

## LESSON 16: WORKING & EATING

Discussions and activities in this lesson focus on the absolute necessity of work and fair wages for maintaining healthy individuals, families and communities. Students explore some of the social and political forces that deny needy people access to jobs, reasonable working conditions, and adequate pay. **POWER PLAY** is a dramatic demonstration of how employers sometimes exploit workers, why workers need to develop unions, and how their attempts to organize are subverted. **LAI D OFF!** allows students to assume the identity of a worker who loses his job after seventeen years. They must plan and purchase meals on a limited budget. **UNEMPLOYMENT & DISCRIMINATION** reveals significant differences in the rates of unemployment and weekly wages for different social groups. Students explore the reasons behind these differences. Additional activities offer ideas on investigating job availability and unemployment in your community, as well as ideas on how to "create" new jobs that would benefit needy people, the entire community, and the environment.

### TEACHER BACKGROUND READING\*

Unemployment is the major cause of poverty in the U.S. Food, housing and health care cost money. Without a job individuals have little access to the essentials of life. Work is fundamental to the health and survival of individuals, families, communities, countries.

Matthew Fox explains in his book *The Reinvention of Work: A New Vision of Livelihood For Our Time*, (Harper, San Francisco: 1994) that every thing in nature, no matter how small, is constantly working. There is no unemployment among the planets, the trees, fishes, butterflies or ants. Their work is in harmony with the work of the universe. The only species among which unemployment exists is the human species. We see the consequences of widespread unemployment all around us: poverty, hunger, family break-ups, depression, heart attacks, child and spouse abuse, alcoholism, drug addiction, criminal activity and suicide. The cycle of poverty set in motion by chronic unemployment spirals through generations depriving future parents and their children of the right to healthy and productive lives.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights which was adopted by the U.N. in 1948 asserts that every person has the right to work and to receive a fair wage for that work, a wage that insures "an existence worthy of human dignity." America's work ethic proudly proclaims that any of us who **can** work, **should** work --- yet millions of Americans cannot **find** work today and cannot afford the training they need to perform the jobs that are available. In 1994 surveys showed that for every vacant job there were more than five "officially" unemployed job seekers. Official statistics don't tell the whole story --- as high as they are, they don't include people who have been forced to take part-time jobs or those who have given up looking for work.

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\* Information and ideas for this introduction are from *WHY Magazine* No. 17, Winter/Spring, 1995. World Hunger Year, New York.

It is important for students to understand that most people are not out of work because they are lazy, but because there are not enough jobs to go around. Some economists claim that a certain "natural" rate of unemployment is necessary to keep inflation in check. How do those of us who are working explain this to those who need jobs desperately but can't find them? Fierce competition for too few jobs and unfair wages create hostility among social groups, and dependence on handouts. Widespread unemployment keeps wages low for the majority of workers who are afraid to speak out or strike for fear of losing their jobs. In 1994 only 11% of nongovernmental workers were unionized. Many people today work two or more jobs at or below minimum wage and still cannot rise above the poverty line.

With so much work to be done on our ailing planet, we cannot afford for even one of us to be out of work. How can we find work for everyone?

1. We can begin by saving jobs. Instead of closing sound plants and moving them to other regions or countries where labor can be had for less, we can search for creative ways to forge healthy relationships between workers and company managements, and to give workers a share of the ownership or profits of the companies they work so hard to sustain. Community-based businesses respect the rights and needs of their workers as well as the health of the surrounding environment.
2. We can redistribute some of the work that already exists. Just as hungry people exist alongside overfed people in our society, unemployed people exist side by side with over-worked people.
3. We can create much needed jobs that infuse workers' lives with meaning, care for needy people and clean up our environment. What kind of work is your community calling for? Certainly not for more automobiles, factories or chemicals. The machine driven work of the Industrial Revolution damaged our natural environment as well as the spirits of workers. The earth calls now for clean water, soil and air, for recycling and repairing, for sustainable energy, organic farming, the planting of trees and gardens. Humanity calls for compassion, understanding, trust, caring relationships, food for everyone, homes and health care for everyone, equal education and meaningful work. There is **so** much work to be done.

## POWER PLAY

The classroom is transformed into an imaginary society where the resources for survival are controlled by one very powerful person. Students experience some of the pressures that lead workers to organize in order to take control of their working lives. It allows them a glimpse of the possibilities available when people work together for change.

This activity is from ***THE POWER IN OUR HANDS: A Curriculum on the History of Work and Workers in the United States***. Copyright 1988 by William Bigelow and Norm Diamond. Reprinted here by permission of Monthly Review Foundation. This is an excellent resource guide with stimulating activities and stories for a more extensive study of work. Available for \$15 from Network of Educators on the Americas. See Resource Guide to order.

**MATERIALS:** A large machine such as a VCR or overhead projector.

### PROCEDURE:

1. Close the door, pull the shades and tell students to imagine that you are all going to live in this classroom for the rest of your lives. There is no soil for growing food but you have a machine that produces artificial biscuits. Correct yourself and explain that actually **you** own the machine. Place the machine in front of the class.
2. Tell students you need workers to produce the food. They will be paid enough money to buy food to live on. Those who don't work will find it hard to survive. Ask for volunteers who want to work, eat and survive. If additional encouragement is necessary, tell students that in order to receive credit for this lesson, they must not starve. Choose only half the class as workers. The rest will be unemployed. Seat the groups at opposite ends of the room facing each other.
4. Explain the economics of your society. Put the chart below on the board. Five biscuits a day are necessary to survive in a fairly healthy manner. Anyone receiving less - the unemployed - will slowly starve. Go over the chart with your students:

<b>DAILY BISCUIT ECONOMY</b>			
	<b>WORKERS</b>	<b>UNEMPLOYED</b>	<b>OWNER</b>
<b>WAGES</b>	\$6 x no. of workers	NONE	NONE
<b>TAXES</b>	-\$1 x no. of workers	\$2 x no. of unemployed	\$1 x no. of unemployed
<b>CONSUMPTION</b>	5 biscuits x no. of Workers	2 x no. of unemployed	6 biscuits
<b>SURPLUS</b>	0	0	4 x no. of workers minus 6 for daily consumption

(If there were 10 workers and 10 unemployed, a total of 110 biscuits would be produced. After taxes, the workers would consume 50. From welfare payments the unemployed would consume 20, leaving a total of 40 for the owner - 34 after consuming six. NOTE: Workers and owner need to provide \$2 to each unemployed person (taxes are paid in biscuits)).

Each worker produces 11 biscuits a day.  
 All workers are paid \$6.00 a day.  
 A biscuit costs \$1.  
 \$1 deducted from the pay of each worker to make welfare payments to the unemployed.  
 Each worker is left with \$5 a day (after taxes) just enough to survive.

(No money or biscuits are actually exchanged during the game.)

4. Tell students that because you are the owner you are entitled to more biscuits --- without you and your machine everyone would starve. Everyday you receive 4 x the number of workers.
5. Show the unemployed that they will receive only \$2 a day in welfare. With this they can buy 2 biscuits. They need work desperately --- they are starving.
6. Be sure everyone understands his/her position. As the owner, your goal is to increase your profits. You can do this by cutting wages.
7. Begin the game by telling students to imagine that several weeks have passed. How have they been eating? How are they feeling?

## **THE GAME BEGINS**

Ask who among the unemployed wants to work. Offer one of them \$5.50 a day (less than the other workers are making, but more than the \$2 they are already receiving.) Once you have a taker, go to the workers and ask who is willing to accept \$5.50. Fire the first person who refuses to accept the lower wage. Send him/her to sit with the unemployed. Hire the unemployed person willing to accept the lower wage. Continue trying to drive down wages this way.

Now and then ask workers to repeat after you "I am a happy worker." "I love my job." Fire those who refuse and hire some of the unemployed. You can refer to the unemployed as "welfare bums" and encourage the workers to do the same. Later, talk about why they were unemployed and who the real bum was.

Anyone who mentions "strike," "union" or anything disruptive is fired immediately. (Remind them that they will not be receiving enough food to

remain strong.) Get all workers to sign "yellow dog" contracts promising never to join a union as long as they work for you.

Hire a foreman who will turn in subversive workers. Let workers know the foreman will be paid more than they get. Whisper something in the ear of a worker to encourage suspicion and division among workers.

If someone threatens to take over the machine hire a policeman or two to protect it. Explain that the police are there to protect "all our property", not just the owner's. (This also lets students know that taking over the machine is possible.) You want to keep workers and unemployed from uniting to strike or taking control of the machine. Offer privileges to certain workers to keep them from seeing their common interests --- higher wages, shorter work days, maybe even profit sharing.

If students are successful in stopping production, you can (1) Wait them out, indicating your surplus of biscuits and how quickly they would starve, or (2) Give in to their wage demands and a little later raise the price of biscuits. Justify your need for more income to meet your higher costs.

Announce that every 3 minutes an unemployed person will die of starvation. This adds a note of urgency and lets the class know that there will be consequences should they fail to act.

Students usually try to organize. The game ends when they have had ample **opportunity** to get together - successfully or otherwise. Participants may be totally demoralized or they may have taken over the machine and found a way to run it collectively.

Spend time discussing the experience. Have students write about how they felt.

What did you personally do to try to stop my efforts to divide people?

How effective were you?

Were there actions you considered taking but didn't? Why not?

If we were to repeat this activity what different actions would you take?

What methods did I use to keep you from opposing me?

Which ones worked? Which ones didn't?

At which points were you most successful in getting together?  
Least successful?

What prevented you from immediately calling a meeting and demanding equal treatment or simply walking over to the machine and taking it over?

Did you think your efforts to unite would be betrayed? What in your life led you to think this?

Have you ever had an experience that convinced you that people could unite and act for an important goal?

As an owner, what kind of attitudes would I want you to have about your ability to work together? About property rights? Respect for authority?

As a follow-up to this activity have students write about a time when they were able to work together with others to achieve a common goal. Share these with classmates.

## **LAI D OFF!**

Students imagine how their lives and community would change if a major employer in their city suddenly closed down. Working with a limited budget, they visit their local supermarket and plan a week's worth of meals.

**MATERIALS:**           Copies of *LAI D OFF!*

### **PROCEDURE:**

1. Distribute copies of *LAI D OFF!* (To personalize this situation, use the name of a large company in your area that employs many people. Have students imagine that that company is closing down.) Read the handout together and discuss the questions that follow.

How does it feel to be out of work?

How will this lay-off change your life?

How is the widespread lay-off affecting your community? Will other people and businesses be affected by this lay-off now that hundreds of people have less money to spend? Explain.

How will the children of laid-off workers be affected?

What do you think will happen to your town?

Who has the right to make decisions that affect an entire community?

What actions could the workers have taken to prevent the closing?

What do workers bring to a company? What does the company bring to a community?

What is necessary to maintain a healthy relationship between workers and company management?

What can workers do to protect themselves from losing their jobs?

2. For homework students must visit their local market with their \$25 unemployment checks and plan their meals for the coming week in their journals.

Did their money buy enough food?

Are the meals nutritious and well balanced?

Would students be healthy and content to eat these meals?

If there is not enough food, what will they do?

## HAND OUT

## LAID OFF!

For the past seventeen years you have worked for a company in your town which manufactures automobiles. Your father and grandfather worked for this company, as do many of your friends and their families. In fact, this one company employs thousands of people from your area. You are a loyal, hard worker. You rarely miss a day of work. One day you receive notice that the company management has decided to close the plant and move it to another country where workers are paid less and unions are illegal. You cannot believe it! The company was doing very well here.

Many other smaller companies in your town are also closing down and there are not enough jobs left to go around. Families are becoming desperate. Some have even packed up and moved to other parts of the United States in search of work. You have stayed because your family and friends are here. This is your home and you would like to see it build itself up again.

You begin receiving unemployment checks. You don't like being out of work. You know the unemployment checks will stop coming soon. You look everyday for a job. You did not make enough at the automobile plant to save enough money to get you by in case of an emergency such as this. Your resources are running low. Your car is starting to break down. Winter is coming and you need a warm coat. The heater in your home needs repairing. You are already in debt. You know you must stay healthy --- you cannot afford to get sick. Many of your friends who have lost their jobs as well are feeling depressed. Many marriages are breaking up.

You have worked out a budget that provides you with a total of \$25 a week for food --- after all your other expenses have been paid. You are at the local supermarket and must plan your meals for the coming week. What kinds of food can you afford? How much food can you buy?



## ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES

1. Watch and discuss one or more of the videos listed in the Resource Guide under "WORK". **ZONED FOR SLAVERY - *The Child Behind the Label***, for instance, is a 23 minute video about children who work in factories in Latin America making clothes for the GAP, Eddie Bauer and Walmart. For detailed lesson plans on teaching about global sweatshops send for Volume 11, No. 4 of **Rethinking Schools** Educational Journal. See Resource Guide - "Resources For Teachers".
2. Songs about work to discuss and write about:
  - Hello, Brother* - Louis Armstrong
  - My Hometown* - Bruce Springsteen
  - Allentown* - Billy Joel
  - Livin' for the City* - Stevie Wonder
  - Frontline* - Stevie Wonder
3. **Workers: An Archaeology of the Industrial Age** by Sebastiao Salgado is a remarkable book of photographs of the faces of workers from over 50 countries which tell the story of the kind of world we are building and who is doing the work.

## DISCRIMINATION & EMPLOYMENT

### PROCEDURE:

1. Ask students to graph the following unemployment statistics from 2008. (Have students call the Dept. of Labor in your city for current, local figures.)

<b>CATEGORIES OF LABOR FORCE</b>	<b>% UNEMPLOYED</b>
ALL WORKERS	5.8
<b>ALL AFRICAN-AMERICANS</b>	10.1
African-American Men	11.4
African-American Women	8.9
African-American Teens	31.2
<b>ALL LATINOS*</b>	7.6
Latino Men	7.6
Latino Women	7.7
Latino Teens	22.4
<b>ALL WHITES</b>	5.2
White Men	5.5
White Women	4.9
White Teens	16.8

(\*When examined as a subset.)

2. Explain that these figures do not include people who work part-time or who have given up on finding a job.

What reasons can students give for the dramatic differences in unemployment among different groups?

What are some of the consequences that occur when too many people must compete for too few jobs?

3. Graph the following statistics:

<b><u>MEDIAN WEEKLY EARNINGS IN 2008</u></b>		
	<b>MEN</b>	<b>WOMEN</b>
ALL	\$798	\$638
White	\$825	\$654
African-American	\$620	\$554
Latino	\$559	\$501

4. Who earns the most? Who earns the least?

What reasons are there for these differences?

How do these differences affect hunger, poverty and violence in our communities?

## **ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES**

1. Have students survey family members, business people, workers and government officials in your community for their opinions on why differences in unemployment rates and earnings exist among certain groups.
2. Encourage students to call the Department of Labor in your city to find out the "job gap" - the difference between the number of people looking for jobs and the number of jobs available. Are there enough jobs for everyone? What kinds of jobs does your community need?
3. Have students use the HELP WANTED ads of your newspaper to do research on the kinds of jobs available in your area. What skills do most of these jobs require? How do wages differ among the jobs available? Are the jobs available to both men and women? Look for ways to graph and chart jobs.
4. Research the kinds of jobs that have sustained your community (farming, fishing, mining, manufacturing, etc.). Interview workers. What kinds of jobs have been lost? Why? What kinds of jobs are needed?

5. Ask students to reflect on how the work of all other species on the planet benefits that species as well as the environment. Has anyone ever seen an unemployed tree, robin or insect? What would happen if one of the planets simply stopped working? Individually or in pairs students can create a painting, poem or story about "The Day The \_\_\_\_\_ Stopped Working". (sun, trees, stars, land, birds, flowers, wind, sky, etc.) What would our world look like? How would other life on the planet be affected?
6. See Resource Guide for books and videos on homelessness.
7. See Resource Guide for books and videos on the importance of work, the history of unions and the labor movement.
8. Find out about child labor groups by writing to The Child Labor Project, 555 New Jersey Ave. N., Washington, D.C. 20001-2079.
9. For information on child labor in America and ways to fight it surf **virtually react:** <http://www.react.com>.

