

# Organic Goodie Simulation

BY BILL BIGELOW AND NORM DIAMOND

This activity is about power. Set in an imaginary society, it poses students a challenge: Can you overcome divisions and unite to create needed changes? If so, what circumstances encouraged this unity? If not, why not? Unfortunately, these days many students are cynical about their capacity to work together — for a better school, a better community, a better society. Without confronting that cynicism, students run the risk of dismissing much of the history from which they could draw hope for the future. This lesson lets them experience some of the pressures that lead workers to organize. Depending on what happens in class, students either glimpse the possibility of organizing and practice overcoming cynicism, or gain an experience out of which their attitudes can be directly discussed. It's also a lot of fun.

## Grade Level

- Middle school to adult

## Goals / Objectives

1. Students will understand some of the reasons workers develop unions and other organizations.
2. Students will experience some of the techniques employers have used to subvert that organizing.

## Materials Needed

- One large machine-like object, e.g., a TV, a projector, or a computer
- Student Handout #1: Organic Goodie Simulation: Questions
- Student Handout #2: Ideas and Social Class
- Student Handout #3: Can People Act Together?

## Time Required

- One class period to “play,” one-half class period to discuss — depending on the length of your class periods.

## Procedure: Day One

1. Close the door and the blinds in the classroom. Tell students to imagine that we are going to have to live in this classroom for the rest of our lives (many groans). Explain

that there is no soil for farming but we are in luck because we have a machine that produces food — organic goodies. Then correct yourself and point out that actually *you* own the machine. Put whatever machine you've selected at the front of the classroom.

2. Tell students you need people to work for you producing organic goodies. Workers will receive money to buy enough food to live on — those not working will find it hard to survive. Ask for volunteers who want to work, eat, and survive. Choose only half the class as workers. The other half will be unemployed. Sit the two opposite each other, the employed facing the unemployed.

3. Now explain the economics of your society to students. Put the “Organic Goodie Economy” chart (see next page) on the board. (You might want to have the chart up earlier, covered with a map or a screen.)

Explain that five organic goodies a day are necessary to survive in a fairly healthy manner. Those receiving less, the non-workers, will gradually get sick and starve. Go over the chart with students: Each worker *produces* 11 goodies a day. All workers are *paid* \$6.00. A goodie *costs* \$1.00. One dollar is deducted from the pay of each worker for taxes to

## Organic Goodie Economy

Production = 11 x no. of workers

	<i>Workers</i>	<i>Per day Unemployed</i>	<i>Owners</i>
Wages	\$6 x no. workers	Nothing	Nothing
Taxes	-\$1 x no. workers	+\$2 x no. unemployed	-\$1 x no. unemployed (see noted)
Consumption	5 Organic Goodies x no. workers	2 x no. unemployed	6 Organic Goodies
Surplus	Nothing	Nothing	4 x no. workers - 6 for personal daily consumption

*Example:* If there were 10 workers and 10 unemployed, the owner would end up with 50 Goodies: 10 would go to unemployed, 6 would be consumed, leaving a remaining 34.

*Note:* Workers' and owner's tax needs to provide \$2 to each unemployed person (taxes paid in Goodies).

make small welfare payments to the unemployed. So, after taxes, a worker can buy five goodies a day, enough to survive. Explain that as the owner, you naturally deserve more because it's your machine — and without your machine *everyone* would starve.

4. Show the unemployed that, as the chart indicates, they only receive \$2.00 a day in welfare payments. This means they can buy only two goodies a day — they are slowly starving to death. They need work.
5. Make sure each student understands their position. Now the “game” begins. Your goal is to increase your profits. The way you can do this is through cutting wages.

Note: No money or goodies are actually exchanged. You might begin by telling students to imagine that a number of weeks have elapsed and then asking members of each group how they have been eating.

6. There is no “correct” order in which to proceed but here are some classroom-tested techniques:
  - » Ask who among the unemployed people wants to work. Offer someone \$5.50 a day — less than other workers but lots more than the \$2.00 they're getting now in welfare payments. After you have a

taker, go to the workers and ask who is willing to accept \$5.50. If no one is willing, fire someone and hire the unemployed person who was willing to work for that amount. Continue this procedure, trying to drive down wages.

- » Anyone who mentions “union,” or striking, any kind of collective action, or anything disruptive should be fired immediately. Get all the workers to sign “yellow dog” contracts promising never to join a union as long as they work for you.
- » You might want to hire a foreman for a little more money who will report “subversive” workers to you. Probably someone will threaten to take over your machine. When this happens, hire a policeman or two to protect it. Explain that they are here to protect “all our property *equally*, not just my machine.”
- » It's important to keep workers and unemployed from uniting in a strike — or worse, to take control of your machine. You can offer privileges to people to prevent them from seeing their interests in common — differential wages, shorter work days, perhaps even profit sharing.

- » If they are successful in uniting and stopping production, you have a couple of options: 1. You can wait them out, pointing out your surplus (using the example on the chart), and how quickly they will starve; or 2. give in to their wage demands and then raise the price of organic goodies. After all, you can justify your need for more income to meet your higher costs.
7. The game is unpredictable, and a range of things has happened in playing it. What *always* happens, however, is that people try to organize. The game ends when students have had ample opportunity to organize — successfully or otherwise. Participants may be totally demoralized or they may have taken over the machine. Whatever happens, and these are not the only two possibilities, make sure to continue until the game’s objectives have been achieved.
  8. Distribute Student Handout #1: Organic Goodie Simulation: Questions for homework. This works better than trying to discuss the game right away, as people need to collect their thoughts about what occurred in class, and discussions will be fuller if students have had a chance to reflect in writing.

### Procedure: Day 2

1. The direction of your discussion will depend on how the simulation developed. However, here are some questions that might be applicable.
  - » What were the major divisions set up in the role play?
  - » How did you feel about your role? Lucky, unlucky?
  - » When did you start becoming dissatisfied?
  - » What plans, if any, did you make to change the set-up?
  - » What made it difficult for you to unite with one another?
  - » How did you feel when I hired the police to protect “all of our property”? Why?
2. *Optional follow-up:* These final questions can
  - » What were the methods I used to try to keep people from getting together to oppose me?
  - » When was I successful? When unsuccessful?
  - » What happened to people who mentioned going on strike?
  - » How did you feel when I raised the price of organic goodies? Why did I say I needed this price increase? Did you accept that reason as legitimate?
  - » How did you feel about the foreman? Would you have liked to be the foreman? the police?
  - » In general, at which points were you most successful in getting together? When were you least successful?
  - » Were there actions that you personally considered but didn’t do anything about? What kept you from acting on your ideas? (Here, try to get at students’ preconceptions about whether or not people are able to stick together: Did they think that efforts to unite all workers and unemployed would eventually be betrayed? If so, explore with students what experiences they’ve had in groups that would make them feel skeptical about people getting together. Likewise, if students felt hopeful about the possibilities for unified action, what gave them that sense? Had past experiences convinced them that people can unite and act together?)
  - » As the owner, what kind of attitudes would I want you to have about your ability to work together as a unified group? What attitudes would I want you to have about private property — like my organic goodie machine?
  - » Are there reasons why particular views of “human nature” — e.g., people are naturally greedy or selfish or competitive — would be encouraged by various groups in our society? Who would have wanted you to have these ideas in our Organic Goodie Simulation?

lead into a discussion about ideas and social class — that there are not just good ideas and bad ideas, right ideas or wrong ideas, but that particular ideas can benefit or hurt different social groups. Distribute the handout #2, “Ideas and Social Class.” Ask students to complete these individually or in pairs. Go through each quote, and ask students about which social groups in the Organic Goodie Simulation would benefit if everyone in the society believed that idea. [Note the source of some of these quotes: Number 3 comes from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; number 6 comes from the song, “Solidarity Forever,” written by Ralph Chaplin in 1915; and number 8 comes from the Preamble to the Constitution of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), adopted in 1905.]

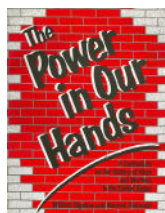
3. *Optional follow-up writing:* Distribute Student Handout #3: Can People Act Together? for students to complete in class or as homework. This questionnaire will allow you to continue to explore with students the origins of their sense of being able or unable to work together. Alternatively, just assign question #3 and have students write a detailed description of the time they acted in concert with others. Ask students to share their papers with the class. Possible discussion questions

include:

- » Does it seem that most of you are hopeful about people’s abilities to work together? Where do your different views come from?
- » What are some of the important experiences in our lives that shape our ideas about human nature (e.g., sports, school, family, work, etc.)?
- » How would you reorganize these activities so that they might change our concept of “human nature”? (The goal here is to get students to reflect on “human nature” as changeable — that people may be the way they are at least partly because of the society they live in.)
- » Are there situations in which self-interest might best be served by uniting with others?
- » From your answers, what role did outside pressures play on your ability to get together? (For example, needing to defend something people all value.)
- » Can you think of a time when you accomplished something by cooperating with a group of people that you couldn’t have done as well alone?

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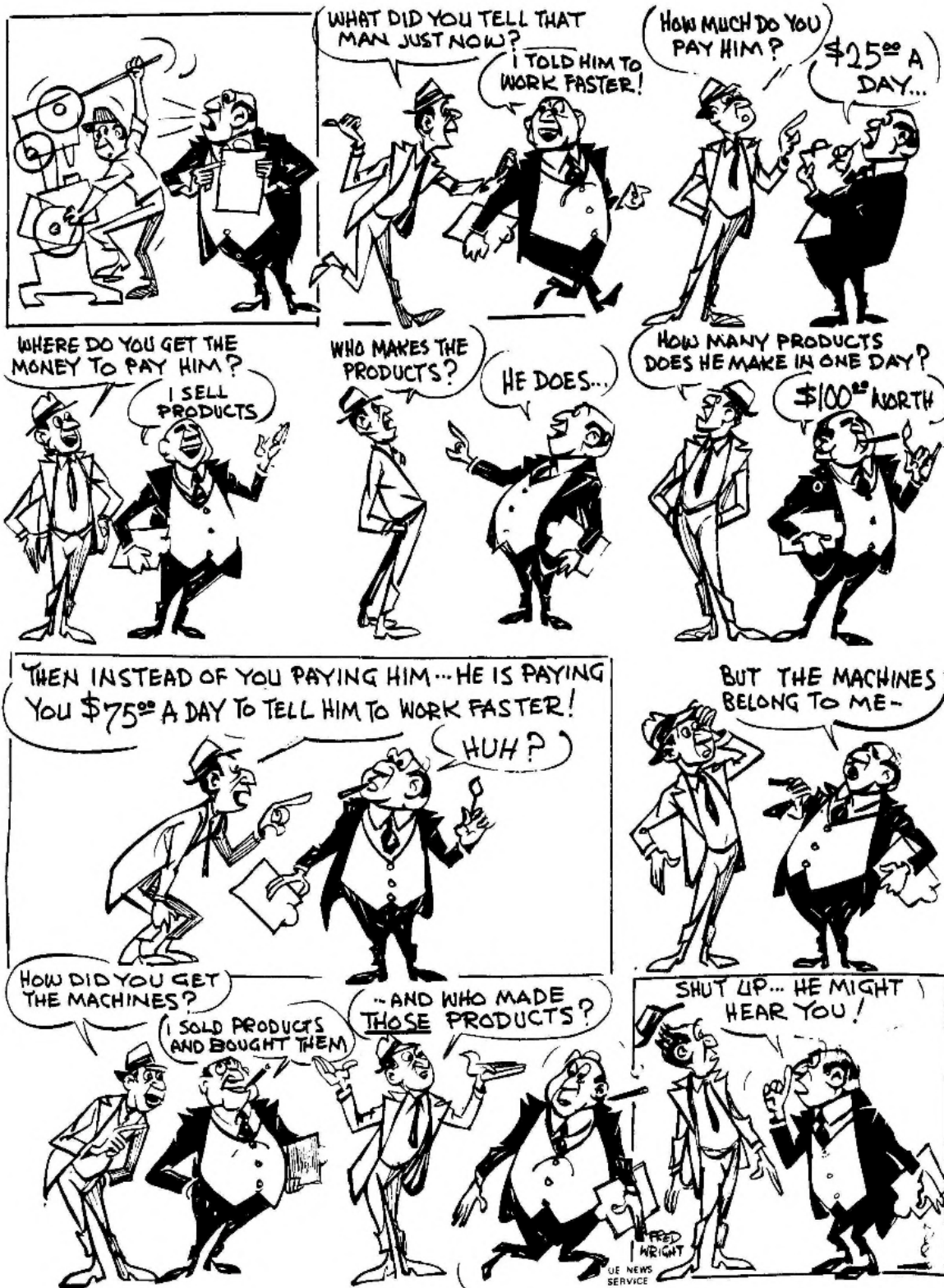
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Cartoon published by the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America.

Student Handout #1  
ORGANIC GOODIE SIMULATION

# Questions

1. What were the various ways that I tried to create divisions between people in the role play?
2. What actions did you personally take to try and stop my efforts to divide people?
3. If we were to do this simulation again, what different actions would you take?
4. Comment on the cartoon, published by the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America. Does it relate to our role play? If so, how?

Student Handout #2  
ORGANIC GOODIE SIMULATION

# Ideas and Social Class

The Organic Goodie game began with three social classes: the workers, the unemployed, and the owner of the organic goodie machine. Based on your experience playing the game, after each statement write down which social class or classes in Organic Goodie would benefit if everyone in the society believed in this idea:

1. People need to leave big decisions to the experts — experts know best.
2. Democracy means “power to the people.” People working together to make decisions is the fairest system and will lead to the best outcomes.
3. “Everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of [their] interests.”
4. Private property is sacred. People should be able to do pretty much whatever they like with their own property.
5. It’s hard work, individual initiative, drive, determination, empowerment, and personal choice that lead to progress and prosperity. Individual freedom leads to the greatest good.
6. “They have taken untold millions that they never toiled to earn, but without our brain and muscle not a single wheel can turn... In our hands is placed a power greater than their hoarded gold, greater than the might of armies, magnified a thousand-fold. We can bring to birth a new world from the ashes of the old. ... Solidarity forever, for the union makes us strong.”
7. Ultimately, it’s best to simply trust yourself, because when push comes to shove, you can’t really trust other people that much.
8. “The working class and the employing class have nothing in common. ... Between these two classes a struggle must go on until the workers of the world organize as a class, take possession of the means of production, abolish the wage system, and live in harmony with the Earth.”

