



## Lesson 7: We Called It A Work Holiday

### ***Learning Objectives***

Students will be able to:

- learn the causes of the Oakland General Strike and what it achieved
- critically assess news coverage of labor issues for point-of-view bias
- analyze the significance of a general strike as a strategy for collective worker action

### ***Video Summary***

Post-war tensions are revealed by a strike of mostly women retail clerks in two downtown Oakland department stores, which expands to become the last city-wide General Strike in US history. When the video repeats a newsreel segment with alternative voiceovers, viewers learn how “news”—like history itself—is constructed from a point of view. And through the exemplary solidarity of streetcar driver Al Brown, we learn how workers can make history, too. [We also gain a unique insight into the longest running farm labor dispute until the 1960’s, the DiGiorgio strike of 1947-1950, through the footage of a “lost film” made by Hollywood supporters of the strike.]

### ***Length***

17 minutes

### ***Time period covered***

1945-1950

### ***Vocabulary***

- *Newsreel*—a news presentation in film, made for movie audiences before television was widely available.
- *Retail workers*—workers in stores that sell products to consumers.
- *AFL unions*—unions whose members are generally workers in the same craft, and are affiliated in a national organization called the American Federation of Labor, dating from the 1880s; pressure from the CIO in the 30s and 40s forces some AFL unions to organize on an industrial basis.

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- *CIO unions*—unions whose members are workers in the same workplace or industry, including both skilled and less skilled workers, affiliated in a national organization called the Congress of Industrial Organizations, dating from 1935.

### ***Pre-viewing Instructions***

Tell the students you're going to show them a videotape on the Oakland General Strike of 1946, and that they should think about two questions while they watch: 1) How do the mass media typically treat unions? 2) Why did the General Strike happen? Then show the videotape. (You may wish simply to focus on one of these questions, since an entire discussion could easily evolve from each. However, a richer discussion can occur from the intersection of the two.)

### ***Post-Viewing Discussion Activity***

Discussion questions of two types can take your class in two separate but related directions, as per the pre-viewing questions above: a) media representations of working people and unions; b) the events of the General Strike and their meaning for working people then and now.

Divide students into small groups and assign either set of questions below, A) Media Representations or B) General Strike, for group discussion, to be followed by reports from each group. (Each set of questions are reprinted in the Appendix as student hand-outs.)

#### **A. Media Representations**

1. *There are 3 different newsreel versions that portray the strike presented in the video. Describe the different points of view in each one.*

A: The first one presents the strike poorly, with no explanation of what was going on or why. The second newsreel is narrated from the point of view of union activists. The third version is based on oral history, the point of view of working people involved in the events.

2. *Which point of view is more fair or valid, and why?*

A: Depends on your individual or group interests, your values, who benefits...

3. *Is the news ever objective or neutral? Why or why not?*

A: A point of view is always presented, and it is important to determine whose viewpoint, before making judgements.

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4. *How does corporate ownership of the television news media, (eg., NBC by General Electric or ABC by Disney), and selling commercial time to businesses affect T.V. news coverage today?*

A: “Freedom of the press belongs to those who own one,” is the basic concept; frequent commercials and time consumed by sports and weather reduce news coverage to a few sensational “soundbites” to keep you watching. Many media managers think that union stories are “boring” or “too controversial.”

5. *How do you decide when the news is accurate or fair? What do you need to know?*

A: Background knowledge of the events, and awareness of the point of view of those writing and editing the news.

### B. General Strike

1. *The Oakland General Strike was part of a nationwide strike wave in 1945-46. One example shown early in We Called it A Work Holiday was the Conference of Studio Unions (CSU) strike in Hollywood. During that strike another union, the International Alliance of Theatrical and Stage Employees (IA) supplied strikebreakers to the studios. What was the effect of this action?*

A: The CSU lost the strike, because its members’ jobs were performed by the strikebreakers, and the studios were therefore able to keep functioning.

2. *What events and actions led up to the General Strike?*

A: The department store strikes by the retail clerks; involvement of other AFL unions in support of the clerks; anger of unionists at police action to assist merchandise delivery to the store; Al Brown stopping his streetcar, shutting down the mass transportation system; a generalized feeling of workers not getting their fair share after sacrifice during WW II.

3. *What role did women play in the retail clerks strike?*

A: The firing of a retail clerk led to the clerks’ strike; women union members, such as Gwendolyn Byfield, served as picket captains and they were on the picket lines “rain or shine.” In the General Strike leadership, women were nearly invisible because few women were in positions of union leadership in that period—or indeed, in positions of real power in any sphere of public life.

4. *What obstacles to worker unity were there in the Oakland General Strike?*

A: The AFL/CIO split; Dave Beck’s opposition.

5. *Why did streetcar driver Al Brown stop his car? Was it the right thing to do? If you*

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*were the worker driving the street car, what would you have done?*

A: Labor solidarity—in support of the mostly women workers on strike at the department store. From the point of view of labor’s ability to protect itself, it was the right thing to do: and it worked. From the point of view of management, it was wrong, because it challenged the power of the employers to run their businesses.

*6. What did workers do during the General Strike? Did the retail clerks win their department store strike, which started it all?*

A: Continuous mass demonstrations; most workplaces shut down; negotiations; holiday spirit. The department store owners reached an agreement with the retail clerks union, soon violated, that police wouldn’t escort strikebreakers into the store anymore.

*7. Were the Teamsters for or against the General Strike?*

A: The rank and file members, and the East Bay local leaders, were strong supporters of the strike. National vice-president Dave Beck was opposed. His argument was that the local had contracts with employers which needed to be observed. The members felt their own best interests were served by honoring the picket lines of the retail clerks.

*8. Just before the CIO unions were going to join the General Strike, the AFL union leadership called it off. What was the impact of this decision? What was accomplished by the General Strike?*

A: The involvement of the CIO unions might have greatly enlarged the scope, multi-racial unity, and power of the General Strike. Business leaders, city officials, and the AFL union leadership each had reasons (although not necessarily the same ones) to fear the consequences of a broader demonstration of the workers’ power, and brokered a quick settlement. The limited success of the General Strike did lead to the recognition by union leaders that unity in political action was necessary, which brought together the AFL, CIO and NAACP to form the Oakland Voters League, which elected sympathetic politicians, and resulted in the settlement of the retail clerks strike.

*9. The Oakland General Strike was the last one in the United States, over fifty years ago. But other countries have them occasionally; for instance, one in Ontario, Canada in 1996. Would a General Strike be possible or desirable as a tool of working people to achieve union goals here today? Why or why not? What are some of the similarities and differences between 1946 and now?*

A: General strikes by workers’ organizations in other countries have had huge political consequences on public policies, with varying results. In the U.S., the strength of organized labor has declined substantially since the post-WW II period—33% organization

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then vs. 14% now; stronger labor tradition at the time; urban geography has changed, e.g., private automobiles vs public transportation, and suburbs dispersing working class neighborhoods; role of mass media today, especially television, in influencing people's consciousness about unions.

### *Extensions/Further Reading*

- *Student Activity*—30 minutes. Have students break into small groups to read aloud and discuss pp. 348-353 of Harvey Swados' novel *Standing Fast* (see Appendix 7). This passage is a fictional description of the Oakland General strike. Ask the students to think about the differences between fiction and documentary descriptions. Is it possible that fiction can provide us with another type of "truth"—e.g., help us to get inside of historical events through emotional identification with characters and situations? Is it also possible that a documentary approach, such as a newsreel, can be inaccurate or misleading, even though it uses facts? If so, how?
- *Student Activity*—three class periods. For the more ambitious teacher: a three day role play of the Oakland General Strike, created by Oakland high school teacher Craig Gordon (see Appendix 7).



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