

Understanding Power (Index Card Exercise) Adapted from UMKC's Labor Awareness Program Judy Ancel et al.

Objectives: To provide students with an experience of what happens when power is unevenly distributed. To explore how banding together, i.e. forming a union, can help to address such inequities.

A. Give each student a blank index card. For every six students, give 5 white cards one a white card (e.g. in a class of 24 you will distribute 20 white cards and 4 blue cards).

B. Explain to the students that the class has x number (the total number of blue cards that you distributed) of chances to win the new Million Dollar Lottery. To be eligible for one of the chances students must:

(1) Find a partner(s) who has a card of the other color.

(2) Negotiate an agreement on how the million-dollar prize will be divided among them if they should win.

(3) Present you with a pair of cards - at least one white and one blue, explaining how the prize will be divided.

C. Remind students that a white card without a blue card is worthless, and that a blue card without a white card is likewise useless.

D. Play the game.

Note for teachers:

You will find that at first the students will all play as individuals. Some aggressive blue cardholders may realize that they can force the white cards to compete bidding one another down. Gradually, someone will realize that if the white cards get together and negotiate jointly, they will have some bargaining power with the blue cardholders. If, after about fifteen minutes, nobody makes this leap you may decide to intervene and suggest it. Of course, the blue cardholders may try to negotiate together too. If you have strong organizers among the white cards, they may actually get all of the white cards to pool their cards and act as one. That's what collective bargaining does. In this game, if you get more than one pair turned in, then you have to draw the winner. You may wish to give out silly prizes to the winners.

After the game is over:

Ask students "If you are a white card, what strategy gives you the best chance of winning the lottery? Ask them, "If you are a blue card, what is the best strategy? Is there anything similar between this game and the workplace? Ask where the employer's (blue cards) power comes from. (Ownership, law, wealth, ability to close up, move ability to hire and fire, etc.) Ask what the game shows about where workers' power might come from. Ask what kept the white cards from joining together in the game? What do employers do to divide workers? Explain that the workers' ability to stick together despite management's attempts to divide them is called solidarity. Ask what would happen if the number of white cards doubled while the number of blue cards stayed the same? As what would happen if the number of blue cards got smaller? In the new global economy both of these things have happened: more workers have come into the global marketplace, competing with each other while at the same time there are fewer employers (as multinational corporations buy each other up and go global). This has shifted the balance of power between workers and employers. Point out that in the current economic system, just as in the game, the blue cards need the white cards and vice versa. Corporations must have workers to make products and profits, and workers need employers to invest capital and provide workplaces.