

Picture Books as a Springboard to Teaching about Labor Unions

Andrea S. Libresco

Discussed in this article:

Cronin, Doreen. *Click, Clack, Moo: Cows that Type*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000.

Markel, Michell. *Brave Girl: Clara and the Shirtwaist Makers' Strike of 1909*. New York: Harper Collins, 2013.

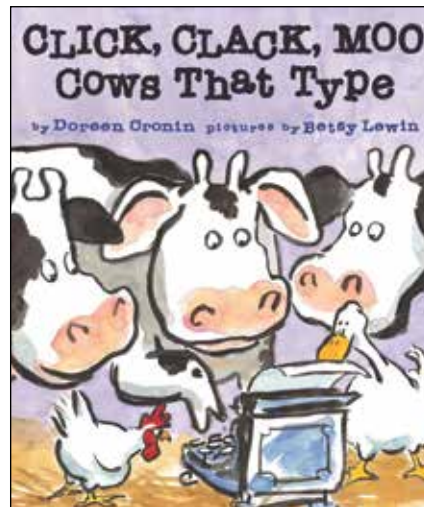
Cohn, Diana. *Si, Se Puede! Yes We Can! Janitor Strike in L.A.* El Paso, TX: Cinco Puntos Press, 2005.

Most elementary teachers belong to a union and value the benefits that their union has delivered—the right to collective bargaining, livable wages, salary increases for advanced degrees and continuing education, health benefits, pensions, weekends and holidays off, paid vacation, sick days, leave to care for a relative, prohibitions on employer discrimination, etc. Yet, many students of these members of the teachers union have little knowledge of the roles of unions, past or present. This may not be surprising, given that union membership has plummeted in the United States in the last 50 years, from nearly one-third of workers to one in ten American workers today (dramatically seen in an online animated map).¹

Decline in membership notwithstanding, unions are an important part of America's history and its standard of living, and a worthy topic for elementary students. Fortunately, there are excellent picture books that approach the topic from a variety of angles. Three are highlighted here, as well as activities that can help elementary students understand how collective bargaining works, what early labor advocates fought for and how they did so, and how unions continue the fight today.²

How Collective Bargaining Works

Sometimes, teachers use Doreen Cronin's recent classic, *Click Clack Moo: Cows That Type* to address the importance of language and communication. Given the important role that the typewriter plays in story, it is a reasonable approach. While these literacy skills and concepts are important, *Click Clack Moo* provides an excellent opportunity to discuss collective bargaining and the vocabulary therein. The farm animals have wants



(a diving board for the ducks in the pond), needs (electric blankets for the cows for warmth), and goods that they produce (milk and eggs). Farmer Brown has his own list of demands (he wants milk and eggs to sell). This book is a primer on negotiation and collective bargaining where labor (the farm animals)

uses its powerful weapon (a strike) against management (Farmer Brown) to help precipitate an agreement, though resolution still requires the intervention of a third party, the labor arbitrator (Duck), whose typewritten notes set the process in motion. Clearly, this book lends itself to role-play. Students enjoy the solidarity of being part of a group with common interests, but they also enjoy getting to be the duck; participating in decision-making is empowering.

Acting out the negotiation on the farm in the book is the prelude to a simulation that concerns classroom rules and practices. When leading this activity, I invite labor organizers into the classroom as participants, but the simulation can be conducted with the help of two colleagues or friends. In the simulation, the students are “labor,” the teacher is “management,” and the two adult guests act as organizers and mediators.

The simulation begins as a single student comes up and tries to negotiate with the teacher individually (for example, for less homework). The teacher denies his or her request. Following this failure, a guest “labor organizer” works with the students (with the teacher out of the room) to compile a list of collective demands (e.g., condition of chairs and desks, supplies, amount and type of homework, etc.). At the same time, the teacher works with an “advocate” to compile her or his own

list of demands as the teacher (e.g., preparedness of students, amount and type of homework, etc.). When the teacher returns to the room, the labor organizer and management advocate help to mediate a discussion between the two sides, working toward a settlement on as many issues as possible. Everyone in the classroom is encouraged to participate.

At least ten minutes should be reserved for a debriefing about the whole activity (which can also continue in the next class). Debriefing questions may include:

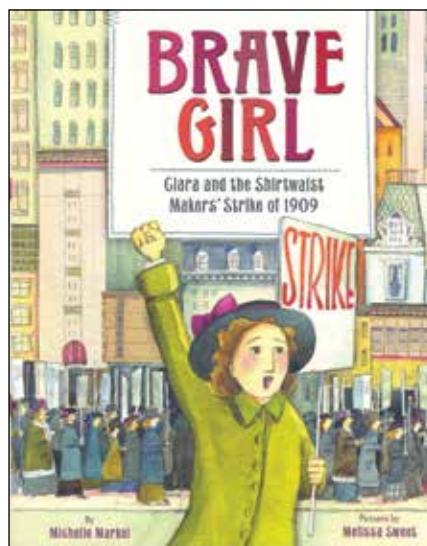
- How did individual negotiation (when one of you came up on your own to try to get what you wanted) compare to collective bargaining (when you stood together) in terms of effectiveness? How do you account for the differences?
- What demands were non-negotiable for you? What kinds of demands were you willing to sacrifice for the sake of an agreement?
- Was the outcome fair?
- What types of issues do you think labor unions find to be the most important?
- What if you couldn't agree—what options would labor have?

This final question leads naturally into the next book, a work of nonfiction about an early twentieth century strike.

What Early Labor Advocates Fought For and How They Did So

Brave Girl: Clara and the Shirtwaist Makers' Strike of 1909—a 2014 NCSS Notable Book—focuses on the young Ukranian immigrant's bold actions as shirtwaist worker and activist. The book chronicles her arrival in America (“...dirt poor; just five feet tall, and hardly speaks a word of English. Her name is Clara Lemlich. This girl's got grit, and she's going to prove it. Look out, New York!”); her work at a textile factory, beginning a mere two weeks after arriving in New York; the conditions under which she works (“From dawn till dusk, she's locked up in a factory... If you're a few minutes late, you lose half a day's pay. If you prick your finger and bleed on the cloth, you're fined. If it happens a second time, you're fired”); the dangers she faces on the picket line (“The bosses hire men to beat her and the other strikers. The police arrest her seventeen times. They break six of her ribs, but they can't break her spirit.”); and her role, at age 23, in inciting the 1909 Uprising of the Twenty Thousand, which ultimately led to concessions by factory owners and the creation of workers' unions in the garment industry across the United States.

A biography of this courageous young woman is long overdue, and it provides a great introduction to her activities and the strike. The space limitations of the 32-page format may leave teachers and students wanting more, which is just fine because there's plenty more to read about the activities of Lemlich; best of all, we can read about them in her own words. The book



quotes only one line from her November 22, 1909 speech at Cooper Union, delivered after her frustration with caution of the male leaders of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union's Local 25, where she advocates a strike. Teachers may well want to supplement that one line

with more of her impassioned speech (delivered at the time in Yiddish),

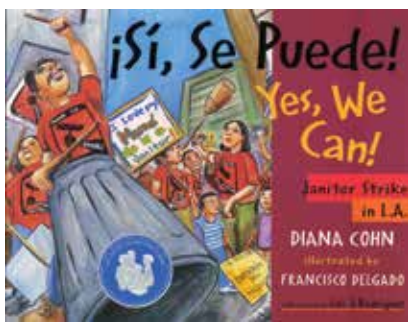
“I am a working girl, one of those who are on strike against intolerable conditions. I am tired of listening to speakers who talk in general terms. What we are here for is to decide whether we shall or shall not strike. I offer a resolution that a general strike be declared—now.”³

Teachers may also want to include the old Jewish oath taken by the crowd of largely Jewish immigrants to indicate their support. The women, in Yiddish, declared “If I turn traitor to the cause I now pledge, may this hand wither from the arm I now raise.”⁴

Following a discussion of the book, students can write a speech that Lemlich could have delivered to explain why women were on strike. After doing so, students may wish to compare their writing to Lemlich's actual argument, “Life in the Shop,” published in the *New York Evening Journal*, November 28, 1909.⁵ (HANDOUT A)

Included in the section “More About the Garment Industry” at the end of the book is the unhappy coda to this success story, namely, the Triangle Fire, which occurred a little over a year later, at one of the companies that refused to negotiate. The details of the lethal conditions at the Triangle factory underline the importance of the arguments that Lemlich and her fellow workers were making. (It is worth noting that the Lemlich piece on Handout A is part of a stellar Cornell University website that chronicles the Triangle Fire with myriad primary sources, including speeches, photos, newspaper articles, testimonials from a variety of labor leaders, songs, plays, the transcript of the criminal trial against the factory's owners, and interviews with survivors - including my relative, Sarah Friedman Dworetz, who, taken for dead, was removed with the other bodies, but separated from them when rescuers detected life).⁶

The same questions that were relevant to the labor negotiation simulation (listed above) are relevant to a discussion of *Brave Girl*. Indeed, these questions are still relevant for today for



workers of all sorts, as seen in the final book discussed here.

How Unions Continue the Fight Today

Because an early 20th century strike may

feel like ancient history to students and lead them to believe that workers' struggles are over, it is important to use a more recent example of labor union activity. *¡Sí, Se Puede! Yes We Can!* tells the story (in both English and Spanish) of Carlitos, a young boy, born in Mexico, who now lives with his mother and grandmother in Los Angeles. His mother works hard as a janitor, cleaning offices to support her family. Although she works nights and weekends, she is unable to pay for all of her family's needs. Readers witness—through Carlitos' eyes—the events of April 2000, in which 8,000 workers participated in the Janitor Strike in Los Angeles. Carlitos' mother explains to her son why the strike is necessary and what the strikers hope to gain. The book includes an explanation of labor unions and strikes, as well as a brief biography of union organizer Dolores Sanchez.

In addition to raising the universal questions about why and how workers struggle for rights and the fairness of outcomes, this book raises other important questions because the story is told by the Mexican-born son of the worker on strike:

- How did the strikes affect workers' families in Los Angeles?
- What particular challenges do immigrants in Los Angeles face in organizing for workers' rights?
- How important is it that the signs and messages on the t-shirts are in two languages?

The afterward of the book includes a bilingual poem, “¡Sí, Se Puede! Yes We Can!” by Luis J. Rodríguez, honoring the workers as human beings who perform valuable services and as labor activists. The poem is a reminder that there are many different types of writing and art that students can analyze to understand the nature of work and working conditions that precipitated labor actions, past and present. Labor songs are particularly effective primary sources to use in conjunction with a lesson on unions, as they are packed with data about working conditions and the need for unions. Lyrics and video performances of many songs are readily available on YouTube. At the webpages of the Smithsonian Folkways Collection, one can download single songs as audio files (for 99 cents), as well as find valuable background and history about songs, songwriters, and the issues of the times.⁷

Students get very engaged in analyzing their lyrics and creating their own songs. Use of a T-chart can support students in their analysis of labor songs, such as “Drill Ye Tarriers.”⁸ Lyrics are printed in the left-hand column of the chart and, as stu-

dents listen, they record “Working Conditions/Improvements Wanted” in the right-hand column. (HANDOUT B) Students create lists that tend to include both the workers' complaints (poor health and safety conditions, low pay, wage theft, long hours, no payment for injuries, long working hours, no respect, etc.) and the remedies they sought and continue to seek (laws regulating health and safety conditions, livable wages, workers compensation, laws regulating work hours, respectful relations with management, etc.).

Students can process the ongoing nature of labor issues through the use of guest speakers. An officer from a local union can be invited to describe his or her responsibilities. If any of the students' parents are union members, they can share their experiences with the class. Or, the topic can be approached from a different angle by inviting a politician in to talk with students about the extent to which the needs of working people have influenced her or him in formulating legislation, especially given the recent push for \$15 minimum wage legislation in many cities. As Dolores Sanchez, labor organizer involved in the janitor strike profiled at the end of *¡Sí, Se Puede! Yes We Can!*, put it, “Even if some of us can't vote, we walk the streets to help elect representatives who can pass laws beneficial to workers.”

And teachers at the elementary level can teach about them. Yes we can. 🌍

Notes

1. Ana Swanson, “The Incredible Decline of American Unions, in One Animated Map” (February 24, 2015), www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/wp/2015/02/24/the-incredible-decline-of-american-unions-in-one-animated-map/.
2. Some of the activities are adapted from Andrea S. Libresco, Jeannette Balantic, and Jonie Kipling, *Every Book is a Social Studies Book: How to Meet Standards with Picture Books, K–6* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2011).
3. “Biography: Clara Lemlich,” a webpage at *Triangle Fire*, American Experience, PBS, www.pbs.org/wgbh/american-experience/features/biography/triangle-lemlich/?flavour=full.
4. “Biography: Clara Lemlich.”
5. Clara Lemlich, “Life in the Shops,” *The New York Evening Journal* (November 28, 1909), archived at the Kheel Center, Cornell University, “Remembering the 1911 Triangle Factory Fire,” trianglefire.ilr.cornell.edu.
6. “Leon Stein Interviews: Sarah Friedman Dworetz,” archived at the Kheel Center, Cornell University, “Remembering the 1911 Triangle Factory Fire,” trianglefire.ilr.cornell.edu/primary/survivorInterviews/SarahDworetz.html.
7. “Classic Labor Songs from Smithsonian Folkways,” Smithsonian, www.folkways.si.edu/classic-labor-songs-from-folkways/american-folk-struggle-protest/music/album/smithsonian/; Peter Rothberg, “Top Ten Labor Day Songs,” *The Nation* (August 29, 2014), www.thenation.com/blog/163148/top-ten-labor-day-songs#; “Union songs and poems,” unionsong.com/songs.html.
8. The song “Drill, Ye Tarriers, Drill” is “generally attributed to Thomas F. Casey” and was published in 1888. The lyrics on this handout are based on those the *Folk Songs of North America* by Alan Lomax (New York: Dolphin Books, 1975), 417. The tarriers were the men who worked at drilling and blasting away rock to make way for track. Casey, in addition to being a tarrier, was an entertainer, and the song was included in the musical “A Brass Monkey” in 1888. (SOURCE: “Classic Railroad Songs from Smithsonian Folkways,” sound recording, liner notes at media.smithsonianfolkways.org/liner_notes/smithsonian_folkways/SFW40192.pdf. Cisco Houston's recording of the song may be purchased for 99 cents at www.folkways.si.edu/classic-railroad-songs-from-folkways/american-folk/music/album/smithsonian/.)

ANDREA S. LIBRESCO is Professor of Social Studies Education in the Department of Teacher Education Programs at Hofstra University, Hempstead, New York, and co-editor with Jeannette Balantic of *Social Studies and the Young Learner*

Life in the Shop

HANDOUT A

by Clara Lemlich (1886–1982)

Lemlich, executive board member of Local 25, sparked the 1909 walkout of shirtwaist makers with her call for a strike. This piece was first published in the *New York Evening Journal*, November 28, 1909.

First let me tell you something about the way we work and what we are paid. There are two kinds of work - regular, that is salary work, and piecework. The regular work pays about \$6 a week and the girls have to be at their machines at 7 o'clock in the morning and they stay at them until 8 o'clock at night, with just one-half hour for lunch in that time.

The shops. Well, there is just one row of machines that the daylight ever gets to—that is the front row, nearest the window. The girls at all the other rows of machines back in the shops have to work by gaslight, by day as well as by night. Oh, yes, the shops keep the work going at night, too.

The bosses in the shops are hardly what you would call educated men, and the girls to them are part of the machines they are running. They yell at the girls and they “call them down” even worse than I imagine the Negro slaves were in the South.

There are no dressing rooms for the girls in the shops. They have to hang up their hats and coats—such as they are - on hooks along the walls. Sometimes a girl has a new hat. It never is much to look at because it never costs more than 50 cents, that means that we have gone for weeks on two-cent lunches—dry cake and nothing else.

The shops are unsanitary—that's the word that is generally used, but there ought to be a worse one used. Whenever we tear or damage any of the goods we sew on, or whenever it is found damaged after we are through with it, whether we have done it or not, we are charged for the piece and sometimes for a whole yard of the material.

At the beginning of every slow season, \$2 is deducted from our salaries. We have never been able to find out what this is for.



Photograph circa 1910. Part of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union Photographs (1885–1985) at the Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives in the School of Industrial and Labor Relations at Cornell University. (commons.wikimedia.org)

Source: Leon Stein, ed., *Out of the Sweatshop: The Struggle for Industrial Democracy* (New York: Quadrangle/New Times Book Company, 1977). The Kheel Center at Cornell University thanks Mrs. Miriam Stein and Barbara Ismail for granting permission to use selections from the late Leon Stein's book on the website. http://trianglefire.ilr.cornell.edu/primary/testimonials/oootss_ClaraLemlich.html?sto_sec=sweatshops

HANDOUT B

Analyzing a Labor Song

Directions: As you listen to and read the lyrics of this song, make a list of the conditions workers faced and the improvements they might have wanted. Underline the words in the song that helped you get this information. Hear the song performed at this free webpage, www.youtube.com/watch?v=jmQtqW4G28g.

Questions

- How well were tarriers paid, according to the lyrics?
- What happened to Jim Goff on the job?
- How did Jim Goff's employer treat him following his accident?
- How could this song be seen as an argument for forming a union?

Glossary

- Tarrier**—a laborer who worked at drilling and blasting away rock to make way for track.
- Docked**—withheld pay
- Tay**—tea
- Foreman**—Work supervisor or boss
- Blast and Fire**—Exploding dynamite loosened and removed rock in the way of the railroad bed

"Drill, Ye Tarriers, Drill" by Thomas F. Casey	Work Conditions and Improvements Wanted by Laborers.
<p>Ev'ry morning at seven o'clock There's twenty tarriers a working at the rock, And the boss comes along, and he says, "Keep still, And come down heavy on the cast-iron drill."</p> <p>Chorus: Drill, ye tarriers, drill! It's work all day For sugar in your tay, Down beyond the railway, And drill, ye tarriers, drill. And blast! And fire!</p> <p>Our new foreman was Jim McCann. By God, he was a blame mean man. Last week a premature blast went off. And a mile in the air went big Jim Goff. And drill ye tarriers drill!</p> <p>Chorus</p> <p>Next time pay day came around, Jim Goff a dollar short was found. When he asked, "What for?" came this reply, "You were docked for the time you was up in the sky." And drill, ye tarriers, drill!</p>	