

National History Day in Wisconsin, 2009-2010

“Innovation in History: Impact and Change”



LABOR HISTORY PRIZES

sponsored by the Wisconsin Labor History Society

The Wisconsin Labor History Society, an affiliate of the Wisconsin Historical Society, awards prizes to middle and high school students participating in the National History Day in Wisconsin competition for projects devoted to American labor history. Through these prizes the Wisconsin Labor History Society hopes to increase awareness of the role of working people in building a more just and equitable America.

PROJECT CRITERIA

Students are encouraged to think creatively about labor history, their project topic, and connection to this year's National History Day theme, "Innovation in History." Qualifying projects will examine **American labor history**. Projects could include:

- 1. Organizations, such as labor unions and political groups connected to the labor movement:** Projects could address labor unions from the national to the local level. The union activities studied need not be limited to struggles over wages and benefits, but can include participation in political efforts to, for example, pass laws as broad as the Wagner Act of 1935 or as limited as one city's minimum wage ordinance. Similarly, political groups connected to labor can be as broad as the nineteenth century's Knights of Labor and as local as those community groups that participated in the grape boycotts on behalf of the farm workers in the mid-20th Century.
- 2. Leaders of working people and their associations:** Projects in this category could include leaders and organizations on the national level, easily identified in any encyclopedia of labor history, but may include local leaders not mentioned in books and the media.
- 3. The experiences of workers on the job or their organized struggles to improve their work and lives:** Projects could analyze the changing work experiences of any occupational group from secretaries to miners, even though no unions had organized the employees.

PRIZES INCLUDE

- Two **\$50** awards offered at each of Wisconsin's **REGIONAL** events to be given for the best labor history entries (one award at the junior age level and one award at the senior age level) to be selected from any competition category.
- Two **\$100** awards offered at the Wisconsin History Day **STATE** event to be given for the best labor history entries (one award at the junior age level and one award at the senior age level) to be selected from any competition category.

LOOKING FOR ADDITIONAL AMERICAN LABOR HISTORY TOPIC IDEAS?

Students often do best when their projects involve them in research on their own communities and families. For additional ideas, students and may consult:

The Wisconsin Labor History Society website (www.wisconsinlaborhistory.org)

American Labor Studies website (<http://labor-studies.org>)

The selected projects should also demonstrate strong research and analysis as defined by the National History Day evaluation criteria. The Wisconsin Labor History Society reserves the right to not make an award in any competition, if—in the opinion of its representatives at any competition—no student project at that competition falls within the scope of the society's labor history award or if no project is of high enough quality.

For more information, contact Sarah Clement, State Coordinator for National History Day in Wisconsin, via e-mail at Sarah.Clement@wisconsinhistory.org or by telephone at 608/264-6487.

Labor-Related Topic Ideas for National History Day

Developed by the Wisconsin Labor History Society

- **The 8 Hour Day; 40 Hour Week:** The idea that a typical work day should last 8 hours emerged as a labor demand during the Civil War, but it was not written into law until the New Deal. Students could address any chapter in the long history of this issue, including its culmination in the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938. By defining the 40 hour week as a standard, this law also created the weekend as we know it.
- **Health Insurance:** Our modern health insurance system has its origins in mutual aid societies, which workers created to protect themselves and their families from illness, injury, and death. Students could address any period in the history of this issue, including its inclusion in the welfare capitalism initiatives of the 1920s and its emergence as part of organized labor's national agenda during and after World War II. In the 1940s and 1950s unions linked health insurance to employment.
- **Equal Employment Opportunity:** Laws stating that people cannot not be denied a job because of their race, gender, or religion were first proposed by the March on Washington Movement, initiated by A. Philip Randolph, leader of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, in the 1940s.
- **Sit-Ins:** This protest tactic was used in the civil rights movement to oppose racial segregation, but it originated in the labor struggles of the 1930s, when unions were trying to organize auto plants, in cities such as Flint, Michigan.
- **Boycotts:** In the late 19th and early 20th century unions used this tactic to pressure businesses, but boycotts originated in Ireland amidst the movements opposing British rule. Irish trade unionists brought the idea into the labor movement, and it has been used in labor conflicts ever since, including the grape boycott instituted in support of the United Farm Workers in the 1960s and 1970s.
- **Women in Public Protests:** The participation of women in public political activities was a scandalous innovation in the 19th century. Although abolitionists and advocates of women's suffrage deserve the most credit for this innovation, labor groups contributed to it, involving women in a wider range of political activities, including the sit-ins of the 1930s.
- **Minimum Wage:** In the late 19th century unions, such the Chicago carpenters, fought for a minimum wage to build solidarity among the skilled and unskilled and to prevent cutthroat competition among employers at workers' expense.
- **Organizing the Unemployed:** During the Great Depression unions organized the unemployed as a pressure group to influence the welfare bureaucracy. Students could address the UAW Welfare Department, CIO Unemployment Division, Workers Alliance of America, Unemployed Councils, or National Unemployed League.
- **Third Force Politics:** Labor groups have created third parties and social movements outside the major parties to advance their agendas. Examples include the Wisconsin Progressive Party of 1934-1945, Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party, North Dakota Nonpartisan League, or the Wisconsin Socialist Party.
- **Workers' Compensation:** Frequent injuries on the job in the late nineteenth century led to calls for laws requiring employers to compensate disabled workers. Numerous states passed Workmen's Compensation laws in the early twentieth century to aid injured workers, and they are part of the larger history of labor efforts to improve safety in the workplace. Wisconsin had the nation's first Workmen's Compensation law.
- **Consumer Cooperatives:** During the late 19th and early 20th centuries labor and farm groups in the upper Midwest formed cooperatives to lower the cost of goods, especially food. The 1960s brought a "new wave" of food cooperatives, including in Wisconsin cities. Many of these cooperatives had ties to labor and to the New Left. See, for example, the Mifflin Street Cooperative and the Williamson Street Cooperative Grocery in Madison.
- **Collective Bargaining:** Since their origins in the early 19th century unions have fought to be recognized as the legitimate bargaining agent for workers in negotiations with employers over wages and working conditions. This demand was not recognized legally on the national level until the 1930s, and the struggle to establish collective bargaining in fact continues.
- **Labor Songs and Song-Writing:** There is a long tradition of labor songs going back to the early 19th century. Sometimes adapted from religious hymns, labor songs expressed grievances and helped mobilize workers during strikes. Labor songs also drew from the long tradition of minstrel singing.
- **Holidays, Personal Days, Parental Leave, Break Times:** All of these rules regulating time on the job were originally demands of workers and their unions. Most were achieved in the second half of the 20th century in long and difficult collective bargaining with employers.