American consumer habits do or do not influence China labor laws (e.g., the impact of American demand for Apple products, cell phones, televisions, etc. made in China.)

Chinese Factories

Ask students read Matthews’s Untold Story, “Foxconn: Ruthless Efficiency and Workers Rights in China” (<http://pulitzercenter.org/articles/foxconn-china-migrant-workers-rights>) and view his video on “black factories:” “Hiding in Plain Sight: China’s Illegal Factories” (<http://pulitzercenter.org/video/china-factory-cell-phone-illegal-government-accountability-supply-chain>). Finally ask students to read an article from the New York Times, “A Night at the Electronics Factory” (<http://pulitzercenter.org/articles/foxconn-china-migrant-workers-rights>) by David Barboza, (June 19, 2010). After exploring these resources, students should have a good understanding of the work being done in many Chinese factories, the conditions in which employees are working, and the call for unionization and increased worker rights.

Encourage students to consider the following questions:

1. Describe the type of work Chinese laborers are performing at many factories in China.
2. Describe the safety precautions, monetary compensation, job security many Chinese factory workers are offered.
3. What do you believe is/should be the role of the Chinese government in the creation and supervision of these factories?
4. How does the current role of the Chinese government in the regulation of factories compare to that of the American/your home country’s government? In the United States, the Department of Labor Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) is responsible for ensuring safe and healthy working conditions for American workers. Have students review the OSHA regulations (<http://www.osha.gov/index.html>) and ask them to consider which of the elements represented in OSHA regulations is highlighted in the? Do they believe industry working conditions should be regulated by the government? Why or why not? Should companies be responsible for their own regulation? Why or why not?
5. What do you believe could be done to increase worker rights in China? What challenges do workers and advocates face as they try to form unions?

Connections to the American Industrial Revolution

During the American Industrial Revolution, factories, workers, and the United States government struggled with the same issues evident in China today: worker rights, working conditions, and factory regulations. In 1911, a fire at the Triangle Factory in New York City killed 146 workers, most young women. This event fueled the U.S. labor movement, requiring the U.S. government to take a more active role in regulation. In 2011, one hundred years after the fire, Cornell University published a comprehensive website remembering the fire, the victims, and discussing the impact the fire had on the country then, and continues to have today (<http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire/story/introduction.html>). The site includes primary sources such as newspaper articles, interviews with survivors and witnesses and songs and plays representing the disaster.

The Triangle Factory Fire, which is included in many history curricula, offers students a tremendous local link to today's global industrialization movement.

Finally, Danish-born photographer, Jacob Riis, published many powerful photographs documenting the living and working conditions in New York City's tenements in the late 19th century. The New York Times has a short biography of Riis, and some of his photographs available on their site.

http://topics.nytimes.com/topics/reference/timestopics/people/r/jacob_riis/index.html

Debating what is Best for China's Workers

To offer students a more detailed look at the lives of Chinese factory workers, and what experts and academics believe is best for the workers, have students read two of the opinion pieces from the New York Times, *Room for Debate* from June 13, 2010, (<http://roomfordebate.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/06/13/what-do-chinas-workers-want/?ref=global>). The pieces by Leslie Chang "More Mobile, Less Content," and by Zhang LiJia, "We are not Machines," highlight both the benefits afforded and challenges faced by factory workers in China.

Additionally, a portion of Jonathan Lewis's PBS Documentary, "China from the Inside," examines the lives of Chinese women who move from rural to urban areas in search of factory work. Like the opinion pieces above, the documentary highlights both the positives and negatives of life for many young women. (Watch minutes: 47:20 - 55:50.)

http://watchdocumentary.com/watch/china-from-the-inside-episode-2-women-of-the-country-video_8fda73ef5.html#.TkwxQL-OLm0

After students have read the opinion pieces and/or watched the documentary, hold a class debate in which students argue in favor of, or against, unions and organized labor in China. Ask students to consider if Chinese workers are better off now than they were in the past; if the opportunity for education, career advancement and the freedoms they gain living in cities, make the conditions more tolerable.