

DO LABOR UNIONS EFFECTIVELY PROTECT WORKERS' RIGHTS?

THIS ACTIVITY SHOULD TAKE ABOUT 90 MINUTES. IF LEARNERS ARE ABLE TO REVIEW MEDIA PRIOR TO THE LESSON, ACTIVITY TIME SHOULD BE 45 TO 60 MINUTES.

INVESTIGATE

Read, watch, and listen to the three media resources on the Thinkalong module. Learners can use the Investigate graphic organizer to summarize each piece of media and record new information. Below are summaries of the three pieces of media curated in the Thinkalong module.

CAN UNIONS ADAPT TO TODAY'S ECONOMIC CHALLENGES?

PBS NewsHour | September 5, 2016 | Video
6:59 minutes

Two experts discuss the decline of union membership and its impact on the United States' economy.

- According to the U.S. Department of Labor, only 11% of wage and salary workers belonged to a union in 2015.
- Over the last three decades, the labor movement has declined, and now only represents half the number of workers it used to in the United States, but recent polls have indicated that over half of people polled would like to join a union.
- Professor Shaiken says that low union turnout could be attributed to tough employer opposition along with other broad changes in the economy that make it harder to facilitate free choice. Mary Kay Henry, President of the Service Employees International Union, says that union resilience and strikes have helped bring national attention to a \$15 minimum wage.
- Countries like Denmark have a wage floor of \$20/hour without having a minimum wage because about 80% of the country's workforce is unionized.
- Henry says that without a shared vision between working people, employers, and government, the United States is experiencing widespread wage inequality.
- Professor Shaiken states that the sharing economy is a critical challenge for today's unions, especially since it's harder to get flexible part-time workers to unionize because they're considered "independent contractors."

BIG UNION LOSS AT AMAZON WAREHOUSE CASTS SHADOW OVER LABOR MOVEMENT

NPR | April 16, 2021 | Audio
3:49 minutes

A recent unsuccessful unionization effort at an Amazon warehouse and what it means for the labor movement in the U.S.

- Workers at an Amazon warehouse in Bessemer, Alabama voted more than two-to-one against joining a union.
- One worker says she voted against a union because she trusts Amazon after the company treated her well when she had health issues. She also doesn't believe a union could deliver on promises to raise pay and improve working conditions.
- Union backers claim there were illegal actions against those trying to unionize and that the company used anti-union tactics to discourage workers from unionizing. Experts say that the failed effort is a good example of how hard it is to establish unions when a company fights back.
- Over the past 20 years, private sector union membership has been cut in half, down to 6.3% in 2020. But according to a Gallup poll from September 2020, 65% of Americans approve of unions.
- Unions are looking for reform from the federal government to help revise labor laws to protect workers trying to unionize.

Using public media — video, audio and digital reports — about newsworthy topics, these classroom-based exercises help learners to think critically about media messages, develop informed opinions, and practice how to take a stand.

THE RISE AND FALL OF AMERICA'S LABOR UNIONS

The Lowdown | Month XX, XXXX | Article

300 words

Explore the statistics around the recent history of labor unions in the United States in this interactive infographic.

- The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in a 5-4 decision, that public sector unions are no longer allowed to force non-unionized workers to pay dues.
- Only 11% of the U.S. workforce belongs to a union today, the lowest rate in more than 70 years.
- After 1945, there was a surge in organized labor combined with a boom in manufacturing and industrial growth. More than 27% of the nation's workers were members of unions at its peak in the 1950s.
- However, as the economy hit a recession in the 1970's, union rate membership began to steadily decline. In the public sector, the rate still hovers at 35%, while in the private sector membership has plummeted to 7%.

KEY WORDS

Look out for these important keywords in the news stories. Discuss the definitions with your learners and see how they affect the understanding of the story.

- Strike
- "Right to work" laws
- Sharing economy
- Independent contractor

CONTEMPLATE

Learners will use media literacy questions to critically engage with news by thinking about its purpose, searching for bias and discussing missing perspectives. They will answer the 5 Key Questions of Media Literacy created by the Center for Media Literacy, which are:

1. Who created this message?
2. What creative techniques are used to attract my attention?
3. How might different people understand this message differently than me?
4. What values, lifestyles and points of view are represented in, or omitted from, this message?
5. Why is this message being sent?

A graphic organizer is included in this guide and the Thinkalong website to help learners answer these five questions about each piece of media.

DEBATE

Use the debate tool on the module webpage to help form evidence-based responses to the debate question.

Thinkalong is designed to help learners engage with real issues that are relevant to their lives. [Structured discussions](#) allow learners to practice their critical thinking skills through evidence-based debate with their peers. Discussions are designed to take about 30 minutes. Educators are encouraged to modify aspects that work best for their learners.

To encourage civil discourse, please review the [Code of Conduct](#) with your learners.

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