

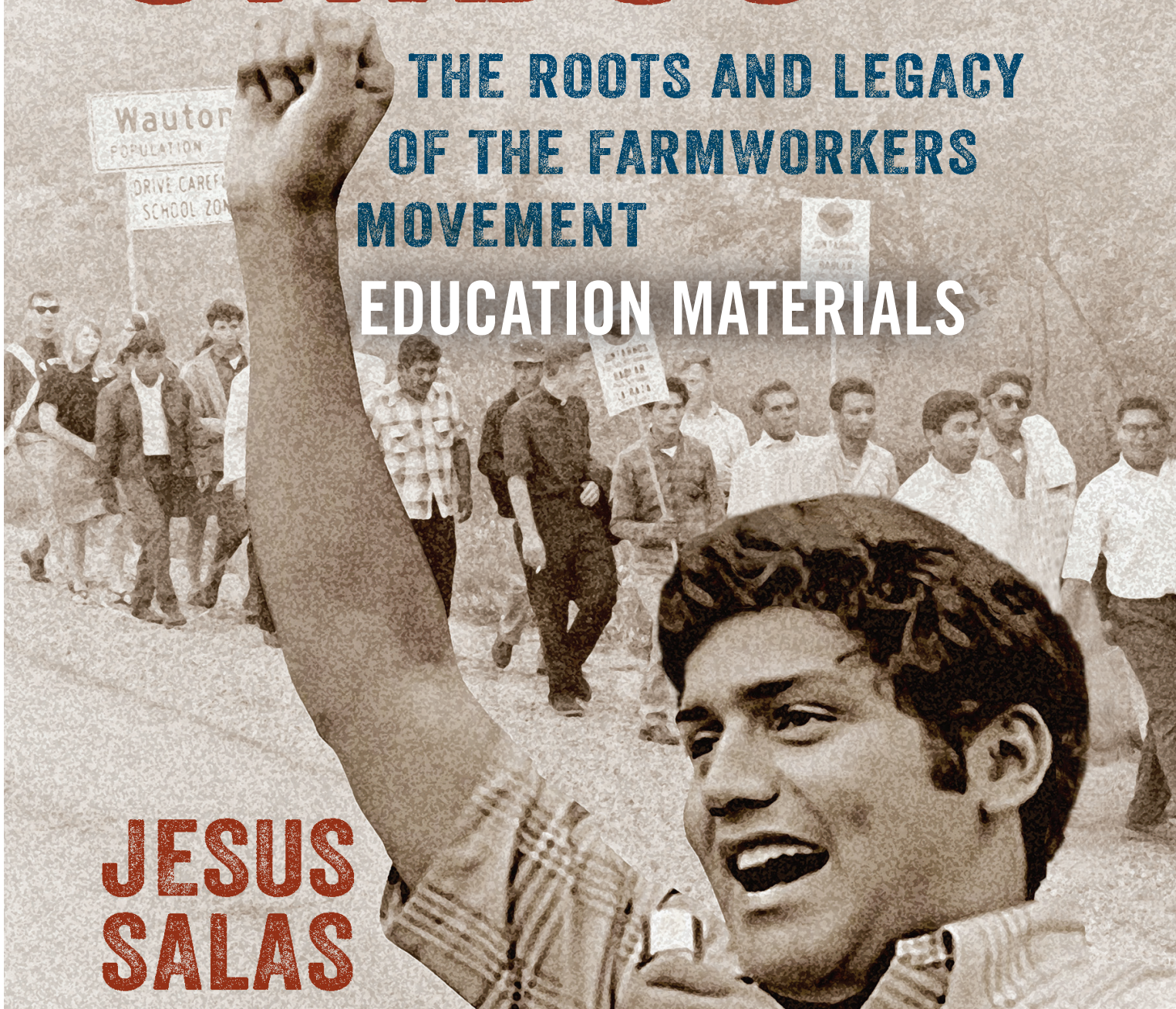


OBREROS UNIDOS

THE ROOTS AND LEGACY
OF THE FARMWORKERS
MOVEMENT

EDUCATION MATERIALS

JESUS
SALAS



OBREROS UNIDOS by Jesus Salas



Introduction

The Book

These educational materials were designed for students in grades 9–12. The activities allow students to explore passages, themes, and topics from Jesus Salas’ memoir *Obreros Unidos: The Roots and Legacy of the Farmworkers Movement* (Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2023). In his expansive narrative, noted labor leader Salas shares an insider’s look at the farmworkers movement, from its roots in southern political uprisings to its lasting legacy of activism. During his childhood, Salas and his family joined the migrant workers who traveled from their hometown in Texas to work on farms in Wisconsin, Illinois, and other states.

Salas describes the brutal working conditions and overcrowded labor camps experienced by the Mexican American workers who fueled the Midwest’s agriculture industry. Taking inspiration from César Chávez, as a young man Salas and others led a historic march from Wautoma to Madison to demand that lawmakers address rampant violations of Wisconsin’s minimum wage laws and housing codes. These young labor leaders founded Obreros Unidos—“Workers United”—to continue the fight for fairness and respect, as well as to provide much-needed services to migrant families. This memoir of a transnational movement details how their work went beyond the fields to have lasting impacts on representation in community organizations and access to services and education, empowering Chicano and Latin Americans for generations to come.

The Activities

These activities can be completed as students read sections of the book or as culminating activities after they have finished the book. The activities focus on the following three themes, which are prevalent throughout *Obreros Unidos*:

- The history of migrant farmworkers in Wisconsin
- The 1966 migrant march from Wautoma to Madison
- Wisconsin labor law and history

The activities involve analyzing book passages, conducting research, watching videos, reading primary source documents, listening to oral histories, and analyzing images. Questions within the activities can be used for group discussion or as prompts for individual written responses.



Enduring Understanding

The history of Wisconsin is filled with stories of migration and immigration. From indigenous oral histories of the movements of people across the landscape to the modern-day immigration stories from all over the world, the experiences of these groups over time has changed and enriched the culture, history, and lives of the people of Wisconsin. While each person's experience is unique to them, across time patterns can be discerned. These patterns, when taken as a whole, provide a picture of the past and present that illuminates how cultures and people react and interact across racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic barriers.

Essential Questions

- How have attitudes toward the immigration of Mexican-Americans changed over time?
- What barriers have migrant workers struggled to overcome as they transitioned from seasonal workers to full-time Wisconsin residents?
- What socioeconomic problems or incentives lead to certain groups being exploited for their labor?
- How have people attempted to rectify the disparity in basic rights over time?

Migrant Farmworkers



The activities in this section are appropriate to complete after students have read the prologue and chapters 1–5 of *Obreros Unidos*. In those chapters, Jesus Salas recounts the annual journey his family (and many others) took from Texas to assist with planting and harvesting on Wisconsin farms, what it was like performing that work, and the temporary living conditions that migrant workers experienced.

Connecting Twentieth-Century Migrant Farmworkers to Today

While Salas began making the trip to Wisconsin with his family in the 1940s, Wisconsin’s history of receiving farmworkers from Mexico and southwestern states goes back even farther. For more of that history, have students read pages 5–64 from *Mexicans in Wisconsin* by Sergio González (Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2017). Alternatively, students could watch a 30-minute book presentation that González delivered in 2018, called [“Mexican Migrant Workers in Mid-Century Wisconsin.”](#)

Performance task:

Have students conduct research to write an essay or deliver a presentation on how migrant farm work of the twentieth century compares to migrant farm work in Wisconsin today. Where do most of Wisconsin’s migrant farmworkers today come from? Which industries do they typically work in? How have conditions for those workers changed? How have they stayed the same? The following are suggestions for students to begin their research:

- Look for recent articles in Wisconsin newspapers and websites about this topic
- Read the information on these web pages from the Department of Workforce Development:

[“Robust Labor Laws Protect State’s Migrant Seasonal Farm Workers”](#)

[“Migrant Labor Law”](#)

Compare and Contrast: Author Viewpoint

Read the following passages from *Obreros Unidos* and *Mexicans in Wisconsin* by Sergio González (Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2017), then answer the questions that follow.

Beet field owners sent labor recruiters into Mexico and the US Southwest in search of workers and paid the recruits' fare to Wisconsin. Employee contracts spelled out workers' yearly employment schedule, wages, and the number of acres they would work. Workers would arrive in Wisconsin around mid-to late April, many with their families, and would leave at the end of the harvest in late October after receiving their final wages. After fulfilling their contractual obligations, field owners would then pay for Mexican families' return passage. (*Mexicans in Wisconsin*, page 8)

Under the primitive conditions that we lived in, without gas, running water, or electricity, it took the collaboration of the whole family to facilitate the preparing of supper. (*Obreros Unidos*, page 38)

There were no sanitary facilities in the field. If there were woods near the crop, men and women were assigned different sections of the wooded area to relieve themselves. If there were no woods, cornfields served the same purpose. If the fields were empty, we took turns going behind trucks or cars that carried us to work. It was humiliating for all of us but especially for the women. (*Obreros Unidos*, page 46)

Questions:

- How does the overview from *Mexicans in Wisconsin* differ from the lived experience described in *Obreros Unidos*?
- What might account for the different viewpoints of the authors?
- How was the concept of migrant labor expressed in each passage?

Performance task:

- Find stories about migrant workers from newspapers, documentaries, magazines, or news programs from the past ten years. Write an essay or create a presentation summarizing the stories and answering questions such as *What has changed in how migrant work is viewed? What has remained the same?*



What's in a Name?

In his book, Salas details the origins of the name “Obreros Unidos” and makes an important distinction. Read the passage and then answer the questions that follow.

We worked and labored, and thus we were trabajadores (workers), but we were also the cultivators. We nurtured cucumbers from a seed to a vegetable-producing plant. We harvested this bounty that was feeding the growing metropolitan areas along the Great Lakes and beyond. To us, this meant that we produced an obra; we made it come to be, to appear, as a craftsman produces an object or an artist, a work of art. We were Obreros Unidos. In English, obreros would be translated as “workers,” but in Spanish obreros are not trabajadores. (*Obreros Unidos*, page 97)

Questions:

- Why do you think Salas believes this was an important distinction?
- What is his view of farm work and its importance?
- What other translations might be more appropriate for Obreros Unidos?
- What thoughts do you have on work you do?
- Are you a worker? A creator? Is there a difference?



1966 Migrant March



The activities in this section are appropriate to complete after students have read chapters 6–13 of *Obreros Unidos*. In those chapters Salas describes how he became politically active, shares his memories of organizing and leading the march of migrant workers from Wautoma to Madison in 1966, and how that demonstration led him to organize several farmworker strikes.

Compare and Contrast: News Coverage

Read this passage from *Obreros Unidos* and complete the following activity.

During the last days of the march, the City of Madison police released a statement that I would be arrested once I stepped inside city limits on Friday. I owed outstanding parking tickets from my stay the previous winter. But an anonymous Good Samaritan paid the tickets and defused the issue. The local press out of Wautoma, the *Waushara Argus*, began to discredit the march as being led by college students (my brothers, Mark Erenburg, and I), high school dropouts (my brothers), and outsiders (our Madison-based supporters). Thereafter, the *Argus* coverage attempted to demonstrate that only several dozen people had marched, that we did not represent the workers, and that most migrants were happy here in Wisconsin. They also gave vent to local members of the John Birch Society, who attacked us by claiming the farmworkers movement was part of a communist-led national movement. As a result, future farmworkers rallies and grape boycott pickets drew counterpickets and “pinko” taunts suggesting farmworkers were communist sympathizers. (*Obreros Unidos*, page 94)

Performance task:

Compare and contrast the following excerpts from news coverage of the march in the *Waushara Argus* and two Madison-based newspapers, the *Capital Times* and *Wisconsin State Journal*. Then answer the questions that follow.

The following excerpts come from two articles published on the front page of the *Waushara Argus* on August 18, 1966:

“Wautoma in Spotlight For Migrant March to Madison” (news article)

Wautoma was in the spotlight throughout the state this week as the origin of a migrant



march to Madison to protest working conditions of seasonal workers. ...

The drama began to unfold Sunday afternoon when Jesus Salas, 22-year-old Stevens Point university student who lives in Wautoma, climbed up the Waushara courthouse steps and began an impassioned plea to his fellow Spanish-Americans.

Wautoma, social center for some 5,000 migrant workers, was jammed with workers in their Sunday best...mostly walking up and down Main Street...visiting...buying ice cream...and attending the Spanish movies at the Park theatre.

Salas, with microphone in hand, urged this relaxed group to attend the rally he had set up on the west lawn... The average attendance was around 100 out of the thousands who were enjoying a Sunday afternoon of leisure.

Salas told the group he had been asked by the governor to delay the march to Madison because state officials would come to Wautoma to discuss grievances. He said he refused to call off the march. Instead, he said he would leave the march Monday night and return to Wautoma to talk with the state delegation. ...

After a few miles Salas and some of his “top command” were back in Wautoma preparing for the evening sessions with representatives of the governor. Those who continued on the march didn’t make out so well.

“Jesus Salas – One-Way Street” (editorial)

Jesus Salas has demonstrated he has nerve. But, whether he has wisdom and whether he will help his people is another matter.

He hasn’t learned that when you ask for the public spotlight you must be sure enough of your beliefs to stand up and battle for them if necessary. He did his cause no good when he bolted a meeting with state officials because a spectator asked about his union affiliations. ...

Close examination will reveal that the relation between migrant and grower in Waushara county has been unusually good. Most workers come back to the same farms each year because they have made good money...and they like the way they have been treated.

Shortly after the stories of a march began circulating, the Argus sent three reporters into the camps. Each one asked the workers whether they believe conditions were bad enough to stage a march. In almost every case, the answer was “No.” ...

Douglas Thorstad claims he has evidence that the union Salas has joined is a communist group, that workers in Delano, Calif., were badgered by unionists they did not want. ...

If there is a shred of truth to the accusation, Salas is doing his people no favor. They have nothing to gain by exchanging their freedom for a communist way of life.

The following are excerpts from an editorial in the August 25, 1966 issue of the *Waushara Argus* titled, "Who Speaks for the Growers?"

The migrant workers of Wisconsin have a spokesman in Jesus Salas whether they want one or not.

He created the impression at the state capital via television microphones and wire service writers that he represents a protest against substandard living conditions and inadequate incomes.

And, how the politicians climbed on the band wagon. ...

Salas, who represents only 15 marchers and one union card, told the governor's delegation that the growers had refused to meet with him. Why should they meet with him? He has presented no evidence he represents the migrant workers in the field.

The following excerpts come from a news article published in the August 12, 1966 edition of the *Capital Times* titled, "Migrant Workers March to Madison:"

Hundreds of migrant farmworkers from Waushara County will begin an 80 mile march to Madison Monday to protest pay and living conditions in central Wisconsin harvesting camps.

Jesus Salas, a Wisconsin resident who attends Stevens Point State College, told The Capital Times today that "the social and economic needs of Wisconsin's migrant farm laborers have been ignored too long." ...

"We are not out so much to create a union," said the 22-year-old Mexican-American, "as we are out to demonstrate the need for state action to guarantee our economic and educational rights." ...

Salas emphasized that no out-of-state organization had fomented this protest: it is a Wisconsin cause initiated by Wisconsin farm workers, he said.

The following excerpts come from an editorial published in the August 18, 1966 edition of the *Wisconsin State Journal* titled, "The Migrants Are Welcome:"

A band of footsore migrant workers is due to arrive in Madison Friday, climaxing a 60-mile march from Wautoma to dramatize what they say are the needs of migrant workers in Waushara county.

We are happy to have them in Madison, and we welcome them. In refreshing contrast to somewhat similar demonstrations in other parts of the country, the workers' march in Wisconsin has been marked by restraint and responsibility. And it has paid off. ...

Credit for the responsible conduct of the affair to date belongs principally to two men. They are Jesus Salas, the 22-year-old leader of the migrant group, and Joseph Fagan, chairman of the State Industrial Commission. ...

It is clear that in that atmosphere, the march has accomplished its purpose. It has brought statewide attention and concern to a generally neglected area. It has pointed up the need for some kind of action, and it has started a good many people thinking about the plight of migrants in Wisconsin.

The following excerpts come from a news article published in the August 20, 1966 edition of the *Wisconsin State Journal* titled, "Migrants Present Their Case:"

"These are some farm laborers who have come here to you. They have marched 80 miles to appeal to the state," said Jesus Salas.

Choked with emotion, the Stevens Point State University student who led the march told migrant workers in Spanish that he was grateful for the sacrifices they had made.

Salas, 22, addressed the group and state officials on the steps of the State Capitol after 160 migrant workers and Madison supporters completed the last leg of the march, much of it to the accompaniment of expressions of support by spectators. ...

At the Capitol building, a crowd of about 400 gathered to hear the hour-long program. After Salas spoke and before a benediction was given, a collection was taken for workers who lost their jobs for taking part in the march.

Questions:

- How was the coverage similar across all three publications? How was it different?
- How would you characterize each publication's perspective? Do you think any of them have a particular bias? What evidence points to that?
- What kind of language do you notice being used in these excerpts? What effect do those language choices have?
- Why do you think some reporters tried to link the workers to communism?

Create a Photo Exhibit

In college, Jesus Salas became acquainted with David Giffey, who would play an important role in Obreros Unidos and the demonstrations and strikes that Salas would go on to lead. One way Giffey supported these efforts was through photographs. Giffey’s collection of photographs, taken between 1966 and 1971, is titled “Struggle for Farmworker Justice.” The photographs are accessible through the [Wisconsin Historical Society’s digital image collections here](#).

Performance tasks:

Read this short [introduction to Giffey and his project](#). Curate a photo exhibit or write a photo essay using 7–10 of the images from the collection. Have students consider the following while creating their exhibit or photo essay:

- Theme: Look at the images in the gallery and decide on a theme. Will you focus on protests? Organization efforts? Work in the fields and factories? Your images should all connect to each other in some way in order to tell the story you want to tell.
- Show, don’t tell: While each image should be titled and captioned, it’s important that the images you select can tell the story with minimal explanation.
- Organize your thoughts: Before setting anything down, draft an outline of your idea. It should contain the following:
 - A brief explanation of your theme (I chose these images because...). This will become part of your exhibit.
 - Links to the pictures you’ve selected
 - Drafts of captions and titles
 - Draft order
 - Draft conclusion
- Captions and titles: The titles of each image will be included at each web link. However, the description text that accompanies each image may be too long, too short, or may not summarize the image well. It is up to you to create a meaningful title and caption for your image and to link that caption back to your theme.

Compare and Contrast: Demonstration Photographs

Follow the image links below to view larger versions of these four historical photographs, all of which were taken at demonstrations held in Wisconsin during the 1960s. Compare and contrast the photographs, then answer the questions that follow.



[WHi image 93386](#) | Photograph by David Giffey

In 1966, marchers of Obreros Unidos (United Workers) leave Wautoma and walk towards Madison along Highway 21 to petition lawmakers to hold farms and food industry corporations accountable for better working conditions for migrant farmworkers. Jesus Salas is in front, leading the march and shaking hands with a man. Three men hold signs that read “Juntarnos Para Ser Reconocidos/Hablar Para Ser Oidos/La Raza Tiene Causa,” which translates to “Join to be Recognized/Speak to be Heard/The People Have a Cause.”



[WHi image 86895](#) | Photograph by David Giffey

In 1969, picketers on the sidewalk in front of a Kroger supermarket in Oshkosh demonstrate for and against the grape boycott that Jesus Salas led in Wisconsin to support California farmworkers. Signs read, “Eat Grapes Best Medicine Against Communism,” “Communism is the issue not unionism,” “Eat Grapes,” “Buy Grapes; Buy Freedom” and “Honor Picket Line. Meat Cutters Supports Grape Boycott.”



[WHi image 6987](#) | Creator unknown

In 1964, members of the civil rights organization the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) picket the Board of Realtors at Coach House Motor Inn in Milwaukee for fairness and equality in housing. The sign that the first picketer holds reads “I’m going to live anywhere I want to!” Other signs read “Equality NOW!”



[WHi image 115506](#) | Photograph by Richard Sroda

In 1962, Wisconsin High students march in front of the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Bascom Hall. The students were protesting against the UW Board of Regents' discussions to close their high school. Some signs read "SOS Save Our School."

Questions:

- What similarities do you see in the images?
- What differences do you see in the images?
- For each image, summarize the reason people are demonstrating (answering who, what, why, where, and how).
- Do you think marching is an effective form of protest? Why or why not? Cite examples from your reading.

Women in the Movement

After his work leading demonstrations and strikes at various farms in Wisconsin, Jesus Salas moved to Milwaukee and began working for United Migrant Opportunity Services, or UMOS. There, he met other Latin American activists, many of whom were women. Irene Santos was one of them. Like Salas, Santos was a migrant worker who later worked as an area coordinator for UMOS.

Have students listen to [an oral history with Irene Santos](#) conducted in 2013, which was part of the [Somos Latinas \(We Women\) History Project](#), or read about Santos on pages 184–191 in the book *Somos Latinas: Voices of Latina Activists*, edited by Andrea-Teresa Arenas and Eloisa Gomez (Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2018).

Questions:

- How were Santos' and Salas' life experiences similar? How were they different?
- How did Santos' life experiences inspire her activism?
- How does Santos define activism? How is that different from or similar to how other Latina women involved in the Somos Latinas project have defined it?

You may have students choose another Latina activist from the Somos Latinas Project (students may listen to another oral history recording or read another chapter from the book). Then have them answer the same questions.

Wisconsin Labor Law & History



Throughout his memoir, Salas mentions Wisconsin's progressive worker's legislation, noting that laws to protect migrant workers existed but were not being enforced. Which laws is he talking about? When were they passed? Have students conduct research to find answers to those questions and to discover what those laws were intended to do, how they made Wisconsin unique, and which government agencies were created to enforce them.

Suggestions on where to begin research:

- [The Wisconsin Idea: The Vision that Made Wisconsin Famous](#)
- [The Progressive Era: 1895-1925](#)
- [Turning Points: The Birth of the Labor Movement](#)

Performance tasks:

- Write a paper or give a presentation on legislation that was a result of Salas' (and others') work. Possible legislation includes:
 - Wisconsin's Migrant Labor Act of 1975
 - Bilingual-Bicultural Education Act of 1976
- Write a paper or give a presentation on a significant event in Wisconsin labor history. Possible topics include:
 - Bay View Massacre (1886)
 - Wisconsin Milk Strike (1933)
 - Kohler strikes (1954–1961)
 - Act 10 protests (2011)