The Current Conflict over Trade Unions in the United States: A Lesson Plan for NEH Institute: “Social Movements in Modern America: Labor, Civil Rights, and Feminism”

James A. Diskant, Ph.D.

Focus/Summary:

The purpose of this lesson is to have students understand the challenges facing the union movement in the United States today in the face of changing work, the role of the federal government, and the role of globalization in terms of competing business priorities. During the last 20 years more and more workers have left manufacturing positions for the service industry for higher wages, better working conditions, and greater job security in a political atmosphere that is not encouraging workers to defend their rights. Meanwhile business owners are perceiving global threats to domestic interests so that many of them are looking for ways to cut labor costs, including taking their companies out of the United States.

In this two day lesson students analyze photographs of workers, read competing views of trade union policies today, and create bumper stickers in order to illustrate relevant propaganda. In so doing they evaluate the merits and demerits of these competing messages. It could be used in a United States history survey course, an AP United States Government course, or an elective on Global Issues/Problems.

Vital Theme and Narrative:

Patterns of Social and Political Interaction

Habits of Mind:

- Perceive past events and issues as they were experienced by people at the time, to develop historical empathy as opposed to present-mindedness; and

- Prepare to live with uncertainties and exasperating, even perilous, unfinished business, realizing that not all problems have solutions

Objectives:

- Students understand the messages pro- and anti-union activists today, and

- Student assess their abilities to influence the political process by creating different kinds of propaganda
Procedures:

This is intended as a two day lesson; prior to Day One, assign the following reading for homework and each your students to summarize each of the four documents in a paragraph in their own words. For the pro-union perspective, read from *American Rights at Work: Advancing Democracy in the American Workplace*: “About Us” and “Unions and Business: Building the Economy Together” at http://www.americanrightsatwork.org/ (Accessed on July 18, 2010). For the anti-union perspective, read from *National Right to Work: Legal Defense Foundation, Inc.*: “Foundation Frequently-Asked Questions” and “Big Labor’s Top Ten Privileges” at http://nrtw.org/ (Accessed on July 18, 2010)

Day One:

**Opening the Lesson: Brainstorming Questions (5 minutes)**

What is propaganda? What kinds of propaganda exist?

**Developing the Lesson:**

**Part One: Comparing Two Images (10 minutes)**

Start the lesson off by showing the two images and ask students first what they see in each image, what the purpose of the images are, and in what ways the images show CVS and Walmart in a positive or negative fashion. Questions for students to consider:

1.) What do they see in each image?

2.) What does each image show about the work place?

3.) How does each image show the employer?

4.) How does each image show the workers?

5.) Would either image lead workers to organize a union? Why or why not?

**Part Two: Discussion of Homework Reading (10 minutes)**

Review the reading and pull out the perspectives of each author and the reasons as to why one side is pro-union and the other is anti-union. Have the students create a chart with two columns of key reasons to join a union (including collective bargaining, higher wages, better working conditions, control over workplace) and of key reasons not to do so (including limiting individual freedoms, alleged coercion, higher demands on employers).

**Part Three: Making Bumper Stickers (20+ minutes and finish for homework)**
Assign half of the class the pro-union side (*American Rights at Work*) and half the class the anti-union side (*National Right to Work: Legal Defense Foundation, Inc*) and have them first brainstorm as to an appropriate slogan for their bumper sticker and then create it. Explain that they will finish it, along with a paragraph explaining it, for homework. Also explain that they will be quizzed tomorrow on each other’s bumper sticker.

*Day Two:*

**Assessing Student Learning:**

Collect the homework, distribute the following quiz questions, and redistribute the bumper stickers so that each student has one that he or she had not created.

**Part One: Quiz: (5 minutes)**

Distribute the following 4 point quiz:

1.) What are the two key components of the message of the bumper sticker?

2.) Is it persuasive? Why or why not?

**Part Two: Class Discussion: (20 minutes)**

Review the quiz and share the bumper stickers by having an open-ended discussion around the following questions:

1.) What benefits do unionized workers have?

2.) What strategies can the workers and/or their union leaders use to accomplish these goals?

3.) If the United States government were to enact the Employee Free Choice Act, what pitfalls could there be for workers?

**Part Three: Reflection Question: Think-Pair Share: (20 minutes)**

First as quiet thinking, then partner sharing, and class discussion:

Imagine you are a worker in CVS or Walmart today, which side would you support? Why?
Part One: Comparing Two Images: CVS and Walmart, 2010:
