Kindergarten Lesson

The Helping Hands of Labor Day: Standing Together for Fairness and Family

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Georgia Standards of Excellence (GSE)

- **SSKH1:** Identify the purpose of national holidays and describe how they are celebrated (Labor Day).
- **SSCG1 / SSCG16 :** Demonstrate civic traits such as cooperation, fairness, and working together to solve classroom or community problems.

Background Information

This lesson is designed to help you translate the big, complex ideas of U.S. labor history into meaningful, deeply human themes that young learners can easily connect with.

History really comes alive for children when they see how people just like them and their mothers stood up for their families. This unit bridges the gap between the famous early 20th-century labor struggles we often teach and a vital, yet frequently overlooked, turning point: the historic 1982 garment workers' strike in New York City's Chinatown. By exploring these stories, children will discover how everyday immigrant mothers and young workers shaped the safety rules, fair pay, and community support we rely on today.



Early Garment Labor Activism (1909–1911)

At the turn of the 20th century, the U.S. clothing industry was notorious for operating out of crowded, unsafe urban tenement buildings and lofts. The workforce consisted primarily of young Jewish and Italian immigrant girls.

In 1909, a young teenager named Clara Lemlich galvanized thousands of these workers to walk out of their factories in a massive, months-long strike known as the "Uprising of the 20,000." They demanded shorter workdays, better pay, and safer conditions.



Tragically, industrial safety reforms moved too slowly. On March 25, 1911, the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire broke out in Manhattan, in which 146 workers lost their lives because they were trapped behind doors that management had intentionally locked to prevent unauthorized breaks. This catastrophic event forced the state and federal governments to enact strict building safety codes, fire laws, and factory regulations,

cementing the role of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) as a necessary shield for working families.

Rise of Chinatown's Garment Enclave

Following the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, the demographic makeup of Manhattan's Chinatown transformed. For decades, discriminatory laws such as the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act had blocked Asian families from moving to the United States together, leaving Chinatowns populated mostly by isolated men who had to leave their families behind. The 1965 law abolished these unfair restrictions, allowing thousands of working-class families from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and mainland China to finally reunite. Arriving during a severe citywide economic crisis with limited English-language job options, these new families turned to a rapidly growing neighborhood industry: the garment trade.



Chinese entrepreneurs rented vacant commercial loft spaces across Lower Manhattan, transforming them into small-scale apparel assembly shops. By 1980, Chinatown hosted nearly 500 garment factories. The backbones of this neighborhood economy were the thousands of newly arrived immigrant mothers who operated the sewing machines.

"Piecework" System and Exploitation

These factories relied on an intense division of labor that bred exhaustion and instability for the workers:



- **Section Work:** Instead of crafting an entire piece of clothing from scratch, a worker spent long, repetitive shifts doing just one specific mechanical action, such as sewing a single straight waist-seam or attaching zippers, before passing the bundle to the next operator.
- **The Piecework Model:** Workers were not paid a guaranteed hourly wage. Instead, they were compensated per individual item or completed segment (e.g., a few cents per zipper). This meant that if a machine malfunctioned, fabric deliveries were delayed, or the market slowed down, the worker absorbed the financial loss.

To maximize their own thin profit margins, factory subcontractors leveraged shared cultural networks, common languages, and the social isolation of the enclave to demand unpaid overtime and suppress complaints. Bosses assumed that because these workers were non-English-speaking mothers with intense child care responsibilities, they would remain submissive.

The 1982 Watershed Strike

The breaking point occurred in the summer of 1982. Factory owners banded together and refused to sign a renewed industry-wide ILGWU union contract, attempting to strip the workers of their hard-won healthcare, vacation pay, and child care subsidies.

Community organizers pivoted to a strategy of social unionism: an approach linking factory-floor rights directly to broader community health, language access, and family support. They recognized that an immigrant mother cannot work effectively if her children are not safe. Organizers rallied the neighborhood by publishing bilingual fliers and holding meetings in the community's native dialects.

On June 24 and July 15, 1982, the sewing machines of Chinatown stopped completely. Over 20,000 Chinese immigrant women walked out of their shops. They gathered in Columbus Park, wearing matching union caps and holding bright, festive balloons alongside bilingual protest signs. Chanting "We are one!", they mounted the largest open labor rally in the history of Lower Manhattan. The absolute work stoppage paralyzed the New York apparel market, forcing the factory owners to capitulate and sign the union contract within days.



Suggested Teaching Activity

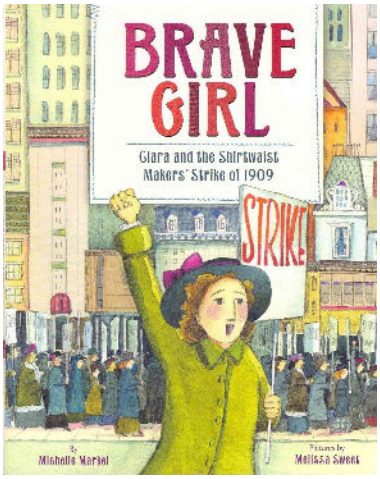
Step 1: Hook & Circle Time — What is Labor Day? (7–10 Minutes)

Gather students on the rug in a circle. Instruct everyone to look down at their clothes: their shirts, pants, or shoes.

Explain that everything we wear was made by a real person using their hands and their energy. Introduce Labor Day as a special national holiday where the country pauses to say "thank you" to everyone who works to build our world. Introduce the core theme of fairness:

> "When you are asked to do a big job or a chore, what makes it feel fair to you? Getting a turn to rest? Having a snack? Having someone say thank you? Today we are going to look at history to see how a large group of brave mothers stood up to make sure their work was fair and safe."

Step 2: Interactive Read-Aloud — Clara and the Early Workers (12–15 Minutes)



Introduce the picture book Brave Girl: Clara and the Shirtwaist Strike of 1909. Explain that this is a true story about immigrant families who came to the United States long ago and worked inside giant clothing factories.

As you read selected pages, focus on the illustrations depicting rows of crowded sewing machines. Pause to ask observational questions to build historical empathy:

- "Look at how close together the workers are sitting. Does this look like a quiet, cozy room or a loud, crowded place?"
- "Clara and her friends worked for many hours without a break, and the bosses locked the doors. Is that fair or not fair?"

Explain to the students that because Clara and her friends stood up, held hands, and marched in the street together, they successfully changed the rules to make factories safer for everyone.

Step 3: Audio and Visual Discovery — The 1982 Chinatown Strike (10–12 Minutes)

Transition from the picture book to the history of 1982 in New York's Chinatown. Explain that many years later, a new group of mothers and grandmothers from China were working at sewing machines in New York. The factory owners tried to take away their holiday time and their neighborhood child care centers. Play a brief video clip of the 1982 march**.** Then, display the historical primary source photographs of the Chinatown workers. These photographs, video clips, and oral history excerpts are freely available through the UCLA AAPI Multimedia Digital Textbook, *Foundations and Futures*: New York Chinatown's Immigrant Garment Workers: Women in Action, 1970–2001.

Guide the students through a visual analysis of the photographs:





- **The People:** Point out that these are mothers, aunts, and grandmothers. They spoke Chinese, and many were brand new to the United States.
- **The Details:** Point out the hats and sashes they are wearing. Note that the women are smiling and standing close together. They brought bright balloons and their children along with them to the park.
- **The Action:** Explain that 20,000 mothers turned off their sewing machines on the exact same day. They went to a park called Columbus Park and chanted **"We are one!"** to make sure their children would be taken care of.

Step 4: Co-Creating the "Fair vs. Not Fair" Anchor Chart (5–7 Minutes)

Bring out the chart paper. Draw a line down the center. Label the left column "Not Fair", and the right column "Fair & Safe".

Have students call out elements from the two historical stories they just explored, writing their answers down to create a visual comparison:

- Not Fair: Working all day without a rest break; hot or freezing rooms; taking away a family's healthcare; locking the factory doors.
- Fair & Safe: Having clear times to rest and eat; clean, bright spaces; making sure children have a safe child care center to go to; standing together with your teammates when a rule hurts someone.

Step 5: Tactile Application & Scribing (10 Minutes)

Have students go back to their tables. Distribute the pre-printed drawing sheets containing the sentence starter: "We are strong when we work together to..."

Instruct students to draw a picture showing people cooperating to solve a problem. They can choose to draw the Chinatown mothers holding hands and marching with balloons in the park, or a real-world example from their own lives (e.g., cleaning up the classroom block center, helping a family member carry groceries, or standing up for a friend on the playground).

As the students work, circulate around the room. Ask each student to explain their illustration, and use a pencil to carefully scribe their exact words at the bottom of their page to document their civic understanding.

Images Used:

1. Four women strikers from Ladies Tailors union on picket line during the "Uprising of the 20,000," garment workers strike, New York City. Courtesy of Library of Congress
2. Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Aftermath. March 25, 1911. New York City, New York, United States. https://catalog.archives.gov/id/6040082
3. Calhoun, Paul. Woman At Work in Chinatown Factory. c.1979-1982. New York City, New York, United States. https://mocanyc.pastperfectonline.com/photo/E7306B86-4E10-4553-9EBC-208916292237
4. Glick, Robert. Chinatown Garment Factory Floor. c.1979-1984. New York City, New York, United States. https://mocanyc.pastperfectonline.com/photo/BBBE01F9-4E39-4436-8A6C-733727336443
5. Garment Workers March. 1982. New York City, New York, United States. https://ilgwu.ilr.cornell.edu/announcements/5.html
6. Lee, Corky. Women Supporters at Rally. 1982. Chinatown, New York City, New York, United States. https://www.foundationsandfutures.org/chapter_resources/women-supporters-at-rally/