Title: Working Conditions in the Past, Present and Future

Description: Students will begin by reading and discussing articles on past working conditions in Lawrence, MA. Then they will research and discuss current and future working conditions in factories in American companies both within the U.S and outside the U.S. They will then analyze the changes in working conditions and the causes for some of the current problems facing factory workers. Finally students will follow up their research with an in-class debate on the causes and solutions to the problems factory workers face today.

Grade Level: High School, 9-12

Mass Frameworks: US II.2 (industrial revolution), USII. 5, (labor unions) and economics

Essential Understanding: Understand the causes and possible solutions to problems factory workers are facing today and have faced in the past 100 years. Understand what the conditions were like in Lawrence at the beginning of the 20th century. Understand how labor unions and organized labor have impacted working conditions in the past and present.

Essential Questions:
What were the problems workers faced in Lawrence at the beginning of the 20th century?

Did organized labor help to find solutions to these problems?

What problems have continued to exist for workers in factories up till the present time?

What are problems factory workers in America are facing today?

What are some of the varying opinions of the causes of these problems in working conditions? Be sure to discuss the opinions of the workers, the owners, and differing public opinion. Use the checklist of working conditions to help you organize the information.

What are the problems some of the workers are facing in American companies overseas?

What are some possible solutions to these problems being offered? In your opinion, can the problems be fixed, what reasonable solutions do you suggest?

What are the specific problems factory workers face in the company that you have chosen?
Are the problems workers face in this chosen company unique or are they representative of the average problems factory workers face?

How do working conditions within this company compare for those employees working in the U.S versus the employees who work outside the U.S?

**Procedure:** Start by reading and discussing past labor issues using the information and readings of the Lawrence Mills as a case study. Then break students up into groups and assign them a company to research. I suggest Wal-Mart and General Motors as two companies with a good amount of available information. Other large multi-national companies could be used as well. Have the students gather information and organize it and then answer the essential questions. They should also use the working conditions checklist as a guideline for their research. After the information is gathered they should present the information to the class. I suggest allowing time for discussion and debate.

**Assessment:** Students should be graded on their research, their ability to analyze the information, answer the essential questions and the presentation. You could also consider the ability to discuss and debate these labor issues as a part of their overall grade.

**Sources:**

**Notes:** the [www.wsws.org](http://www.wsws.org) website has interviews with GM factory workers after the strike in Flint, Michigan. These interviews could be used as primary sources.

If you search for labor conditions or by company on [www.topix.com](http://www.topix.com) you can find up to date commentary from real workers on current conditions and their views of labor unions.

Students may also want to conduct interviews if possible with workers or owners.

**Articles:**
“Why GM’s Plan won’t work” May 9, 2005, Business Week Online.
“A Race to the Bottom” posted on [www.worldbank.org](http://www.worldbank.org)
“A Race to the Bottom” posted on [www.aworldconnected.org](http://www.aworldconnected.org)

**Books**
“A Race to the Bottom” by Alan Tomlinson
Checklist for Factors to Consider When Analyzing Working Conditions:
What type of healthcare, if any, is provided to workers? How much does it cost?
What type of retirement or pension is provided?
Is there any job security?
Sexual harassment
Discrimination (all types)
Wages
Hours
Safety
Job Sight conditions
Travel expenses
Employee Moral
Worker Relocation
Benefits like stock options etc.
Salaries of CEO’s etc. vs. factory workers
Company Profits
Training Programs
Cost of Living vs. Workers’ Salaries
Taxes

Notes: Factors to consider may not be limited to just this list, this is only meant to be a
guide to understanding overall working conditions.

Topics to Consider; What Impact do these topics have on working conditions?
NAFTA and other U.S trade policies
Outsourcing
Environmental Impact
Labor Unions
United Nations and international human rights laws
Globalization