ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are a number of sayings we're all familiar with that heap contempt on group effort: too many cooks spoil the broth; a camel is a horse designed by committee; too many chiefs, not enough Indians. Yet when it comes to writing and testing curriculum, the more cooks, committees, and chiefs, the better.

The lessons in this guide have been touched by many hands. In 1978, Jerry Lembcke and Leigh Bradford-Ratterree, then on the staff of the Pacific Northwest Labor College, assembled high school teachers and labor educators from the region to share lesson plans and methodologies on teaching labor history. These monthly meetings culminated in a week-long seminar which brought together labor organizers, high school and college teachers, historians, and community activists. To enable this gathering, The Oregon Committee for the Humanities provided generous financial assistance. A number of the participants in those early sessions influenced the direction of this effort and have continued to offer valuable advice. We especially want to thank Tom McKenna and Peter Thacker. In addition, one of the first lessons we produced, the *1934 West Coast Longshore Strike,* was co-written by Sally Tollefson.

From the beginning, Millie Thayer wrote and tested the curriculum, and led workshops with other teachers. Her experience and creativity have directly or indirectly contributed to every lesson included here.

At a time when the curriculum was first taking shape, Jerry Baum and Marty Hart-Landsberg met with us regularly. Their counsel, grounded in labor education experience and dedication to labor culture, enriched our conception of this book.

An earlier draft of this guide was distributed by the Pacific Northwest Labor College. In 1982, PNLC sponsored a day-long workshop for twenty-five area teachers who agreed to test the lessons in their classrooms. Once again, The Oregon Committee for the Humanities came to our financial assistance to enable this further testing.

A number of the writing assignments included in the curriculum were inspired by Linda Christensen, a teacher at Jefferson High School in Portland and the most imaginative writing instructor we know.

As labor organizer and teacher, Jeff Edmundson gave us useful advice from his experiences with the lessons. He also kindly allowed us to use his "Confessions of a French-Fry Champion" (**Lesson #7: Taylorizing Burgers: A Fantasy**).

Fellow members of the Portland Labor Players II, a group that combined quality theater with a commitment to its audience of working people, provided moral support and more. In particular, Robin Chilstrom, Jane Ferguson, Marita Keys, Kath Meardon, Melinda Pittman, Marie Selland, and Vicki Stolsen enhanced our sense that playfulness, too, is essential in learning.

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Publication of this curriculum does not stop the process of refinement and addition. For this, we count on you, the teacher, community organizer, labor educator. Throughout the years that we have been engaged in labor education, our inspiration to continue work on this curriculum has come from our colleagues—you. As you teach the lessons in this book, please take some time to complete the evaluation. Help us develop a community of educators committed to creating a pedagogy for democracy.

NOTES TO THE TEACHER

The lessons in this book are the product of more than ten years of testing and revision. They've been used in middle and high schools, colleges, workshops with teachers and community activists, union apprenticeship classes, labor education courses, meetings of union organizations, and worker study groups. We hope and expect that educators at all these levels will find this book of use.

For each of these levels the book might have been organized slightly differently. We've chosen to present it as a high school curriculum, the format most easily adaptable to other uses. Thus we say "student" and "teacher" throughout, whereas "participant" and "facilitator" or "workshop coordinator" might be more appropriate to nonschool contexts. Similarly, the "lessons" are divided into periods ("Day One," "Day Two," etc.) of less than an hour, but they can easily be combined in one session. In any case, the time indicated for each lesson is only an approximation. Because the lessons encourage extensive student participation, our own experience has shown that the timing will vary from one use to the next.

Each lesson includes detailed instructions, student materials, questions for discussion, and suggested follow-up activities. The book is divided in two parts. The first includes teacher instructions, the second the student handouts. The second part is also available separately, as a Student Handbook.

How to Read a Curriculum

A curriculum doesn't read from start to finish like a novel. Because each lesson describes a group learning experience, you'll most likely find the book easiest to follow if you encounter the activities as a group would. In a role play, for example, when the instructions call for students to receive roles, take a break from reading the instructions to look over some of the roles. We've found this helps to imagine the activity.

If you're like us, the introduction to a book sometimes gets read, sometimes not. In the introduction to this curriculum we share some of our experiences with the lessons and outline obstacles and possibilities in teaching labor history. It is what we wish we knew before launching this project. We've also included a brief introduction to each lesson which offers an overview of its goals and objectives.

"What If I Don't Have Time to Teach It All?"

For a class that meets 45–50 minutes a day, five days a week, the sixteen lessons would require about seven weeks. That's a long time. Nonetheless, we hope that you will consider using the book in its entirety for a number of reasons. First, each lesson builds upon and reinforces earlier lessons; there is an integrity to the scope and sequencing of the full sixteen. Second, while ours is a study of the history of work and workers, in fact it's much more. As we stress and elaborate in the introduction, the lessons are really explorations into the meaning and mechanics of democracy. Further, the curriculum helps participants gain a sharper analysis of the entire society. All this means that there is a lot more going on than simply labor history.

Okay—there's the plea. Still, some of you will not have sufficient time to cover the entire curriculum. The following is our abbreviated, no-frills version:

Lesson #1: Organic Goodie Simulation

Lesson #2: Who Makes History?

Lesson #4: Paper Airplane Simulation

Lesson #10: Lawrence, 1912: The Singing Strike

Lesson #12: Southern Tenant Farmers' Union: Black and White Unite?

Lesson #14: Union Maids

INTRODUCTION

THE POWER IN OUR HANDS: CONTENT, PEDAGOGY, AND STUDENT EXPERIENCE

What would it mean to live
in a city whose people were changing
each other's despair into hope?—
You yourself must change it.—
What would it feel like to know
your country was changing?—
You yourself must change it.—
Though your life felt arduous
new and unmapped and strange
what would it mean to stand on the first
page of the end of despair?

—Adrienne Rich

To teach is to be a warrior against cynicism and despair. We lose battles daily: A student comments that all people are selfish and out for themselves; a fellow staff member confides, "That woman is beyond hope." Last year, one of our students attempted suicide with Drano and orange juice.

We've joined the fight in different decades and at different points. One of us is a high school teacher, the other a college professor and labor educator. We share the goal of having our teaching contribute to the creation of a fully democratic society in which people have power and hope. To this end, we see an understanding of labor's heritage and of the strengths of working-class culture as crucial. Crucial also are skills of informed and effective participation: to be able to analyze and take action.

When we first began teaching, we were not as well aware that *how* we teach, as well as *what* we teach, is part of our work against cynicism and implies a larger social vision. We learned quickly that a "we talk, you listen/read this and answer the questions" pedagogy anticipates an undemocratic outcome. Top-down education, like the hierarchical power pyramids people experience in work and community, erodes self-esteem and initiative and promotes feelings of apathy. Apathetic people don't change society—or themselves.

Too often, our early attempts to find alternatives proved disappointing. When one of us was a first-year teacher, his well-intentioned, if awkward, efforts prompted a student to remark, "This class is weird; it feels like a local TV ad." We made an obvious discovery: critical and participatory teaching is a lot tougher to pull off than conventional classroom methods. At times, sheer exhaustion drove us to the havens of traditional passivity-producing lessons.

We began experimenting with the lessons that ultimately became this curriculum, sobered by disappointments yet still committed to democratic education. Now, years later and after much trial and testing, we think we're making progress.

The Power in Our Hands: As the title suggests, the curriculum encourages participants—students,* workers, teachers—to reflect on our power, our ability to make and remake society—indeed to see *everything* about our lives as changeable. In its treatment of history, the curriculum focuses on the contributions of ordinary people—the "hired hands"—as builders and creators. It's really a curriculum on

*For the sake of convenience, we use the term "students" throughout the introduction to mean all participants in the activities other than the teacher or group leader. When we use the term more narrowly to mean high school or college students, this should be clear from the context.

democracy, an extended exploration in participation and decision-making.

The lessons in the curriculum do not, however, impose a perspective on students—even one that argues for democracy. Rather, students confront the difficult choices that genuine democracy requires. They engage in dialogue with the content, each other, and the teacher to make personal the ideas in the lessons. It is a students-centered curriculum: they think, they choose, they act.

In the three upcoming sections of this introduction we summarize how (1) *the content,* (2) *the teaching methodology,* and (3) *the use of student experience* contribute to creating a classroom of active learning and student empowerment:

- The content of the curriculum highlights instances where people acted together to understand and change the conditions of their lives. Drawing on history, students learn some of the skills of social analysis that make informed action possible. They learn to examine and challenge their own and others' premises about people's capabilities; they learn how change occurs and what social change is possible.
- The learning methodology in the lessons is participatory. Through role play, simulation, and imaginative writing, students move into the hearts and minds of the characters who worked for and against change. They encounter history not as an inevitability but as a range of possible outcomes dependent largely on the understandings and efforts of people like themselves.
- And the students' own lives become an additional "text" within the lessons. In writing and discussion, students are asked to examine their experiences as a way to root the concepts of the curriculum in their own lives. The lessons draw on students' experiences to understand history, and draw on history to understand the students' experiences.

The Content: Change Is Possible

Most people spend more time in work than any other single activity. Work is crucial in shaping people's attitudes and sense of their own capabilities. And the structure of work strongly influences other social institutions, including school and family. Students are forever hearing parents and teachers admonish, "This will prepare you for getting a job," or "Your boss wouldn't let you get away with that."

Too often, that work world is presented as an unquestioned fact of life—or even as life itself. The lessons here call on the participants to take a critical look, to ask whether alternative structures could exist. And to the extent that social institutions mirror the organization of work, students gain insights into other important influences on their lives.

Not a "Great Men" History of Labor. Many textbooks and union histories focus on "great men." Cigar-chomping Sam Gompers and blustery George Meany conferring with presidents can be colorful characters, but when we lionize famous individuals, we tend to forget underlying social forces and the decisions and actions taken by ordinary workers—people like our students and their families. Overemphasizing the contributions of great men can discourage students from identifying with people like themselves who reflected on their lives and decided to act.

Recently, for example, we visited the classes of a friend in Los Angeles. In her school's U.S. history textbook, the obligatory chapter on the rise of the 1930s union movement gave credit almost exclusively to leaders like John L. Lewis and Phillip Murray. The book's real hero was President Roosevelt, without whom, the authors apparently believe, little change would have occurred. Never mind that Roosevelt's vision of change was sharply at odds with that of many workers—the text ignored those workers almost entirely. In this book and in too much other labor history—indeed, in too much histo-

ry in general—change is bestowed from above rather than struggled for and, at least in part, enacted from below.

In this curriculum, when we feature the achievements of individuals (the remarkable story of former Klansman C.P. Ellis, for example—see **Lesson #12: Southern Tenant Farmers' Union: Black and White Unite?**) it is to demonstrate the capacity of ordinary people to learn and change. We highlight individuals not for their fame but for what their stories can teach students about their own capabilities.

We've also chosen historical episodes that challenge widely held beliefs about the inability of people from diverse backgrounds to work together for change. Workers speaking dozens of languages, many illiterate, a large proportion teenagers, *did* unite in the 1912 Lawrence, Massachusetts, textile strike. Our students are usually surprised; they aren't accustomed to organizing for even such modest goals as better cafeteria food or their own workplace bulletin board. Tracking, grading, class backgrounds, and sometimes tastes in music, as well as age, race, and sex differences, discourage high school and college students and workers from attempting to act together. We see them interpret history through these same cracked lenses. Although rarely more than a footnote in most history texts, the Lawrence strike can spark deep reconsideration of people's potential to work through the divisions among them.

Racial Conflict. Racial antagonisms also often seem to students to be part of human nature. In **It's a Mystery (Lesson #11),** we explore some of the causes of this and see which social groups actually gain from racial hostilities. Again, our goal is to encourage students to understand racism as they understand other divisions: as phenomena with comprehensible social origins. In the **Southern Tenants Farmers' Union,** students write a dialogue from the point of view of farmers who need racial unity to accomplish their goal but also need to overcome long-held antagonisms. Here, as throughout the curriculum, students see no certainty of positive change, only a possibility dependent on people's efforts and choices.

In one dialogue, a student named Jeff had two black farmers square off. Here is an excerpt:

Tom: Frank, you ain't making no sense. Why should I join this union?

Frank: Tom, if you do, then other black brothers will join. Soon all the blacks would be in the union. Then and only then would we be able to control the planters instead of them controlling us.

Tom: Frank, this gun is all the control I need. I can do anything I want if I got this gun.

Frank: Can you keep your job with that gun? Can that gun help you out when you're starving? Can that gun keep your family together? Can you feed yourself with that gun? No. The gun you have there just keeps you from trusting folks enough to give them half a chance to help you.

Tom: Frank, I just see a bunch of white men wanting my five dollars. There ain't no white man going to go out of his way for a black man. Wasn't ever like that, never will be like that.

Tom eventually joins the union, but without enthusiasm. Jeff acted out his dialogue with another student and helped lead a discussion about why Tom maintained his attitudes and whether Frank could have used more persuasive arguments. The discussion allowed us to explore student beliefs about the possibility of black-white unity. But discussions like this require some trust among students, and beginning with the history helps give perspective and critical distance from our own lives.

The Causes of Social Injustice. Students are tempted to blame oppressive conditions on the selfish inclinations of this or that individual. For example, the "greedy" owner in the **Organic Goodie Simulation (Lesson #1)** and Andrew Carnegie in **Homestead (Lesson #8)** are easy targets. Too easy. We've included questions in the lessons that encourage students to move beyond simplistic explanations to consider the structural reasons for injustice. In the **1934 West Coast Longshore Strike**

(Lesson #13), for example, the waterfront employers cut wages to $.85 an hour and require thirty-six-hour shifts. But the cause is systemic: owners face sharp competition for the scarce 1930s shipping business. "Nice" owners will go under. The system is the problem, not evil people.

Too often, on the rare occasions that labor history is taught, the point seems to be to show students how awful things were "back then" and how lucky we are now. For example, the film **Union Maids (Lesson #14)** could be misused to show only the terrible hardships of the 1930s, that tough struggles were necessary, great victories won, and thank heaven it's all in the past. Our approach reflects the filmmakers' own attempt to look at the 1930s from the standpoint of activists still alive today, still feisty and committed to social change. Students not only see a decade of determined and courageous labor activity, but they also examine the 1930s goals not yet accomplished and think about lessons for today.

Visions of Work and Workers. Before joining the workforce, students' study of work is generally confined to "career education." At the high school where one of us teaches, career education is a required subject. The text for the course encourages adjustment, not critical thinking. As one teacher told us, "The book says, 'Here's the way it is; fit in as best you can. Dress right, don't talk back.' "

The mass media are worse. In one study, the International Association of Machinists monitored television programming—members across the country noted all TV references to work and workers. The results: work itself is nearly always ignored; "workers" are usually presented simplistically and as stereotypes—as beer-drinking caricatures who butcher the English language and vegetate in front of the TV.

These omissions and stereotypes lead students and young workers to hold their own backgrounds in contempt. If we fail to challenge the negative social messages, we contribute to reinforcing these attitudes. Work must be seen as an area for analysis and reflection. If not, people will be disabled in assessing or influencing a major part of their lives.

A workshop we offered recently included people from an assortment of unions and occupations. A sheetmetal worker complained about the negotiating team for his union: "They're just a bunch of guys like me. They should bring in college-educated people. Workers aren't smart enough. The owners always out-talk us so we never get what we want." This expression of self-contempt is a mighty vote of no-confidence in democracy, bred and reinforced in school and media. Unless made explicit and put in context it becomes self-fulfilling: workers who *believe* they cannot control their own affairs in fact cannot.

Challenging Self-Contempt. *The Power in Our Hands* focuses on how changes in work have eroded worker self-confidence. For example, in **Free to Think, Talk, Listen, or Sing (Lesson #5)** students learn that between the Civil War and the early 1900s work was increasingly subdivided, with many jobs becoming more repetitive and machine-like. Students reflect on how these new conditions limited workers' skill development, social interactions, and ultimately their ability to act together for common goals.

Most texts portray changes in work, tools, and machinery as products of "scientific advance" or "brilliant ideas." This curriculum shows how new production techniques were shaped by people with particular motives and interests, often responding to workers' movements and to resistance within the workplace. For example, in **Free to Think, Talk, Listen, or Sing** when mule-spinners began to "trouble" the management of one nineteenth-century mill, the owners brought in new machinery in order to replace male workers with young women—who they expected would prove more docile. As students encounter this history, the "we're not smart enough" attitudes gain some needed context. They can understand these notions as a partial—but intended—consequence of the degraded conditions of work.

The Best Teacher: Experience

A history of people's attempts to work together creatively to better their lives needs a pedagogy to match. In the lessons included here students encounter historical issues first-hand, through simulation, role play, and imaginative writing. Instead of *hearing about,* they *experience.*

In the **Organic Goodie Simulation,** students-as-workers confront an owner (played by the teacher) intent on pitting workers against one another so as to drive down wages. What should we do, students wonder, shut up and do as we're told, beg higher wages from the owner, start a union? Students choose their own strategy. In some classes, the students have sat and watched as the unemployed starve. In others, they have organized an alliance of workers and unemployed to strike. Occasionally, students have taken over the machine and decided to run it themselves. One year students carted us off to a makeshift prison and threatened "death" if we tried to overthrow their new owner-less society.

In the writing assignment following the simulation, participants evaluate their responses to the owner's strategies. With hindsight, students often wonder whether they might have devised a more creative form of resistance. The previous day's struggles, compromises, starvation, and revolts become a rich text for analysis in follow-up discussion.

Simulating Changes in Work. In most labor histories, struggles are portrayed with little reference to the actual work or methods of production. Historically, the organization of work has been both prod and obstacle to workers' efforts for greater democracy. In the **Paper Airplane Simulation (Lesson #4),** highly skilled paper airplane workers watch as the management "steals" their techniques of production, chops up the work process, and reassigns discrete tasks to each worker.

What motivated these changes? Could worker resistance have blocked or redirected them? How would the new organization of the workplace alter workers' family lives or their relationships with one another? Instead of hearing a lecture or reading a handout, students use their own experiences as the basis for probing these and other questions. From having produced paper airplanes, they know that nothing in the nature of the product necessitated that each worker be allowed to make only one fold again and again. They can see what dictated this work organization: the interests and power of management. They understand that the structure of a workplace and the kind of skills workers are allowed to learn and perform are less matters of science or technology than of human choice.

Students *and* Workers. Don, Gary, and Tony are members of the Ironworkers' union. After their apprenticeship class one night, they invited us out for coffee. Their group had just finished **Unit II: Changes in the Workplace/ "Scientific" Management,** and they had some concerns. The conversation lasted hours as they talked about changes in the shop where they worked. "The older workers," one of them said, "each do one kind of job. They're either a welder or a fitter or a burner or a something else. They know how to do other jobs, but they're not certified so they can't actually do them. Now, we're training to do every part of a job, like to build a complete section of a bridge the way a Shopman used to."

At first, as we had studied the history, they had been puzzled. Was their workplace returning to a nineteenth-century mode of production, where workers were masters of the entire process? After **"Taylorizing" Burgers: A Fantasy (Lesson #7),** they concluded that they were going to be used as "serial specialists," never doing more than a fragment of a job. Management, however, would gain increased flexibility with a smaller workforce, because the new workers could be easily moved from one task to another. Their analysis led to an important discussion over staffing and work rules in the next round of contract negotiations.

Among our high school students the most common work is in fast-food restaurants. Richard, who had won an award for "fastest burger flipper," wrote in his year-end evaluation that

the highlight of the class was sharing his analysis of why the company offered these kinds of awards. He compared it to the contest that management set up in the **Paper Airplane Simulation.** Likewise, Peggy, who had worked for two years in a pizza parlor, wrote of how amazed she was to think of her day-to-day worklife as part of a larger historical process. She hated work, but thought of job conditions as "just the way things are." Now she was talking with co-workers about their dissatisfactions and what could be changed.

And that's an important goal of the curriculum: the more our students view the world of work—indeed every social institution—as largely the outcome of human decision, the closer they come to realizing the possibility of restructuring these institutions in their interests.

Doing Democracy. In **Lawrence, 1912: The Singing Strike (Lesson #10),** students confront the actual dilemmas faced by the striking millworkers, members of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). And like the millworkers, the student strikers must figure out how to feed starving children and confront bayonet-happy militiamen, with no higher authority guiding their deliberations. They must also devise methods to make decisions democratically. These discussions can get heated. We've had students vote to remove unruly peers, divide into competing factions, and turn on haughty, self-appointed leaders.

Students also carry conflicts, petty and deep, into their proceedings. As Brenda wrote in her role play evaluation: "The class brought in outside problems and prejudices. This created a lot of friction. People were learning a new skill and felt they were falling flat on their faces. They were discouraged, but the class was really progressing." Another student wrote, "As soon as someone said, 'Hey man, I think we have too many personal grudges and too much racism in this classroom in order to make decisions together,' I knew we were in for a lot of trouble."

Far from being a distraction, this classroom conflict helps students understand the difficulties Italians, Hungarians, Poles, and a dozen other nationalities had making decisions as a group. After the first set of problems, students step out of their roles to talk about class dynamics and to review the social vision of the IWW which powered the strike. In round two, after this important intervening discussion, students begin to learn what encourages group decision-making and what inhibits it. And by the time students encounter the employers' "God and Country" campaign at the conclusion of the strike, their group problem-solving is downright proficient. As Brenda concluded in her evaluation, "I felt that the class was very successful after the first set of questions. We finally had a chance to find out how to operate without an authority figure. Just like a colt trying out its shaky new legs. After a few spills it can walk around a little."

Students often catch the irreverent egalitarianism of the IWW members they portray. One year a class making decisions was taking longer than we wanted. We (foolishly) put a time limit on the discussion. One youngster shot back, "We don't have to obey that rule—we didn't make it. We're the IWW, we believe in democracy!"

Thinking and talking effectively with one another, weighing evidence and arguments, making decisions with peers: these are basic skills—prerequisite to people's development as social questioners and initiators of change. Yet few students are accustomed to independent decision-making.

Why not? The school curriculum emphasizes geography and geometry, chemistry and career ed. Where are discussions of, and experience with, democratic decision-making? The **Lawrence** role play thus becomes a possible jump-off point for exploring the nature of schooling: Why is democracy talked about but seldom practiced? What if this changed? Would offices and factories, department stores and universities welcome workers who expected a full voice in every arena of their lives? Whose interests might be threatened?

The participatory teaching methods included in this curriculum, like the **Lawrence** lesson, have a deeper aim than simply transferring information or analysis. Despair and cynicism fade when students exercise initiative and judg-

ment. They are more likely to feel capable of making changes—both personal and social. Lectures won't convince students that they can make decisions with their peers. Nor will reading about inspiring social change make students believe that they too can take part. Listening and reading can surely help facilitate understanding; experience is what makes ideas concrete.

The Textbook of Students' Lives

A curriculum is not an educational cookbook. Students don't come guaranteed to respond identically to each curricular recipe we follow. So we're in luck. Every class offers us the opportunity to link and enrich course concepts with the diverse backgrounds of our students.

Recently, in one of our classes, we totaled the ages of students and teacher: 531 years. This combined experience is brought to every unit of study, we pointed out, and is a rich additional text.

The Power in Our Hands explores feelings and activities everyone has experienced: resistance, cooperation, competition, prejudice, powerlessness, risk taking. Throughout the lessons we've indicated points where participants might be encouraged to discuss or write about personal experiences that exemplify these and other concepts.

In the **Organic Goodie Simulation,** discussed earlier, students as workers and unemployed confront the monopolistic owner of the machine which produces all sustenance in the society. Do students feel that any effort at collective action would be betrayed? Are the owner's promises trusted? How students react to their simulated hardships and choices depends in part on the prior understandings and sensibilities they bring to the class.

A writing assignment elicits student attitudes by asking class members to describe a time in their lives when a group they were a part of acted effectively together. Alternatively, students can choose to tell of an episode when they discovered they *couldn't* count on others.

Students are generally eager to share their writing in class. This assortment of experiences becomes the material for discussion. Students begin to see how their ability to work with trust and cooperation and the attitudes that underpin this ability are shaped in part by the rest of their lives. For teachers, the discussion is an opportunity to help students make these connections; it's also informative. Learning more about our students enables us to ground future lessons in their experiences and interests, not simply in what we think in the abstract are important concepts.

Imaginative Writing. Throughout the curriculum we suggest writing topics that connect participants' lives to themes in the lessons. In **Who Makes History? (Lesson #2),** we encourage people to write poems modeled after Bertolt Brecht's "Questions of a Worker While Reading" which search out the hidden story behind a commodity or event. Some students draw on their own work lives to expose poetically the underlying reality of an efficient office or tonight's salad. Others take familiar objects and imagine the process of creation. Last year, a high school junior in one of our classes wrote a humorous but biting poem about Mr. Ruffle and his potato chip workers "who cut that extra something":

You know what it is—
into your pockets;
who go home with numb hands every day
from washing thousands of dirty potatoes in ice water;
who sit up all night picking splinters out of calloused hands
from chopping trees for paper bags that you put your name on . . .

In a later lesson, students read about C.P. Ellis, a former leader of the Ku Klux Klan who turned in his white sheets and Exalted Cyclops title when he discovered blacks made better allies than targets. After discussing Ellis's dramatic conversion to union organizer, we ask students to write about a change in *their* lives, one they hadn't before thought possible.

Asking students to reflect on their own lives more deeply roots what they've learned. From the "read-arounds," in which class members share their writing with one another, emerges a beautiful and powerful tapestry of their lives. This homespun literature becomes the experiential text for the class to analyze and admire. But a caution: while the read-arounds can build community and camaraderie, they need to be more than literary show-and-tells. The goals are to stimulate students to a dialogue with each other and with their own experiences and to reflect with greater rigor on the history, not simply to produce pretty writing.

For example, in the C.P. Ellis writing assignment just mentioned, students have written vivid accounts of a significant life change: overcoming the dread of public speaking; shaking a "crack" habit; representing co-workers in grievance proceedings; dealing with an alcoholic boyfriend. In the read-around, we urge students to listen for factors that contribute to people feeling capable—and incapable—of change. What was the relationship between external conditions, such as moving to a new school or department at work, and personal change? What influence did the act of making an important change have on students' feelings that they could move further? People put the microscope to their own experiences in order to make generalizations they can test in other contexts.

In teaching these lessons we have tried to keep alert to topics that stimulate particularly animated discussion. One year we arranged an after-school meeting between fifteen of our high school students and a researcher studying work discipline in McDonald's restaurants. The students felt good that their experiences and observations had value. More importantly, listening to one another, students saw basic similarities in their workplaces. When reminded of our paper airplane simulation and "scientific management's" breakdown of work into deskilled fragments, students had more examples from which to understand the concepts. It wasn't extra credit that kept these young workers past five in the afternoon telling stories and asking questions; it was the desire to make sense of their own experiences and the shared exhilaration of taking their work lives seriously.

Curriculum and Unions. In case it is not already apparent, we want to underscore that *The Power in Our Hands* is not a simple "pro-union" curriculum. While the lessons treat unions as vehicles for protection and improvement, they also acknowledge that unions may be at times discriminatory, at times hierarchical. Students are encouraged to be critical of all forms of domination and inequality.

Unfortunately, teaching materials by and about unions are often misleading. While depicting important struggles, they begin with too narrow an understanding of union "accomplishments." A typical curriculum will emphasize that public education, workers' compensation, unemployment insurance, social security, minimum wages, maximum hours, child labor protection, occupational safety and health regulations were fought for by organized labor. But although these reforms were indeed significant, they had their share of irony and disappointment. For example, workers' compensation is portrayed as a triumph for labor. Yet both by original design and in practice it has protected employers more than workers. Workers' comp has both stabilized employer costs and diluted corporate responsibility for worker safety and health. And it successfully diverted attention from the need for further action on occupational health and safety for half a century.

As these lessons show, the labor movement has made contributions to democratization and social justice that go well beyond lists of legislative victories. Its successes have been achieved to the extent that its own internal workings were democratic, its workplace struggles militant, and its links with other social movements deep. This is the real stuff of labor history.

Our goal here is more to probe than back-pat. Lessons like **Birth of a Rank-and-File Organizer (Lesson #9)** help students see the importance of unions. **Union Maids** and **Shutdown! (Lesson #15)** show that, even with a

union, the struggle for a decent workplace and society is an ongoing process.

A Work in Progress. We first began developing these lessons in 1977. From time to time we led workshops with high school and college teachers and labor educators. In written evaluations and follow-up meetings they told us what worked and what *needed* work. This has been a fun and productive process—but one we could continue indefinitely without having a final product. While there is no such thing as a finished curriculum, we decided to stop tinkering and offer these sixteen lessons now.

Still, there are gaps. All the lessons depict work as paid labor. That leaves out housework. Nor do we deal with the steady narrowing of union activity that has resulted from legislation and court action. Issues surrounding undocumented workers in the United States—the so-called illegal aliens—are complex and deserve some sober, non-xenophobic classroom reflection. Transnational corporations now dominate our economic life, increasing the need for international coordination of unions and workers' movements. We hope you'll join us in producing new lessons that address these and other topics. (See **Evaluation,** which follows the student handouts.)

We talked with some of our students early last year about how schooling had affected all of our lives. One thoughtful young woman frowned and said, "You know, when I was little and something was wrong I wanted to change it—to make it right. But now I don't do anything because I really don't feel I can make a difference."

We don't want to work in institutions that generate despair. And we don't have to. Schools and unions are settings that can reinforce hope and enthusiasm, that can inspire a sense of justice, that can provide opportunity for democratic decision-making and participation, and that can enrich it all with knowledge.

We hope that *The Power in Our Hands* will contribute to a different vision of education, one that asserts through its content and pedagogy that yes, you can understand your life, your world—and yes, you can make change. Join with us in helping students and workers to reclaim what they should never have lost: the knowledge that they *can* make a difference.

—June 1988