

Documentary Lens Lesson Plan for *On Strike: The Winnipeg General Strike, 1919*

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Curriculum Connections

Lesson Objectives

This lesson is intended to foster, in Grade 11 and 12 students, a knowledge and understanding of the issues raised in the film *On Strike* and to promote progressive, democratic considerations around values and attitudes regarding Canadian citizenship. Cross-curricular connections include Social Studies, Language Arts, Political Science, Economics and History.

The activities will help students develop their inquiry, research, critical thinking, communication, and media literacy skills. Students will brainstorm current events around strike action issues; compare the rights of workers in the past and today; research and prepare a debate based on principles in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the Canadian Labour Code; and write an editorial on the filmmaker's point of view.

Canadian Social Studies Themes in *On Strike: The Winnipeg General Strike, 1919*

Theme/Strand/ Key Concept	Connections to <i>On Strike: The Winnipeg General Strike, 1919</i> Discussion Points/Guided Questions
Citizenship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What rights do Canadian citizens have to organize workers' unions? Were the workers and returned soldiers who participated in the Winnipeg General Strike acting within their rights to organize workers' unions? What rights do members of Canadian unions have to organize and carry out strike action? Were those involved in the Winnipeg General Strike acting within their rights to organize and participate in strike action? What does the Canadian Constitution have to say about Canadians' rights to peaceful assembly?
Identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What was the common identity shared by the striking workers and soldiers? What was the common identity shared by the Citizen's Committee of One Thousand? What aspect(s) of identity might have been shared among those who opposed the strike? Discuss the personal, cultural and ancestral divisions among those who participated in the Winnipeg General Strike.

Theme/Strand/ Key Concept	Connections to <i>On Strike: The Winnipeg General Strike, 1919</i> –Discussion Points/Guided Questions
Change and Continuity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are some examples of the rights and protections that Canadian workers enjoy today? Which of these rights do you think came about because of strike actions or other forms of civil disobedience in the past? • How have conditions improved or worsened for Canadian workers, regarding their rights and protections since the time of the Winnipeg General Strike? • How do current wages and incomes relate to the current cost of living in your part of Canada? How does this compare to other regions of the country? • In the film there is reference to the gap between the haves and the have-nots in Winnipeg as contributing to the strike. Has this gap widened or narrowed in Canada since 1919?
Culture and Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is socialism? How did it play a role in the Winnipeg General Strike? • How did events in Russia, particularly the Bolshevik revolution, inspire workers in Winnipeg? • What cultural ties, if any, existed between Russia and those who would have supported the Winnipeg General Strike? • At the beginning of the documentary, a voiceover refers to the General Strike as “a war of ideologies.” What opposing ideologies, or worldviews, were being represented by those who were for and against the strike?
The Land: People and Places	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In the documentary a woman’s voice is heard speaking to how the factory owners and bosses lived on one side of Winnipeg (the south) and how the immigrants and workers lived on the other. Why do you think that owners and workers lived literally “on opposite sides of the track”? • Why was Winnipeg such a hotbed of industrial activity leading up to World War I? What conditions particular to this city and its citizens contributed to such industrial and economic activity?
Individuals, Societies, and Economic Decisions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Solidarity is key in union organizations, and it is mentioned in the film. What does this concept mean? • How can it industry owners and bosses profit from a war abroad? • Are economic decisions always ethical? Discuss the ethical concerns that are raised from war “profiteering.”
Global Connections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Much of the industry in Winnipeg leading up to the strike was contributing to and profiting from the war overseas. What were the products being manufactured? Where were they being shipped? • How are industries and corporations contributing to wars in the world today? Are there industries or corporations in Canada that are profiting from such conflicts today?
Power and Governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What kind of labour codes existed to secure and protect workers’ rights in Canada at the time of the Winnipeg Strike? • Which jurisdiction(s) of government contend(s) with labour issues in Canada? Name some examples of current labour issues in your province.

Theme/Strand/ Key Concept	Connections to <i>On Strike: The Winnipeg General Strike, 1919</i> —Discussion Points/Guided Questions
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why were all three levels of government opposed to the strike and insistent that “it had to be quashed at all costs”? • Was it reasonable for the press and the government to infer that workers rallying for their rights in Winnipeg had direct ties to Russian Bolsheviks and were planning a revolution? • Who condoned the use of “special forces” of untrained “police” to quash peaceful assemblies of workers’ unions? Was this fair and democratic?

Assessment Strategies

- Critical thinking, ACTIVITY 2, Who’s Right?: assessing information considering context, bias and objectivity; synthesizing information on historical and contemporary issues to reach an informed position.
- Communication skills, ACTIVITY 1, Why Strike?: participation in group brainstorming and clear communication of ideas; ACTIVITY 2, Who’s Right?: communicating effectively to express point of view; using debate to persuasively express an informed viewpoint on an issue.
- Research skills, ACTIVITY 5, Researching Strike Action: drawing conclusions based on research and evidence.
- Media literacy, ACTIVITY 3, Media Literacy, Writing an Editorial: examining the techniques a filmmaker uses to persuasively communicate a message.

Materials and Resources

- History of Winnipeg General Strike <<http://www.civilization.ca/hist/labour/lab04e.html>>.
- “Strike Action” description and definitions <en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Strike_action>.
- Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms <laws.justice.gc.ca/en/const/annex_e.html#I>.
- Canadian Labour Code <laws.justice.gc.ca/en/L-2/17169.html#rid-17214>.

Activities for *On Strike*

Introductory Activities

ACTIVITY 1: Why Strike?

Introduce the term *strike action*, using the definition found in the second source in the Materials and Resources above:

Strike action (or simply a strike) is the mass refusal by groups of workers to perform work. Strikes first became important during the industrial revolution, when mass labour became important in factories and mines. In most countries they were quickly made illegal as factory owners had far more political power than the workers. Most western countries legalized striking partially in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century.

From Wikipedia.org at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Strike_action

Ask students what they know about recent strike actions that have been covered in local or national media.

Once they have this background, ask students to brainstorm, either as a class or in small groups, the reasons why people go on strike. Urge them to be specific. For example, if students suggest poor working conditions, ask them to consider the details:

- Is the work environment dangerous? Explain: Not enough light? Unsafe machinery? Toxic materials? Repetitive stress syndrome?

Or, if students suggest not enough pay, ask:

- What is a reasonable rate of pay? What is a living wage? Who decides “how much is enough”? How does this relate to cost of living?

Developing Concepts and Applying what You’ve Learned

ACTIVITY 2: Who’s Right?

Step 1: As students watch *On Strike*, ask them to notice the way the story is told—through remembrances of those who had first-hand experience in the Winnipeg General Strike. Speaker after speaker reminds the viewer that there were two sides to this conflict. One person suggests it was “the big fella versus the little fella.” Another says that it was the “bosses” against “the rest of us.”

Ask students to think about whether or not the federal government’s intervention in the strike was reasonable, democratic and respectful of the rights of the striking workers. Of course, workers’ rights have evolved over time, which is taken up in step 2 below.

Step 2: Ask students to look at the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (online at http://laws.justice.gc.ca/en/const/annex_e.html#I), which is part of the Canadian Constitution.

- If the Winnipeg General Strike were to occur today, what would be different about the government reactions?

This important document should be helpful in deciding if, by today’s standards, the citizens of Winnipeg were within their constitutional rights to gather, to organize and to form unions.

Similarly, the Canadian Labour Code is another relevant document, since it outlines the rights of both workers and employers, including issues regarding strike action. The current Labour Code has obviously been updated since 1919, but students can use it to decide if by today’s standards, the workers of Winnipeg were within their rights to unionize and strike. Of particular relevance are the sections on Industrial Relations, particularly the brief portion relating to Employee/Employer Freedoms (<http://laws.justice.gc.ca/en/L-2/17169.html#rid-17214>).

Step 3: Divide the class into two groups. One half researches the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, particularly the first four sections, i.e., Guarantee of Rights and Freedoms, Fundamental Freedoms, Democratic Rights, and Mobility Rights. This group of students must assemble a case defending the striking workers.

The second group, using the Canadian Labour Code, must defend the interests of the bosses and owners. These questions can guide them in preparing for the debate:

- Does the *Charter/Labour Code* fairly and adequately ensure and protect the rights and freedoms of workers?
- Does the *Charter/Labour Code* fairly and adequately ensure and protect the rights and freedoms of owners/bosses?

Step 4: Let the debate begin! As moderators, you and other audience members will decide which team argues its case better.

ACTIVITY 3: Media Literacy, Writing an Editorial

Before doing this activity, you may want to read the National Film Board document, “Behind the Camera: Teacher’s Guide,” which is available at the Documentary Lens Web site. This article explores general themes about documentary films, in particular their composition and relevance as educational media.

Explain the task: to write an editorial or opinion piece on the perspective of the filmmaker of *On Strike*. Is this an objective presentation? Does the filmmaker show a bias? These questions may be helpful:

- How is the documentary composed? Does it follow a linear timeline? That is, is it chronological?
- What visuals (i.e., photos and drawings) are used? Are these elements used effectively? Why are such visuals used as opposed to others, live action, for example?
- Describe the sound/audio? Are these elements used effectively? How is the narration handled?
- Why does the film open with archival photos of World War I?
- Where do you think the filmmaker’s sympathies lie?
- Are the two sides of the strike fairly represented in this film? Is it necessary that both sides receive equal representation in the film?
- What constitutes unbiased reporting or coverage? Does such a thing really exist?
- Does the information from the film hold up to scrutiny compared to other sources you have researched?
- What is the significance of the closing of the film where the narrator recites the following: “You cannot make a truth untrue / By dint of legal fiction / You cannot prison human view / You can’t convict conviction.” How do these lines relate to the theme and subject of this documentary?

Extension Activities

ACTIVITY 4: Questions of Legality

This is an excerpt from an open letter written by the mayor of Winnipeg that appeared in the *Manitoba Free Press* on June 23, 1919.

Any foreigners who make any threats of any kind or in any way intimidate or worry would-be workers in the slightest degree can expect immediate deportation to Russia or wherever they come from. We intend to purge the city of any lawless element and prosecute to the full rigor of the law. On the other hand, all law-abiding citizens can feel free to go about their business in the full realization that British law will protect them to the limit. No further open-air meetings, either in parks, streets or public places, will be permitted until further notice.

Archived at Museum of Civilization’s Web site at
<http://www.civilization.ca/hist/labour/labv22e.html>

Ask your class to consider the legality of the mayor’s decision based on the Equality Rights clauses in our Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

ACTIVITY 5: Researching Strike Actions

There have been many major strike actions around the world. Students might research one and write an essay that includes the following:

- What are the issues at the heart of the strike?
- What are the demands of the workers?
- What is the response of the government and the authorities?
- How do these scenarios resemble or differ from the Winnipeg General Strike?

Labour activist Cesar Chavez (1927-1993) is one important figure in labour history. More recently, the workers of Argentina have decided to take over factories that were closed down. This story is the subject of the 2004 documentary *The Take*, available on DVD and video from the National Film Board. For more information, visit www.nfb.ca/webextension/thetake/. For an online interview with one of the directors, Avi Lewis, see www.mosaico21.com/onlinemosaicoxxi/english/filmvideo/avilewis.htm.