



LESSON PLAN

WEST VIRGINIA MINE WARS MUSEUM

wvminewars.org

401 Mate Street Matewan, West Virginia 25678

Lesson 3: Forming a Union

Objectives:

- Students will analyze the conflicting sides of forming a labor union in West Virginia during the early 20th century through a role play.
- Why form a union? Students will weigh the evidence in this interactive lesson where they will be interjected into the lives of miners and their experiences.

Materials Needed:

- [Ralph Chaplin's Solidarity Forever lyrics](#) and [audio](#)
- Student Handouts:
 - [Pro-union miner](#)
 - [Anti-union miner](#)
 - [Undecided miner](#)

Warm Up/Introduction:

- ❑ Distribute the lyrics to “Solidarity Forever” and play the song while students read along. (There are many versions on YouTube, [but here's one we enjoy.](#))

Ralph Chaplin, the author, began writing the anthem during the Paint Creek-Cabin Creek Strike 1912-13 in Kanawha County, WV. Over 100 years later, the song is still popular among many labor unions and workers across the world.

Activity 1: Reading/listening to “Solidarity Forever”

(Synchronous)

Instruct students to analyze the song and what it might teach us about the people who sang it. Then, facilitate a group discussion about what having a union meant to miners.

Guiding questions:

- What were the complaints? Why would miners/workers want a union?
- How do workers who sang this song see themselves?
- How did they want things to be different?
- What did being in the union mean to them?
- Compare this song to the song and poem discussed in the previous unit, how does this song address difference?

(Asynchronous)

Instruct students to analyze the song “Solidarity Forever” and what it might teach us about the people who sang it. Then, have students write a paragraph from the perspective of a union miner (fictional or non-fictional) in West Virginia in the early 20th century. Students may refer to the guiding questions for suggested topics and key points.

Activity 2: Forming a Union

(Synchronous)

Read the short handout about the demands of Paint Creek miners in 1912: Historical Background for the activity (also included in the student handouts):

In April of 1912, miners along Paint Creek in Kanawha County who had recently joined the coal miners union, the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), were negotiating a new contract with mine owners. The owners refused the miners demands for a small wage increase, and in response the miners along Paint Creek went out on strike. Their demands were not focused on the wage increase. Instead they focused on:

- 1. Recognition of the union and its right to represent miners in contract negotiation*
- 2. The right to free speech and assembly in company towns*
- 3. Allow miners and their families to shop at non-company stores*
- 4. That the union employs a second check-weighman at the scales to make sure their coal was being weighed fairly*

Word quickly spread to neighboring Cabin Creek where miners faced similar conditions, but had not yet formed a union and joined the UMWA. You are a miner on Cabin Creek. Do you support forming a union and going on strike as well?

- Based on the class-size, organize the students into three groups: 1. those for the union, 2. those against the union, and 3. those who are undecided.
- The pro-union and anti-union miners will make a list of reasons or arguments for their position. At the end, have each group present their position to the class. Their jobs are to provide persuading arguments to the undecided miners, trying to get the undecided miners to join their position.
 - Be sure that each group assigns an elected spokesperson to present to the class!
- The undecided miners will then vote on whether or not they will join.
- At the end of the activity, give time for a quick debrief.

Suggested **concluding discussion questions**:

- What arguments were most compelling?
- How did these arguments connect to the other things we already know about the Mine Wars (coal camp life, immigration and migration, company towns)?

- What was most striking about the demands of the miners?
- Compare the reasons different types of miners (pro-union, undecided, pro-company) felt and acted the way they did. How is this story more complicated than “good guys” and “bad guys”?
- Why would the role of families impact the decision to join or not join the union?
- Hypothesize what role you think women and children might have played in these discussions.

(Asynchronous)

Read the short handout about the demands of Paint Creek miners in 1912: Historical Background for the activity (also included in the student handouts):

In April of 1912, miners along Paint Creek in Kanawha County who had recently joined the coal miners union, the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), were negotiating a new contract with mine owners. The owners refused the miners demands for a small wage increase, and in response the miners along Paint Creek went out on strike. Their demands were not focused on the wage increase. Instead they focused on:

5. *Recognition of the union and its right to represent miners in contract negotiation*
6. *The right to free speech and assembly in company towns*
7. *Allow miners and their families to shop at non-company stores*
8. *That the union employs a second check-weighman at the scales to make sure their coal was being weighed fairly*

Word quickly spread to neighboring Cabin Creek where miners faced similar conditions, but had not yet formed a union and joined the UMWA. You are a miner on Cabin Creek. Do you support forming a union and going on strike as well?

- Based on the class-size, organize the students into two groups: 1. those for the union and 2. those against the union
- The pro-union and anti-union miners will make a list of reasons or arguments for their position.
- Have students create a deliverable of their choice--a political cartoon, skit, video, poem, drawing--to provide persuading arguments to the other side (union or nonunion) to join their position.
- At the end of the activity or next class period, give time for the students to conduct a quick debriefing of the exercise or presentation of their deliverable.

Historical Context/Background Resources:

- (Reading) For a short introduction to the Paint Creek-Cabin Creek Strike, check out [this e-WV encyclopedia entry](#).

- (Reading) An 8-page article authored by Ralph Chaplin, *Violence in West Virginia*, [available here on google books](#).
- (Poetry and song) A collection of songs and poems related to solidarity, collective action, and the efforts to unionize: [When the Leaves Come Out, and other Rebel Verses, 1887 - 1961, by Ralph Chaplin](#)
- (Song) [Which Side Are You On?](#), a song by Florence Patton Reece

For more resources on forming a union in southern West Virginia, please visit our website at www.wvminewars.com

WV 8th Grade Curriculum Standards:

SS.8.7 Correlate West Virginia economic conditions with the effects on its citizens (e.g., employment, population, migration, and health).

SS.8.8: Analyze the impact of absentee ownership, renewable and nonrenewable natural resources, labor unionization and the development of infrastructure on the economic growth of West Virginia

SS.8.24 Demonstrate an understanding of West Virginia’s development during the early twentieth century. (Analyze the evolution of the labor movement in West Virginia. Summarize the progressive reform movement in West Virginia.)

Solidarity Forever
written by Ralph Chaplin in 1915

When the union's inspiration
Through the workers' blood shall run
There can be no power greater
Anywhere beneath the sun
Yet what force on earth is weaker
Than the feeble strength of one?
But the union makes us strong
Solidarity forever
Solidarity forever
Solidarity forever
For the union makes us strong
It is we who plowed the prairies
Built the cities where they trade
Dug the mines and built the workshops
Endless miles of railroad laid
Now we stand outcast and starving
Mid the wonders we have made
But the union makes us strong
Solidarity forever
Solidarity forever
Solidarity forever
For the union makes us strong

They have taken untold millions
That they never toiled to earn
But without our brain and muscle
Not a single wheel can turn
We can break their haughty power
Gain our freedom when we learn
That the union makes us strong
Solidarity forever
Solidarity forever
Solidarity forever
For the union makes us strong
In our hands is placed a power
Greater than their hoarded gold
Greater than the might of atoms
Magnified a thousand-fold
We can bring to birth a new world
From the ashes of the old
For the union makes us strong
Solidarity forever
Solidarity forever
Solidarity forever
For the union makes us strong

Write down answers to these guiding questions in preparation for a class discussion.

Guiding Questions:

- Why would miners/workers want a union?
- What were the complaints?
- How do workers who sang this song see themselves?
- How did they want things to be different?
- What did being in the union mean to them?
- Compare this song to the song and poem discussed in the previous unit, how does this song address difference?

Student Handout: **Undecided Miner**

In April of 1912, miners along Paint Creek in Kanawha County who had recently joined the coal miners union, the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), were negotiating a new contract with mine owners. The owners refused the miners demands for a small wage increase, and in response the miners along Paint Creek went out on strike. Their demands were not focused on the wage increase however. Instead they focused on:

1. Recognition of the union and its right to represent miners in contract negotiation.
2. The right to free speech and assembly in company towns
3. Allow miners and their families to shop at non-company stores
4. That the union employs a second check-weighman at the scales to make sure their coal was being weighed fairly.

Word quickly spread to neighboring Cabin Creek where miners faced similar conditions, but had not yet formed a union and joined the UMWA. You are a miner on Cabin Creek. Do you support forming a union and going on strike as well?

You are a miner who is undecided about whether to join the union or not. You are curious to hear about different arguments for and against before you make up your mind. Some thoughts you have had both for and against the strike, but feel free to add your own:

Arguments for:

- You think the mines are unsafe and the pay is too low.
- You think the prices at the company store are too high and wish you could shop elsewhere.
- You really do not like feeling watched and intimidated by the mine guards.
- You think maybe sometimes the check weighmen are unfair.
- You worry about making enough money to support your family.
- It makes you mad to see the owner in his fancy car and nice clothes while sometimes your children go hungry.

Arguments against:

- You are worried about losing your job.
- You are worried about being evicted from your house.
- You have lots of friends and family in the camp and are worried about what will happen to them if things get violent as they often do with strikes.
- The preacher at church said you should be against the union because it is an "abomination to God."
- What other job could you do?

Student Handout: **Anti-union miner**

In April of 1912, miners along Paint Creek in Kanawha County who had recently joined the coal miners union, the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), were negotiating a new contract with mine owners. The owners refused the miners demands for a small wage increase, and in response the miners along Paint Creek went out on strike. Their demands were not focused on the wage increase however. Instead they focused on:

1. Recognition of the union and its right to represent miners in contract negotiation.
2. The right to free speech and assembly in company towns
3. Allow miners and their families to shop at non-company stores
4. That the union employs a second check-weighman at the scales to make sure their coal was being weighed fairly.

Word quickly spread to neighboring Cabin Creek where miners faced similar conditions, but had not yet formed a union and joined the UMWA. You are a miner on Cabin Creek. Do you support forming a union and going on strike as well?

You are a miner who is against joining the strike and the union. This is because you are also employed as a company spy who reports on troublemakers. You have been told by the managers that you should do everything you can to discourage your fellow undecided miners from joining the UMWA. They say that if the union comes in, they will have less money and will probably have to fire you from your part-time spying job. But don't let the other miners know you are paid by the company to speak against the union, the miners will be very mad at you for being a spy because even those miners who are unsure of the union hate spies, and many have been beaten up and run out of town. During secret meetings with managers you have been told to oppose all union talk and they suggested some reasons that might resonate with other miners, but be sure and add your own as well:

- The owners promise that they will raise the wages once they can, things are just difficult right now economically.
- Unsafe conditions in the mines are due to the fault of miners themselves who don't know how to mine properly and safely. Especially untrained immigrant and African American miners (this is not true, but it is an excuse the company often uses).
- The mine owners, foreman, and managers work hard too! If they hadn't opened these mines and risked their money, none of the miners would have jobs!
- You think that the store is very nice, has everything you need (this is basically true!) and it is kind of the miners for taking care of us like that.
- The owner just bought new stained-glass windows for the church, it shows he really cares!
- You think that the only ones who are upset and want to join the union are those hotheads who have been influenced by "un-American" ideas. America is built on private property and hard work, the miners who want the union are just jealous

Student Handout: Pro-union miner

In April of 1912, miners along Paint Creek in Kanawha County who had recently joined the coal miners union, the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), were negotiating a new contract with mine owners. The owners refused the miners demands for a small wage increase, and in response the miners along Paint Creek went out on strike. Their demands were not focused on the wage increase however. Instead they focused on:

1. Recognition of the union and its right to represent miners in contract negotiation.
2. The right to free speech and assembly in company towns
3. Allow miners and their families to shop at non-company stores
4. That the union employs a second check-weighman at the scales to make sure their coal was being weighed fairly.

Word quickly spread to neighboring Cabin Creek where miners faced similar conditions, but had not yet formed a union and joined the UMWA. You are a miner on Cabin Creek. Do you support forming a union and going on strike as well?

You are a miner who is very supportive of the strike and union and are trying to organize your fellow miners to join with you. You have attended secret meetings on Paint Creek to learn about the UMWA and about how to get better working conditions for you and your family. During those meetings you have heard and thought of many reasons for joining the union among them are:

- The oppressive nature of company town life where you feel you are constantly being observed.
- Unsafe conditions in the mines that the company has done little to fix.
- The company weighs the coal you haul out of the mine to determine your pay, some miners who are friends with the check weighman who weighs the coal have an easier time than “hotheads” like you who are told your coal has too much slate in it and they reduce the weight accordingly. You want a union check weighman to keep them honest.
- You think that they raise the prices at the company store without warning and so your wages do not go as far and you have difficulty making enough money to feed your family.
- You think it is unfair that the owners make so much money while the miners who produce the wealth get paid so little.