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LABOR HISTORY IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS: UNIONS GET 'EM WHILE THEY'RE YOUNG

by Kevin Dayton

With an uncertain outlook for labor unions in America, some union leaders plan to reverse their membership decline by influencing young minds and making unions relevant for a new generation. They believe a capitalist conspiracy is excluding their view of labor history from the public school history curriculum, and they believe unions are losing members because schools aren't teaching young people to appreciate unions and union political achievements and goals. In response to this perceived neglect of labor history, union activists have begun a crusade to send a political message about unions to a captive audience of public school students. Led by California unions, this crusade is becoming a national movement. Do advocates of the free market need to respond, or is this union plan to impose labor history in the classroom doomed to failure?

Unions Face a Shaky Future

Labor unions seem destined for cultural and economic irrelevance in the United States as the percentage of workers represented by a union has dramatically declined. In 1953--the year of peak union membership--32.5 percent of all workers and 35.7 percent of the private workforce belonged to a union.¹ In 2001, 13.5 percent of all workers belonged to a union, and the number was 9.0 percent without government employees.² Harvard professor Robert Putnam creates a melancholy image of the decline of unions when he writes, "The solidarity of union halls is now mostly a fading memory of aging men."³

Attitudes about unions among young people do not portend a revival of unionism anytime soon. Although no one has apparently surveyed American young people about unions, the results of such a survey would likely be bad news for union leaders. Most young people readily accept that they will have individual responsibility for determining their financial status in life. Few expect to rely on union leaders to negotiate collective bargaining agreements on their behalf, and few seem interested in career advancement based on confrontational relationships between "labor" and "management."

Union advancement is a low priority on the list of leftist causes supported by students at colleges known for liberal political activism. A poll of Yale University undergraduates during a 1996 labor dispute between employee unions and the administration showed that only 20 percent supported the unions, while 35 percent supported the administration. The other 45 percent didn't know or didn't care. Some undergraduates even organized an anti-union group called "Students for Union Compliance."⁴ An October 2002 "teach-in on labor issues" at the Yale campus intended to "educate undergraduates who were curious about labor relations" attracted only 25 undergraduates out of 5000 enrolled.⁵

Unions Tackle a Classroom Conspiracy

The decline in union membership since the early 1950s has several likely causes, including the transformation of the country's primary economic activity from manufacturing to services, the unwillingness of younger generations to join formal organizations, and decades of union leaders who focused on providing services for their members instead of traditional organizing. Liberals sometimes identify President Ronald Reagan as the culprit for the decline of unions. But some union activists see more insidious plots.

These union activists detect a conspiracy among corporate interests, free market advocates, and conservative government officials to marginalize the role of labor unions in American history. As a labor studies professor writes, "The powerful influences of competitive individualism and ideological conservatism discourage many Americans from appreciating labor history."⁶ Unwitting teachers therefore teach history with the presumption that capitalism and classical liberal economic policies benefit working Americans. Textbooks also show the same bias, as they are essentially a product of corporate America that must win approval from conservative officials for use in large states such as Texas, Florida, and North Carolina. Even the Internet shows evidence of this conspiracy, according to John Summers at the University of Rochester:

More fundamentally, I also raise concerns about the future of labor history in cyberspace. Will the Web escape, or replicate, the anti-worker political biases frequently associated with public history? A theoretically egalitarian instrument of communication, the Web blurs boundaries between academic and public history, offering university professors opportunities to capture typically elusive publics. Like other mass media, however, it already betrays the corrupting influence of private money. Will the world of labor thus become invisible in cyberspace, or perhaps, will it appear "strange and sinister" (to borrow an apt remark from C. Wright Mills)? Or will scholars and citizens effectively counter the attempts underway at large corporations and among libertarian ideologues to colonize new media in the name of "free" markets?⁷

This ideological colonization is supposedly reflected in the school history curriculum, in which students learn too much about historical figures in government and commercialism and not enough about ordinary workers and the labor organizations that claim to represent them. "Labor History is rarely taught, thereby leaving out an important aspect of what happens and continues to happen for a majority of people, i.e., workers, their families and communities," says the California Federation of Teachers.⁸ "This (labor history) curriculum is severely limited in the State of New York and this omission by the State Education Department needs to be corrected," writes the sponsor of a bill to require schools to have courses of instruction about labor unions.⁹ "There's a lack of knowledge and understanding of the contributions of organized labor in the public school curriculum," claimed California labor leaders and then-State Senator Barbara Lee when she introduced a labor history bill in 1997.¹⁰ "History studies only focus on the leaders--the chiefs--without mentioning anything about working class people," says a Washington State high school teacher. "Students read the texts and don't see themselves or their families represented."¹¹ The secretary-treasurer of the New York State AFL-CIO states that "the idea here is that students have a right to know about the contributions of the American labor movement,"¹² as if schools were denying a constitutional right to their students by not providing a labor history curriculum.

In these arguments, labor history is portrayed as an attempt to provide a well-rounded education, or as an exercise in self-recognition and self-esteem for working-class students. But union leaders have a vested interest in seeing their organizations depicted as highly relevant in history--and more importantly, highly relevant in the present and future. With the goal of reviving their membership, union activists are devising the actual labor history curriculum to be taught in the classroom,

implementing the curriculum in the classroom, and even creating the teaching methodology for the curriculum.

Labor History Becomes a Strategy to Promote Unions

Origins for labor history in the classroom can be traced back at least to 1981, when the City University of New York developed the "American Social History Project," meant to present the history of marginalized and oppressed groups in an interesting way to a "broad popular audience." Among the various non-traditional components of American history emphasized in this project was labor history. Leaders of this project have produced labor history material, including textbooks, videos, collections of primary documents, a CD-ROM, and a website. Workshops, summer institutes, seminars, and other programs sponsored by the American Social History Project train teachers to present ideas largely through "collaborative and active learning strategies" in which students often work in groups.¹³

It seems that in the mid-1990s, unions selected labor history in the classroom as a strategy to reverse the long decline in their membership. If unions could change the depiction of American history to focus more on unions, perhaps a new generation of Americans would aspire to join a union or organize a union. At the request of the AFL-CIO,¹⁴ President Clinton declared May 1995 as the first Labor History Month, using his proclamation to recognize noteworthy accomplishments of unions in American history. When he declared Labor History Month again in May 1996, President Clinton included language in his resolution connecting knowledge about labor history to the future of organized labor:

As we approach the 21st century, our Nation's economy is undergoing a transformation as momentous as the change that spurred the exodus from farms to factories 100 years ago. And in facing the challenges posed by global competition and rapid technological advances, the workers of the Information Age need the same effective leadership that allowed their forbears to succeed. Each new generation of workers must embrace the activism that has characterized labor's rich history, and all Americans should recognize the role that labor has played in the continuing progress of our democracy.¹⁵

The Winter 1997 issue of the *Organization of American Historians (OAH) Magazine of History* exclusively focused on labor history. An article "Why Teach Labor History?" supports labor history in the schools as a way to revitalize the contemporary union movement at a time of crisis for workers. "With union membership reduced, government standards for worker rights and safety under assault, with job security in jeopardy everywhere, young people entering the labor market are more vulnerable than ever to abuse in the workforce."¹⁶ This was written at a time when work fatalities reached record lows and the nation's economy was in the midst of rapid growth and low unemployment.

At this time, teachers' unions began calling for a national movement to bring labor history to the classroom. At its 1998 national convention, the National Education Association (NEA) adopted a resolution to "collaborate with other labor unions, colleges, and universities to include the study of labor history and collective bargaining and encourage the development of curricular materials as a part of the preparation for future leaders."¹⁷ Not to be outdone, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) adopted a resolution at its 2002 convention resolving that the AFT and the national AFL-CIO would form a task force to develop a plan to support and coordinate K-12 labor education and convene a national conference to educate teachers and union activists about the best materials and practices in the field. This resolution was blunt about the intent of labor history, noting that "union density in the United States has fallen to levels unseen since early in the last century" and that "students need to learn more about labor history and the role of unions in protection of workers'

rights in order to make informed decisions about their lives at work."¹⁸ At this same convention, the AFT also approved a resolution to establish an American Labor Studies Center in Troy, New York, which would "collect, analyze, evaluate, create and disseminate labor history and labor studies curriculum and related materials, aligned to academic standards in place, to K-12 teachers nationwide in cooperation with the National Education Association and other organizations and agencies who express an interest."¹⁹

As teachers' unions approved these resolutions, unions and union-funded historical societies began pushing legislative proposals in various states to implement labor history as part of the public school history curriculum. In 1997, the California State Senate approved a bill requiring labor history instruction in the state's public schools; it was never considered in the Assembly. In 1999 and in the subsequent legislative session, New York legislators tried to pass a bill requiring elementary and secondary schools to teach courses on the role of unions in American society. A bill introduced in the Wisconsin legislature in 2001 would have required "every school district's instructional program in state, national, and world history to include information on the history of organized labor in America and the collective bargaining process." The bill did not pass.

In contrast to these legislative failures, the Massachusetts AFL-CIO found an innovative way to use state government to advance labor history in that state's schools. As the result of a bill approved in 2002, the state will sell commemorative license plates showing the insignia of the Massachusetts AFL-CIO, and proceeds will be used to promote the study of labor history among high school students and raise scholarship funds for students who score well on a labor history examination.²⁰ This is a clever combination of promoting unions on the highways, raising money for union promotional materials, and bribing students to learn about labor history by encouraging them to study it with the goal of winning a scholarship. The fund to further labor history education will be supplemented by gifts, grants, and donations from public and private sources.

Labor History Enters the Classroom

Although the national teachers' unions have called for the coordinated development of a national labor history curriculum, there doesn't yet seem to be a centralized national campaign to impose it. A perusal of union publications and websites shows unions in different states are independently developing the tools needed to invade the classroom. Several websites now collect links to labor history archives, industrial relations libraries at colleges, and college labor history programs and centers, but the labor history movement seems disjointed and disorganized.

Unions in several states have initiated strategies to bring labor history into the classroom. The Rhode Island Labor History Society, with 71 local unions as members at the end of 2001, holds a labor history essay contest for high school students, with prize money to the winners.²¹ The West Virginia Humanities Council provides a classroom curriculum about labor history developed with support from the West Virginia Department of Education and the West Virginia AFL-CIO.²² Other labor history programs for public school students are reportedly in effect in the Chicago area, where the Illinois Labor History Society has developed "A Curriculum of United States Labor History for Teachers" with Chicago area teachers and union leaders.²³ Teachers in St. Paul, Minnesota--with support from union officials--have developed a ten-part lesson plan called "Untold Stories: Learning about Our History" to teach local labor history. Lesson plans are posted on the website of Workday Minnesota, a self-described collaborative effort of the Labor Education Service and the Minnesota AFL-CIO.²⁴

Other examples of the nascent labor history movement have been reported in *Communique*, the weekly bulletin of an education think-tank called the Education Intelligence Agency (EIA). The EIA discovered that \$12,750 in federal School to Work funds was supporting the Calumet Project's

Labor Education in the Schools program in Hammond, Indiana:

The Calumet Project sends union organizers into high school classrooms to lecture on 'labor history, famous labor leaders and the impact unions have had on society.' Neither the union speakers nor the Calumet Project are disinterested academics. In fact, the Calumet Project also offers assistance in organizing, strike or lock-out campaigns, and training union supporters in how to build community-labor relations.²⁵

The EIA also reported that in the summer of 1999, the Wisconsin Education Association Council held a conference dedicated to "developing strategies and skills for implementing the Great Schools Initiative," which is the union's blueprint for its vision of education reform. One of the workshops was "Labor Studies in the Schools (Labor History)." It has the following description:

This session is designed for educators at all grade levels who wish to acquire new methods and materials for teaching their students about organized labor and its role in society. Members (Education Support Personnel and Teachers) will receive important information about the history of labor unions, their influence in building support for Great Schools and how they are essential to maintaining a strong public system of education.²⁶

To assist with the Wisconsin labor history movement, the Wisconsin AFL-CIO has a website coordinated by the Wisconsin Labor History Society listing books for elementary and high school students, films, documentaries, and websites about labor history.²⁷

One school district cited as using the American Social History Project curriculum is the West Contra Costa Unified School District in Richmond,²⁸ a struggling industrialized city near San Francisco that has long been a bastion of political strength for organized labor. The local school district requires union agreements for contractors on its school construction, and in 2001 the Richmond City Council implemented the highest living wage ordinance in the country. It's the type of place where unions can push labor history into the schools, and it's also the type of place that most desperately needs to free itself from the economic assumptions of unionism.

California Leads the Labor History Movement

National efforts to develop a labor history curriculum for schools may soon become more organized with the emergence of California as the national leader in the labor history movement. The political climate of California has created a ripe environment for the advancement of labor history in the schools, with the California legislature today as perhaps the most "progressive" state legislative body ever seen in the United States. In the Los Angeles and San Francisco metropolitan areas, union-supported liberals have a firm lock on most local governments, including school boards. In addition, development and distribution of labor history material for schools are assisted by a taxpayer-funded union think-tank called the Center for Labor Research and Education at the University of California campuses in Berkeley and Los Angeles. All of these factors have helped California to become a working model for the advancement of labor history in the schools.

In September 2002, California Governor Gray Davis signed into law Assembly Bill 1900. Sponsored by the California Federation of Teachers, this bill recognized the first week of April as "Labor History Week" and authorized public school districts to "commemorate that week with appropriate educational exercises that make pupils aware of the role that the labor movement has played in shaping California and the United States." The original version of the bill appropriated \$150,000 for school districts to purchase educational material about labor history, but this provision was eliminated after consideration of the state's \$24 billion budget deficit.

How did California unions manage to get Labor History Week? One reason is that the unions already had the apparatus in place to execute a labor history program in the schools. The California Labor Federation operates a Labor in the Schools Committee meant "to assist teachers in reaching students with information about the history and current place of the labor movement in American democracy." Participants of this committee mainly include teachers from the Los Angeles and San Francisco school districts, along with some outside advisors. This committee has produced a variety of labor history projects for all grades.²⁹

Elementary school students may participate in The Yummy Pizza Company, a role-playing exercise in which students make mini-pizzas while dealing with labor-management conflicts. In the end, the pizzas are ideally enjoyed by a unionized student workforce presumably liberated from the greedy owner's excessive profiteering.

High school students may watch a 10-part video series written and directed by the California Federation of Teachers' communications director, Fred Glass, who is also a union organizer and labor studies professor. Funded by the AFL-CIO, the California Labor Federation and several individual unions,³⁰ the *Golden Lands, Working Hands* video series explains California labor history from the union point of view. Michelle Vesecky at the U.C. Berkeley Center for Labor Research and Education recognized the unprecedented achievement of this video in her article "*Golden Lands, Working Hands: The History of the Future*":

Other states, such as Minnesota, Rhode Island, Wisconsin, Illinois, Massachusetts, Ohio, Iowa, Michigan, New Jersey, and Virginia have already developed labor history programs. However, *Golden Lands, Working Hands* is groundbreaking. No other state has developed a curriculum as comprehensive as the CFT's multi-media project. *Golden Lands, Working Hands* will be the first of its type to have both its own textbook and an hour long video.³¹

While Glass claims the video series is "politics-proof" because it mentions past episodes of corruption and discrimination in organized labor,³² he has a political goal: encourage young people to join unions or organize employees at their workplace into a union. "Students who go through the *Golden Lands, Working Hands* unit will be in the workforce within a year or two ... It will give them the knowledge necessary to be able to say 'Union Yes' if they are working in a place where they have that choice."³³ According to Glass,

(T)he video explores a great deal of the events and issues in the history of California labor and takes us right up to the present, dealing with current issues such as mass corporate 'downsizing,' part-time and temporary employment, inadequate health care coverage, and the battle for a living wage. It shows how today's labor movement is attempting to reinvent its tradition of standing up for working people, and how it continues to make history in the process.³⁴

Vesecky at the Center for Labor Research and Education makes the intent clear: "The CFT plans to raise awareness in future workers, future voters, and future policymakers. Through education, hopefully worker empowerment will result."³⁵

A theme of the video series is that life was relatively good for American workers when unions were at their zenith, and now life is a struggle for American workers because unions represent a much smaller percentage of the workforce. The classroom guide for teachers to use in conjunction with the video series summarizes the 22-minute long final segment in the series--"Golden Lands, New Demands"--as the story of how "a new corporate regime ruthlessly replaces full-time 'middle class' union jobs with part-time, temporary, 'disposable' employment." But the summary notes that not all is lost: "In response, a new organizing mood emerges among California working people grappling

with the effects of the global economy, spurring struggles for full-time work, living wages, health care and dignity."³⁶

California working people struggling for dignity in the last segment of the *Golden Lands, Working Hands* video series include bike messengers, hotel workers, janitors, and college instructors targeted by current organizing campaigns. Departing from history into the realm of contemporary union politics, the segment depicts four examples of union activism: the "Justice for Janitors" organizing movement of the Service Employees International Union; the AFL-CIO "Union Summer" program in which mainly young participants work in internships as part of organizing campaigns; the "Living Wage" campaign for municipalities; and fighting "anti-union" politicians and proposals such as California's Proposition 226, a "paycheck protection" proposal on the June 1998 ballot. Perhaps with the intention of introducing students to the struggles of young workers, the video focuses on efforts of some San Francisco bicycle messengers to organize into a union with the help of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union. Bike messengers complain that they need a union because their work is dangerous, they get low pay, they don't get respect, and rich multi-national corporations are taking advantage of them.³⁷

Although the video obviously is biased toward presenting the union view of history, one area in which the *Golden Lands, Working Hands* video series becomes excessively simplistic in its politics is when it relates the 1992 Los Angeles riots to the decline of unions. According to the video, in the 1950s unions provided good jobs and were a responsible agent to address community frustration about racism. In the 1990s, without strong unions or good jobs, rioting provided the outlet to address racism. For students too young to remember the riots or understand the complicated causes behind them, this explanation is grossly incomplete.

Like the labor history program produced by the American Social History Project, the *Golden Lands, Working Hands* program emphasizes collective viewing and discussion. "Group screening and interaction can, at least potentially, create the energizing connection of ideas shared among people, on the basis of which they can act," Glass writes.³⁸ Not only does the content of labor history question the benefit of individualism in the workplace, but the methodology of teaching labor history seems to reject individualism in the classroom as well. Obviously the gentle guidance of the teacher combined with the peer pressure of fellow adolescents will lead students to a preordained positive conclusion about unions.

Now that Labor History Week is in effect, the California Federation of Teachers plans to implement the *Golden Lands, Working Hands* program as part of the California high school history curriculum, using teachers' union locals and an anticipated recommendation from a future California History-Social Science Curriculum Framework and Criteria Committee to "allow the more rapid dispersion of the curriculum throughout the state's school districts."³⁹ At the time Governor Gray Davis signed the Labor History Week bill into law, the Napa/Solano County Central Labor Council in the San Francisco Bay Area announced its intention to institute a labor history curriculum in Napa and Solano county school districts.⁴⁰

Also assisting with the labor history movement is the University of California's Center for Labor Research and Education. Its Collective Bargaining Institute for L.A. Students brings Los Angeles high schools students together to participate in mock collective bargaining sessions, while at the same time their teachers spend the day in a "training session designed to make labor education part of the regular public school classroom."⁴¹ This program is supposed to become a model program for school districts across the country known as the Collective Bargaining Education Project. With a total of \$17 million in funding received from the state budget since 2000, the Center for Labor Research and Education has the financial resources to advance this program in California

and elsewhere.

Are the Capitalists Really Excluding Labor History from History?

The need for a special labor history curriculum in schools is questionable, since most history textbooks appropriately discuss the rise of labor unions and the passage of landmark labor protection laws in the 20th Century. California's History-Social Science Framework and Content Standards for California Public Schools, adopted by the California State Board of Education in 2000, include numerous references to labor history. Elementary school students are supposed to learn about the role of labor in industry and agriculture, the accomplishments of Cesar Chavez, and the past human struggles that are the basis for Labor Day. Junior high school students are supposed to learn about the rise of the labor movement, union leaders such as Samuel Gompers, collective bargaining, and strikes and protests over working conditions. High school students are supposed to learn about the right to join unions and the advances and retreats of organized labor from the creation of the Congress of Industrial Organizations and the American Federation of Labor to current issues of a post-industrial, multi-national economy, including the United Farm Workers in California.⁴²

Modern high school history textbooks cover significant aspects of the labor movement. For example, Houghton Mifflin's *A People and a Nation: A History of the United States* dedicates ten straight pages to the rise of the labor movement during the Industrial Age. Among the labor topics discussed in this textbook are the employment of women; child labor; wage work; industrial accidents; courts restricting labor reform; railroad strikes of 1877; the Knights of Labor; the Haymarket Riot; the American Federation of Labor; the Pullman Strike; the International Workers of the World; women in the labor movement; immigrants, African-Americans, and labor unions; the Congress of Industrial Organizations; rivalry between craft and industrial unions; sit-down strikes; the Memorial Day Massacre; and the Taft-Hartley Act. Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers are mentioned in the context of Hispanic interest movements. *A People and a Nation* also mentions the decline of labor unions as part of its discussion of the 1980s, asserting that President Reagan presided over the government's "busting" of the air traffic controllers' union in 1981 and claiming that "Reagan made the unions' hard times worse."⁴³

Prentice Hall's *America: Pathways to the Present* discusses early labor unions; the Knights of Labor; the American Federation of Labor; the International Workers of the World; the negative reaction of employers to unions; the Great Railroad Strike of 1877; Eugene Debs; the Haymarket Riot; the Pullman Strike; and the labor movement as part of Progressive reform. There is a box about the origins of Labor Day and a suggestion to listen to the IWW song, "The Commonwealth of Toil," and other labor songs. Students are asked to compare arguments of Samuel Gompers and a manufacturing company manager, and they are asked to assess the reliability of sources about the Taft-Hartley Act. Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers are mentioned in the context of Hispanic interest movements. Although this textbook does not mention the decline of labor unions, it does state that "Reagan also challenged the powers of labor unions" and refers to the firing of unionized air traffic controllers.⁴⁴

Is Labor History a Union Pipedream?

Just because governments are requiring labor history in the classroom doesn't mean that unions will win special treatment in the American history curriculum. One could argue that schools are now so overwhelmed with curriculum requirements that labor history is unlikely to filter through a school district into a school and then into a classroom. The *Golden Lands, Working Hands* video series is 171 minutes long, requiring teachers to spend almost three hours viewing it in order to evaluate its usefulness in the classroom. (The classroom guide advises teachers to view the video twice before

showing it.⁴⁵) Unless a teacher has a strong personal commitment to unionism, labor history will probably not infiltrate most classrooms, especially classrooms in suburban school districts where students are likely to feel uneasy and parents will complain if teachers start showing union politics into the curriculum.

More susceptible to labor history in the classroom are urban school districts, where many school board members, administrators, and teachers are strongly supportive of unions and parents tend to be less involved with the details of their children's education. Labor history in these schools could be used as a primer in union organizing, with guest lecturers suggesting that students organize fellow employees at fast food restaurants and video stores where they have part-time jobs. In fact, the classroom guide for *Golden Lands, Working Hands* suggests that teachers "contact your local AFL-CIO Central Labor Council for union activists who can speak with students about current issues and union campaigns, and how students can become involved."⁴⁶ The classroom could become a recruitment center for AFL-CIO programs such as "Union Summer." It could also become a source of hundreds of "grassroots" letters or organized visits to legislators from students newly concerned about a "new corporate regime" they learned about in school. And what message would teachers send to students if California's "Labor History Week" occurs when a teachers' union is about to go on strike?

Will the *Golden Lands, Working Hands* video series inspire young people to support unions? Although testimonials, video footage, and even a pro-union rap cartoon video are included in the video series to stimulate student interest in a potentially dry topic, watching and understanding the video requires close attention and a knowledge of American and California history that may be too difficult an obstacle for most students, even with the teacher's use of accompanying lesson plans and classroom guide. The best target for the unions' labor history curriculum may be students in Advanced Placement American history classes. Yale may yet get a student body supportive of its employee unions.

Unions Misidentify the Causes of Their Decline

Another more fundamental problem with the video series--and with the concept of labor history in general--is that union activists may be misidentifying the causes of their decline. In its summary of the *Golden Lands, Working Hands* video series, the AFT Labor in the Schools Committee website rails against "the anti-union attacks of right-wing politicians" starting with President Ronald Reagan's decertification of the air traffic controllers' union after an illegal strike in 1981.⁴⁷ In other words, union activists want students to learn that union membership is declining because of the animosity of conservative Republicans and their business allies, not because of the free choice of workers. But the decline in union membership began in 1954, twenty-seven years before Reagan took office.

In addition, Harvard professor Robert Putnam has included the decline in union membership as just one example of a generalized decline in American civic and social organizations. "Perhaps the problem with union membership is not so much skepticism about the idea of 'union' as skepticism about the idea of 'membership,'" Putnam writes.⁴⁸ He cites a labor economist who touched on this possibility in 1979, "The young worker thinks primarily of himself. We are experiencing the cult of the individual, and labor is taking a beating preaching the comforts of coalition."⁴⁹ Unless history classes are the source of student attitudes about independence and individualism, a week of labor history is unlikely to convert younger generations to unionism.

A Free Market Response to Labor History in the Classroom: Ignore It or Join It?

As labor history becomes part of classroom curriculum, is there need for a perspective that

specifically gives competitive individualism and free market capitalism a role in the history of the country? Too often academic advocates of capitalism bluntly tell inquisitive students to read Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman to learn about the history of free market economics. High schools aren't going to be responsive to this kind of proposal. To counter the unions with an appealing version of economic history that appeals to students, it may be necessary for business associations, corporations, and free market think-tanks to create their own flashy videos and curriculum guides. Free market think-tanks such as the Smith Center for Private Enterprise Studies, located at California State University at Hayward, already sponsor annual essay contests for San Francisco area high school students about economic issues or starting a small business, and this kind of program can be expanded. Junior Achievement can present positive programs about economics and business to public school students, in contrast to the union-backed labor history curriculum that portrays small business owners and large corporations as exploiters of workers. Maybe local economists can give guest lectures explaining to high school students how union-backed minimum wage increases reduce their after-school employment opportunities.

For fairness and balance, any labor history curriculum needs the perspective of Americans who believe in individualism and merit as well as the perspective of Americans who believe in collective bargaining and economic protectionism. After all, the glory of collective social action for one person may mean the suppression of individual freedom for another. Surely the 47 percent of Californians who voted for Proposition 226 in 1998 weren't all exploiters of labor, and some supporters were even union members. Also, 46.4 percent of all union representation election cases that were overseen and resolved by the National Labor Relations Board in 2001 resulted in rejection of unionization.⁵⁰ Surely some of these people voted against unionization for reasons other than employer brainwashing or intimidation commonly alleged by unions.

One example of an organization with a history of competitive individualism and merit is Associated Builders and Contractors (ABC). Founded in 1950, this trade association for construction companies has played a balancing role in many of the political battles concerning labor relations in construction during the second half of the 20th Century. It outlined and popularized the "merit shop philosophy" that the lowest responsible bidder should win a job regardless of the union affiliation of its employees. Millions of construction workers are working outside of a union, and many of them made a decision to leave a union or be independent of a union in order to work for a company belonging to ABC. These workers and ABC company owners can provide stories with a different perspective on labor history for students to consider. Unfortunately, ABC has not recorded its history in a way that would appeal to students or even a general audience.

At the very least, by promoting an alternative theory of labor history in the classroom, free market proponents will highlight the inappropriate union efforts to impose a political ideology on a captive student audience in the classroom. One can only imagine the howling from union lobbyists if a California State legislator introduced a bill establishing "Capitalism is Cool Week" in public schools. Unions have a role in the workplace defined by law, but their propaganda does not belong in the classroom any more than corporate propaganda belongs in the classroom. As Mike Antonucci of the Education Intelligence Agency wrote in his analysis of the National Education Association's labor history plans for 2000, "Public schools and teacher colleges shouldn't teach nutrition courses designed by McDonald's, medical testing courses designed by PETA, or labor history courses designed by NEA."⁵¹

And for those union leaders and their political allies who argue that all teaching in the public schools is inherently capitalist propaganda, there's always the example of the Laborers union that established its own charter school in Cranston, Rhode Island. The Laborers teach a construction trade to high school students as well as math, science, English, reading, and social studies.⁵² Their version of history might be a disservice to students looking for a complete view of history, but at

least the students and their parents will know what they're getting.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ "U.S. Union Membership, 1948-2001," chart, *Labor Research Association Online: Stats & Data*, Labor Research Association, 30 Oct. 2002, <http://www.laborresearch.org/charts.php?id=29>. [Back to Text](#)
- ² "Union Members Summary," U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics: News, 17 Jan. 2002, *U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics*, 30 Oct. 2002, <http://stats.bls.gov/news.release/union2.nr0.htm>. [Back to Text](#)
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- ⁴ Stephane Clare, "Students Undecided about Union Conflict," *Yale Daily News*, 7 Mar. 1996, 1 Nov. 2002, <http://www.yaledailynews.com/article.asp?AID=7351>. [Back to Text](#)
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