LESSON 9

BIRTH OF A RANK-AND-FILE ORGANIZER

How did workers respond to workplace changes introduced by management? Their strongest response was the formation of unions. In this lesson, students read about the spontaneous organizing of men and women in a Chicago glove-making factory. As participants, students are called upon to assess the importance of union recognition: should they continue to strike for their union even if all other demands have been satisfied?

Goals/Objectives

1. Students will become aware of a range of causes for strikes.
2. Students will empathize with the problems of workers on strike.
3. Students will weigh the importance of the union shop in relation to no union organization.

Materials Needed

- **Student Handout #9-A: Birth of a Rank-and-File Organizer.**
- **Student Handout #9-B: Birth of a Rank-and-File Organizer: The Conclusion.** (Student copies of this reading are optional.)

Time Required

- One class period, plus part of a second period.

Procedure

1. In class, read aloud **Student Handout #9-A: Birth of a Rank-and-File Organizer.** The story is told by Agnes Nestor, who works in a glove-making factory in Chicago. Though at first she enjoys her work, changes introduced by management eventually lead to a strike. The workers have a number of demands, one of which is that the company will agree to a union shop, including recognition of the union and a willingness to bargain collectively.

   The students' copy of the story ends with management sending individual letters to the strikers agreeing to meet their demands. However, the company's letter does not even mention the demand for a union shop.
2. Stop reading at the close of the students' copy. At this point the women must decide whether to accept management's offer and return to work, or to continue the strike and hold out for a union shop.
3. Ask students to finish the story. They should continue to write from Agnes Nestor's point of view, describing how they think the women would or *should* have responded to the company. Their task is to bring the strike to a

conclusion. While we're reluctant to set a specific length for an assignment such as this, emphasize to students that there are hard choices for the women to make and a good deal of discussion among them will probably take place. Student stories should reflect the difficult nature of the decision.

Suggest or brainstorm some possible events that could have occurred: the strikers get together in each others' homes to discuss their response; a large meeting is held to air different views; some women return to work as others continue on strike. Encourage students to write the dialogue between strikers and to get inside Nestor's thoughts and feelings.

Alternatively, have students write an interior monologue from Agnes Nestor's point of view. Students should imagine they are Nestor and write her thoughts and feelings from a first-person perspective: What worries or doubts does she have? Should the women go back to work? How important is the union shop? etc.

4. In class, encourage people to read their stories aloud. Discuss the merits of the various conclusions that the students chose.

Some questions to consider while discussing the different conclusions:

— Why do the foremen act as they do? Is it merely personal pettiness or are they attempting to heighten divisiveness and/or maintain their own control?

— Why might the union shop be *the* most important demand of the strikers?

— What could happen to the workers if they returned to work without the union shop?

— The strike has gone on for almost two weeks. Can you think of any problems the strikers might experience if they refuse the company's offer?

— What are some strategies the company could use if the workers refuse to return?

— If the union shop is won by the workers, will they all live happily ever after? What problems will they still have to face? How might the employer try to reverse their gains? What divisions among the workers in the glove factory will still need to be overcome?

5. As students share their stories and monologues, we are often struck by the dramatically different outcomes of the strike people anticipate. Some versions end in utter disarray and despair; others portray triumphant conclusions with airtight solidarity. In discussion, we encourage students to reflect on *why* they chose such different endings—what in their *own* experiences made them more or less hopeful?

6. After the discussion, read aloud the actual ending (**Birth of a Rank-and-File Organizer: The Conclusion**). Compare the results of the strike to the endings the students projected.

STUDENT HANDOUT #9-A

BIRTH OF A RANK-AND-FILE ORGANIZER
by Agnes Nestor

Seemingly spontaneous outbursts of workers are usually the result of years of built-up frustration. Often it is the act of one person or a group of persons that sparks a walkout leading to a strike. In this selection Agnes Nestor gives us a picture of both the conditions in the shops and how the glove-making shop in which she was working became unionized. Nestor later became the vice-president of the International Glove Workers Union and president of the Chicago Women's Trade Union League.

Our machines were on long tables in large rooms, and we operators sat on both sides of the tables. At last I was where I had longed to be, and here I worked for ten years. I was earning fairly good pay for those times, and I was happy. We would mark out the quantity of our work and keep account of our earnings. I still have that little book in which I kept my accounts. It is interesting to see how I gradually increased my weekly pay.

To drown the monotony of work, we used to sing. This was allowed because the foreman could see that the rhythm kept us going at high speed. We sang *A Bicycle Built for Two* and other popular songs.

Before we began to sing we used to talk very loudly so as to be heard above the roar of the machines. We knew we must not stop our work just to hear what someone was saying; to stop work even for a minute meant a reduction in pay.

We did want to do a little talking, though. In order not to lose time by it, we worked out a plan. We all chipped in and bought a dollar alarm clock which we hung on the wall. We figured that we could do a dozen pairs of gloves in an hour. That meant five minutes for a pair. As we worked we could watch the clock to see if we were on schedule. If we saw ourselves falling behind, we could rush to catch up with our own time. No one was watching us or pushing us for production. It was our strategem for getting the most out of the piecework system. We wanted to earn as much as we possibly could.

But, though we all seemed happy at first, gradually it dawned dimly within us that we were not beating the piecework system; it was beating us. There were always "pacemakers," a few girls who could work faster than the rest, and they were the ones to get the new work before the price was set.* Their rate of work had to be the rate for all of us, if we were to earn a decent wage. It kept us tensed to continual hurry.

Also, there were some unjust practices, outgrowths from another era, which nettled us because they whittled away at our weekly pay. We were charged $.50 a week for the power furnished our machines. At first we were tolerant of the charge and called it "our machine rent." But after a time that check-off of $.50 from our weekly pay made us indignant.

We were obliged, besides, to buy our own needles. If you broke one, you were charged for a new one to replace it. We had, also, to buy our own machine oil. It was expensive; and to make matters worse, we had to go to certain out-of-the-way places to obtain it.

But this was not all. Every time a new foreman came in, he demonstrated his authority by inaugurating a new set of petty rules which seemed designed merely to irritate us. One

*The price changed at random and often varied from day to day.—*Editor's note.*

such rule was that no girl must leave her own sewing room at noon to eat lunch with a girl in another room. My sister Mary had now come into the factory, and we were in the habit of grouping at lunch time with friends from other departments. But even two sisters from different departments were not permitted to eat lunch together. Mary was in a different department at the time, and this regulation seemed too ridiculous to be borne. Consequently, whenever the foreman had left the room at noon, we went where we pleased to eat our lunch. Sometimes he spied on us and ordered us "Back where you belong!"

In the face of all this, any new method which the company sought to put into effect and disturb our work routine seemed to inflame the deep indignation already burning inside us. Thus, when a procedure was suggested for subdividing our work, so that each operator would do a smaller part of each glove, and thus perhaps increase the overall production—but also increase the monotony of the work, and perhaps also decrease our rate of pay—we began to think of fighting back.

The management evidently heard the rumblings of a threatened revolt. Our department was the "glove-closers." A representative of the company sent for a group from another department, the "banders," asking them to give this new method of subdividing the work a trial and promising an adjustment if the workers' earnings were found to be reduced. The group agreed to try out the new method; but when they got back to their department and told the banders about it, the banders revolted, refused to work the new way on trial, and walked out.

We of our department felt that we should be loyal to the girls who had walked out, and we told the foreman that if the company tried to put new girls in the places of the banders, we would walk out, too!

We had taken a bold step. Almost with spontaneity we had acted in support of one another. Now we all felt tremulous, vulnerable, exposed. With no regular organization, without even a qualified spokesman, how long would such unified action last? If anyone ever needed the protection of a firm organization, I for one at that moment felt keenly that we certainly did.

The glove-cutters, all men, had a union that had existed for about a year. The girl who sat next to me told me about it. She had a boyfriend in this union, but she was always careful not to let anyone hear her talk about it because in those days unions were taboo. She said that the cutters—all men—had talked of trying to get the girls to join the union and had wanted to approach our plant to suggest it, but that some of the members had said, "You'll never get those girls to join a union. They'll stand for anything up there!"

The banders had been smart. They had walked out on Saturday. One of their number decided to get publicity about their grievances and she gave the newspapers the full story about their strike.

The Chicago Federation of Labor was having a meeting that day, and the glove-cutters from our shop had special delegates there. A labor reporter went to these delegates asking for details about the walkout of the banders. It was the first the delegates had heard of the matter. But, learning that the banders of their own factory had struck, they decided to try to get all the girls to join the union.

On Monday the president of the union tried to arrange a meeting with our group. But it was too late. During the weekend, the boss had decided to abandon the new system. Workers had been sent word to come back and everything would be all right, that they could work as before. We felt that now we had a certain power and were delighted over what seemed to us a moral victory. Monday morning found us back at work.

All was not settled, however. On Monday the glove-cutters' union rented a hall within a block of the factory. As we came out from work that afternoon, members of the glove-cutters' union met us, telling us to go to a union meeting at this hall.

Israel Solon was one of these men. Sometimes, if a girl hesitated about going to the hall, he would urge: "Don't be afraid of the boss; protect yourself! Go to the union meeting!"

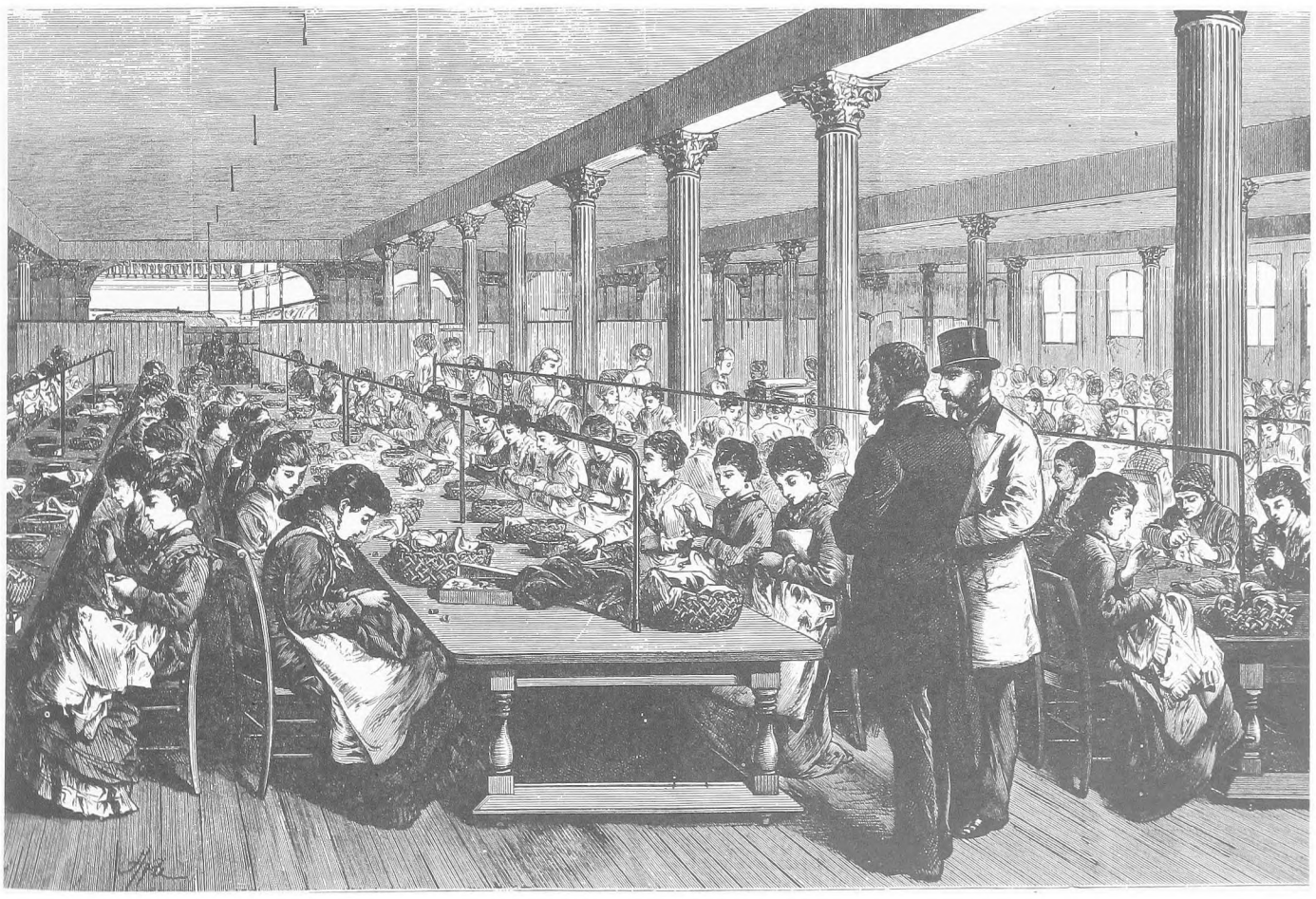
I was only too anxious to go and did not care who saw me. It seemed legitimate to protect one's self from unjust rules. I went without hesitation.

The meeting was a great success; workers packed the hall, and many nonmembers signed for membership. The work of organizing continued for three evenings, until most of the shop had been persuaded to join.

Toward the end of the week, there was a disturbance in the cutting department. It leaked through to us that a cutter had been discharged and that the cutters were organizing a protest strike. We were young and inexperienced in union procedure; and, as I look back now, I see that because of that lack of experience, and because we were newly organized and therefore anxious to use our new organization, we did a rash thing. We started a strike movement in protest at the discharge of the cutter and also for the redress of our own grievances. We even celebrated the event with a birthday party for one of our girls and had a feast with lemon cream pie at lunch time. During the feast we formulated our plan. We decided it would be cowardly to walk out at noon. We would wait until the whistle blew for us to resume work, and then, as the power started up on the machines, we would begin our exodus.

Somehow the foreman got wind of our plan. We were forming a line when reinforcements from the foremen's division scattered around the room ordering us to go back to our places. We began to chant: "We are not going to pay rent for our machines!" We repeated it over and over, for that was our chief grievance. . . .

We walked out. We did not use the near-by stairs but walked through the next room in order that the girls there might see us leaving. The girls there were busily at work, quite unconscious of our strike movement. I knew that our cause was lost unless we got those girls to join us. When we got out to the street, I told my companions that all was lost unless we could get those others to walk out too. We lined up across the street shouting "Come on out!" and calling out the names of some of the girls. We kept this up until a few did obey us. Gradually others followed until the shop was almost emptied. Then we paraded to the hall on Leavitt



Street for the meeting with the union leaders.

At the meeting we were called upon to state our demands. We gave them: no more machine rent; no paying for needles; free machine oil; union shop; raises for the cutters who were paid the lowest wages. . . .

Evidently the union officers thought I was a ringleader, for when the committee was appointed to represent our group, my name was called. When Mary heard it, she said: "Why did they put Agnes on? She can't talk!"

This seems amusing to me now; also to certain of my friends who were present at that meeting, for they assure me that I have been talking ever since. . . .

We joined the picket line again and held meetings every day and evening in the hall the cutters had rented. How important we felt! Speakers sent to our evening meetings were furnished by the Chicago Federation of Labor organization committee headed by John Fitzpatrick. One evening they sent Sophie Becker of the Boot and Shoe Workers Union, the only woman on the organization committee. I am afraid that I was a great hero-worshipper in those days! I was so thrilled with her speech that as she left the hall I leaned over just to touch her. Then I leaned back satisfied because I had got that close to her.

All this was happening at the same time that streetcar conductors were being discharged because it became known that they were forming a union. Some of the conductors, as they passed our picket line, would throw us handsful of buttons which read: "ORGANIZE. I'M WITH YOU!"

We wore those buttons on our coats, and when we boarded the cars we would watch the expression on each conductor's face to find out whether or not he had joined the union. . . .

The second week of our strike began. About the middle of the week, we girls on the picket line each received a letter from the company urging us to come back to work and promising that if we reported upon receipt of the letter our old places would be restored to us, that there would be no more machine rent or "power charge," as they called it, that needles would be furnished at cost, that machine oil would be furnished free, and that the cutters would receive a dollar a week raise. But no mention was made of our demand for a union shop. . . .

From Agnes Nestor, "I Become a Striker," *Woman's Labor Leader* (Rockford, Ill.: Bellevue Books, 1954); reprinted in Rosalyn Baxandall, Linda Gordon, and Susan Reverby, eds., *America's Working Women* (New York: Vintage, 1976).

STUDENT HANDOUT #9-B

BIRTH OF A RANK-AND-FILE ORGANIZER
The Conclusion

We talked it all over with misgivings, lest some of the girls be misled by these promises. Without company recognition of our union, we might all be lured back to work, the more progressive and outspoken of us discharged one by one, and all the old practices put back in force, perhaps even more tightly than ever. Such things had happened before. Our safety and our future, we knew, lay in our union. We decided not to return to work just yet. Meanwhile we doubled our picket line, determined that none of our group should falter.

We had hoped to get all the girls in the factory into our union, but we had trouble with the girls of the kid glove department. Only a few of these "aristocrats" had ventured to walk out with us. The rest had remained aloof. Like the gloves they made, the kid glove makers felt that they were superior to the rest of us and used to refer haughtily to the rest of us as the "horsehide girls."

During one of the last days of our strike, one of these kid glove girls passed along our picket line on her way to work. We told her that she wasn't going in; we formed a circle around her and took her to the streetcar a block away and waited to see that she went home. We stood waiting for the car beside a long water trough where teamsters watered their horses. One girl who was holding tightly to the kid glove maker threatened, "Before I let go of you, I will duck you in that water trough." It was only an idle threat; of course she did not intend doing it.

Newspapermen were on hand trying to get stories about the strike. Luke Grant, a veteran labor reporter, was watching as we put the girl on the streetcar.

Next morning a front-page story appeared headlined, "STRIKERS DUCK GIRL IN WATER TROUGH." Other newspapers carried the same fiction and played it up for several days, some even with cartoons of the fictitious event. . . .

Perhaps because of this newspaper publicity—Luke Grant always insisted that his story won the day for us—or perhaps because it looked as though we girls would refuse forever to return to work unless all our demands were met, the management agreed to our union shop and to the redress of all our grievances. We went back to work the following Monday with, as we said, "flying colors." Our union shop, we felt, was our most important gain.