

1934 Minneapolis Truckers Strike

Film/ Role Play Exercise

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(Inspired by *The Power in Our Hands* by William Bigelow and Norman Diamond)

Time Needed: Three Class Periods

Materials:

- Minneapolis Truckers Make History DVD (18 mins)
- Character Handouts
- Questions Facing Your Group Handout
- Signs with the Group Names

First Class Period:

- (2 mins) Introduce the topic for the next two class periods (the Minneapolis Truckers' Strikes of 1934) and explain that they will have the chance to learn more about the strikes through a role play exercise and a film.
- (4 mins) Watch the first four minutes of the film "Minneapolis Truckers Make History" *Do not show the rest of the film (see below for instructions on when to resume the film).*
- (5 mins) Explain that the students will be assigned to a group representing real people who were involved in the 1934 Minneapolis truckers' strikes. Display the names of the different groups. Explain that they are about to divide into these different groups and that their task is to a) read the character sheets b) discuss them and c) collectively complete the Questions Facing Your Group handout (only one handout needs to be completed per group). Remind them of how much time they'll have and that they should select someone to facilitate their group (making sure everyone gets a chance to speak) and someone else to take notes during the discussion (and to complete the handout). Explain that each group will have three minutes to share highlights of their discussions and their answers to the handout with the other groups. Assign the students to the different groups.
- (15 mins) Students meet in their separate groups, read and discuss their character sheets and complete the handout.

The Groups:

- Unemployed Worker
- Union Member
- Business Owner
- Farmer
- Police

- (15 mins) Each group reports back to the class; 3 mins each.

Second Class Period:

- (5 mins) Explain that the groups will now have a chance to talk with each other. Since there are five groups, the union members group will be asked to participate in two different conversations. Explain that they have ten minutes to prepare one person from their group to have a conversation with a representative from a different group.

Ask the union members to prepare for a conversation with the farmers and a different conversation with the unemployed workers. Ask the business owners to prepare for a conversation with the police.

Role Play Conversations:

- The farmers and union members
- The unemployed workers and union members
- The business owners and police

Explain that each conversation should last 3-5 mins and that the groups should decide, during their preparation time, what their goal is for the conversation.

- (10 mins) Role play preparation

- (5 mins) Role play between the farmers and union members

- (5 mins) Role play between the unemployed workers and union members

- (5 mins) Role play between the police and the business owners

(10 mins) Discuss what people noticed during the role plays. What were the goals of the conversation? Were people able to accomplish these goals? What was easy about the conversation? What was difficult?

Third Class Period:

- (1 min) Explain that you're now going to watch another installment of the film to learn what happened.

- (7 mins) Watch the next 7 minutes of the film. Do not watch past 11:00.

- (15 mins) Ask the students to think about their character groups and to discuss how they think they'd be feeling at this point (as the different characters). What would they want to do next? Full class discussion.

- (7 mins) Watch the rest of the film.

- (15 mins) Discuss their reactions to the end of the film. Did anything surprise them? How do they think their characters would feel at this point? Why were the 1934 Minneapolis truckers' strikes referred to as a "turning point" for labor? What do these strikes mean for us today? For farmers today? For unemployed people today? For police today? For business owners today? For union members today?

Handout: Questions For Your Group

1. What is most important to you?
2. What, if anything, is difficult about your current situation?
3. Who could help you?
4. What will you do next and why?

Unemployed Worker

You try to remind yourself that you're part of the 25% of the country out of work; to not take it personally. That you could do many jobs, but just aren't being given the chance. But it's been over a year since you had a job. You've already had to give up your apartment and your family has moved in with your cousin and her family. They've tolerated you, but you know that sleeping on their couch can't last forever. And while unemployed people in other parts of the country can keep a vegetable garden year around, this is not possible in Minnesota. The bread lines that you have to wait in for just a bit of food seem to be getting longer. You heard that President Roosevelt had signed relief laws, but nothing's changed yet in Minneapolis, from what you can tell. Your friend, who was part of the recent coal strike, says that the unions are the answer. He says that once all of the industries in the city are organized, that that'll make everything better for all workers; that it'll create more jobs. Good jobs, with a living wage. He says "they keep us fighting each other for crumbs—if the union wins a good contract, that'll help everyone... we all do better when we all do better."

He predicts that when they go on strike again (which they're apparently considering), that the trucking company owners will try to hire unemployed people as strike breakers. "Scabs," he calls them. He pats you on the back, saying "I know you'd never do that." You nod, but later, at home with your family, watching your kids trying to run without shoes that fit them, you realize that it'd be hard to turn down a job—even if you knew that you were being hired to replace a striking worker. Your friend, the one involved with the union, calls to tell you that there's going to be a meeting for unemployed workers over at the union office. They're calling an "unemployed council," he says. The goal of the meeting will be to see how unemployed workers can help each other— like everyone pitching in a few pennies to help get someone's utilities turned back on. Will you go?

Business Owner

Your family and its business helped to make Minneapolis the great city that it is. While your company is certainly not the biggest around, you've provided hundreds of jobs over the years to the uneducated class, and have donated to numerous charities. Now, the truckers who transport your goods, who should be thanking you for their jobs, are saying that they want you to recognize their "union." You've read the literature provided by the Citizens Alliance and understand that organized labor is evil and un-American. You agree with the Citizens Alliance leaders that it is necessary to protect the city and the nation from being swept up in a red tide of revolution.

Law and order must be enforced and private property must remain the beacon of all that is good and right, you tell your children. As one of your business partners explained on the way to symphony last night: "this is a war between the owners of American industry and the working class." You know which side of this equation you're on and decide to join the executive council of the Citizens Alliance. At the last meeting of the council, the strike and its settlement are discussed. The Citizens Alliance attorney reports on the coal strike settlement meeting. He assures everyone that nothing agreed to this year would hold up come next season. By that time, he says, the coal operators will have a good list of all of the union members and simply won't hire any of them back. Still, he warns, significant challenges lie ahead. He says that even though the police chief is loyal to the Citizens Alliance, additional pressure may be necessary in order to insure that the full police force understands who butters their bread (i.e. business owners and the Citizens Alliance). He also suggests that Citizens Alliance members figure out how to turn workers against each other; how to divide the workers (unemployed vs. union members, etc.)

Perhaps most importantly, he says, all members of the executive council will need to recruit a sizeable group of volunteers to serve as both strike breakers and as specially deputized police. The council moves to require all members of the Citizens Alliance to provide the names and contact information of friends and family members who can be called upon to take up arms as deputies—"we need everyone in order to keep our city free of these unions," they say. A meeting is announced later in the week, for everyone volunteering to serve as a deputy. It is clear that business owners who do not attend or send representatives (friends/family) will be pressured to do so. Will you attend? Will you recruit others?

Farmer

Your family has been farming an hour outside of Minneapolis for two generations. Your grandparents were immigrants who started the farm with nothing and for many years, were able to make a decent living. Since the depression, however, it's been difficult to make ends meet. You try to not let yourself think about all of the farm's debt (this year you had to borrow to get your seed and supplies) or how you're going to pay the mortgage next month. You've heard that the workers who went on strike in the coal yards in the city may be planning another work stoppage. If they do, you're told, only farmers who are members of farmers' organizations will be free to drive their trucks to town and market their produce. You've considered joining such an organization before, but your brother (who runs the farm with you) says there's no extra money for joining associations. "We don't need any help," he says, "and we've got no help to give." By this he means that you can't afford to be giving any of your harvest away—something that the Farm Holiday Association is known to do.

Your brother also points out that many people who've lost their farms have moved to the cities seeking work and have wound up unemployed and homeless. He asks you "is that what you want?" You explain that, as part of the Farm Holiday Association, you'll still be able to sell your produce, so losing everything isn't very likely. "Tell me how many people are going to come to these special farm stands," he counters. "Not as many as those who go to the established stores supplied by the wholesalers, I can tell you that." You realize that you don't know the answer to this; you want to believe that there'd be enough business from the strikers and their supporters, but you're not sure. You hear that there's a meeting being called, of farmers who plan to support the strike. Will you go?

Member of Teamsters Local 574

You've worked in the coal yards for the past six years—ever since graduating from high school-- and know the business well. Things had gone from bad to worse in the yards and when you joined the vote to strike, you knew that you had nothing to lose. As you told your mother in a letter you “were practically starving to death anyway.” You owned your own truck, like all of the other drivers, and got paid by the ton (of coal). You were getting 90 cents for hauling a ton of coal and wanted a dollar. If you made twelve dollars a day, that was a great day. You were working very hard, but still going hungry.

You figured out how to band together, with other yard workers and drivers during the strike—something that people had said couldn't be done. You're particularly proud of helping to get the “roving pickets” off the ground. Because there were so many yards, it would've been impossible to have a picket line big enough to stop trucks everywhere at the same time. But, with the roving pickets, small groups of workers could fan out and stop trucks at various locations. You were impressed by this and by the organization of the strike leaders. And all of this during sub-zero temperatures; you were glad for all of the regular people who needed coal that the strike only lasted for three days.

Now, the other truck drivers want to be a part of the union as well and are requesting that Local 574 be the union to organize them. You know that this is a vote of confidence; the workers get that your union—unlike some others—will not sell them out. You're asked to come to a “Monster Mass Meeting” at the Schubert Theatre where all of the workers in the industry would come together to discuss future plans for the union. You notice at the meeting that many drivers and helpers are wearing Local 574 buttons.

A friend of yours who was a part of the coal strike as well, goes to the meeting with you and remarks afterwards that this new strategy to organize the entire industry sounds great during speeches, but that it will be a very difficult—and possibly bloody—battle. “It's one thing for the coal operators to make some promises just to us,” he says. “But making Minneapolis essentially a union town? That's a whole different thing.” He tells you that he has a family to feed and wishes you well. “You should think twice before getting any more involved with all of this,” he says. “I don't want to be attending your funeral and watching your wife and kids standing there at it.” Will you go to the mass meeting?

Police

Unlike most of your co-workers, you don't entirely blame the strikers for their actions. People in your own family have had a hard time making ends meet, especially during the Depression. You know that skilled tradesmen (carpenters, plumbers, etc.) sometimes do okay, but coal drivers and other truckers make almost nothing.

Your own job isn't so easy to come by. And you're reminded of this frequently by the Chief of Police, Michael Johannes. "We work because business in this city works," he tells you. And by business, he means the Citizens Alliance—the organization that all of the businesses in the city are pushed to belong to. Often, you notice, it feels like the Citizens Alliance runs the police force, and they are determined to keep Minneapolis a union-free city. They didn't want any unions at all, Johannes reminds you.

You realize that most of the strikers are soft-spoken, gentlemanly fellows, but that doesn't mean that you won't have to hit them with clubs, or even worse, if necessary. Apparently, there's talk of a larger union organizing drive—and a strike that would attempt to stop all truck traffic from going in or out of the city. Johannes comes back from a meeting with the Citizens Alliance leaders smiling. "If the union tries to stop truck traffic, he says, we'll plenty of extra help." You learn that he's referring to special deputies that the Citizens Alliance is recruiting; men with no formal training who are just going to be given clubs and rifles. Citizens Alliance members begin stockpiling sawed off rifles in one of the rooms at your station. It feels like these guys are gearing up for a real war, something you're not so sure you want any part of.

But your entire family is relying on your paycheck, including your elderly mother, and you know that you have to keep this job. "Go out and do your duty," Johannes tells you, sending you off, with a new club (weapon) to look for "troublemakers" at a "Monster Mass Meeting" called by the union. Will you go?