Teaching Labor History in the Connecticut Public Schools

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"The history of the American labor movement needs to be taught in every school in this land....America is a living testimonial to what free men and women organized into free democratic trade unions can do to make a better life....we ought to be proud of it."

Hubert H. Humphrey, Former Vice President

According to a poll by the independent Hart research, 54 percent of adults said they know just a little or don't know much about unions. They said their chief sources of knowledge were personal experience (37 percent), people in unions (26 percent) and the media (25 percent). Significantly, learning in school was not even mentioned.

The implications of the research are clear. To a very large degree, Americans are uninformed or misinformed about union, the labor movement and the role that workers have played, and do play, in our nation's economic, political and cultural life.

For these reasons the Greater New Haven Labor History Association (GNHLHA) is proposing legislation requiring the teaching of labor history in Connecticut public schools. The legislation specifically calls for "the teaching of organized labor, the collective bargaining process, and existing legal protections in the workplace in Connecticut public school classrooms." The purpose of the legislation is to get labor's untold story told.

This legislative proposal follows the lead of the Wisconsin labor history association that organized the first in the nation passing of historic legislation in 2009. Similar legislation is being presented in other states across the country.

Unfortunately, apathy and indifference are at the center of young people's lack of understanding the role of unions and labor history. Students have simply been taught little or no labor history. Because of this fact, generations of workers don't have a basic understanding about the historical role that unions played in helping to create the middle class. They don't know that it was unions that helped give American society the weekend, minimum wages, health care benefits, social security, Medicare, 40-hour work week and unemployment insurance.

Most people don't remember or know how important the labor movement was in pushing Depression-era politicians to pass legislation that systematizes the basic features of American work wage earners now take for granted.

How Labor's story is distorted in high school history textbooks

In a new report commissioned by the Al Shankar Institute called "Labor's Story Left Out of High School History Textbooks," (the report) finds that most Americans never get the information they need to create informed opinions on questions about labor's role in American society. The report surveyed four major textbooks that together account for most of the market in U.S. history textbooks' in this country and called the coverage of the labor movement - *spotty, inadequate, and slanted.* The textbooks present labor history in a biased, negative way; for example, focusing on strikes and strike violence while neglecting labor's role in bringing generation of Americans into the middle class. At other times, the textbooks simply ignore labor's contributions – including unions' activism in passing social reforms such as the eight-hour workday, and their strong support for the civil rights movement.

AFT president Randi Weingarten said, "This report explains why so few Americans know much about labor's history and contributions. It paints a devastating picture of distortion and omission."

The report notes that the problem of negative or incomplete coverage of the labor movement in school textbooks dates back at least to the New Deal era, and scholars began documenting this biased treatment beginning in the 1960's. It concludes that U.S. history texts have essentially -- taken sides in the intense political debate around unions -- the anti-union side.

The report was motivated by the belief that students need a straightforward story about labor based on much more than what the media can provide.

Students deserve unbiased knowledge and understanding that will help them form their own critical judgments.

In the face of such depressing news, the GNHLHA hopes to turn around young people's knowledge of unions and labor history in Connecticut. Students need this information delivered in a classroom setting.

To Summarize: 7 reasons why we need to teach labor history

1. It's time to re-balance the scales. Most school children readily hear about the corporate leaders and politicians of our nation's history; rarely do they hear about the heroes among our working people who struggled to bring equity and justice into the workplace and into our communities.

2. Trade unions in Connecticut and throughout the nation have contributed to our way of life. Few people know that our nation's public education system, including its universities, is a product of the constant support of labor unions and their members.

3. Labor unions are part of Connecticut's heritage. The state has always been a strong participant in worker struggles.

4. Most Connecticut families have a labor tradition. By the 1950s, more than 35% of Connecticut workers had joined unions. Their stories were "front page news" daily.

5. Teaching about labor has been largely ignored in our schools and textbooks. Academic standards and curriculum resources such as textbooks have historically ignored or been deficient in their treatment of workers and the labor movement. Significantly, many teachers want to cover this history in their classrooms, but there are few written curriculum standards by local and state educational institutions to encourage the teaching this material. An excellent website for labor curriculum is labor-studies.org/ (American Labor Studies Center).

6. The cost to School Districts will be minimal. The proposed legislation leaves it up to each district to develop its own method of teaching about labor history and collective bargaining. Teaching materials are readily available, and can be inserted within existing curricula.

7. Lastly, the story of labor and workers can provide more excitement in the classroom. The need to make history alive and interesting to students is critical in today's schools. The struggles of working people will prompt many students to look back upon their own families and backgrounds (perhaps through oral history), making history more relevant.

"Our sons and daughters deserve to know that the fruits of our labor were not handed down to us by those in power but rather won by the efforts of extraordinary people who sacrificed to produce a better life for all of us."

Ken Germanson, president of the Wisconsin Labor History Society