Teaching history from
DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES

AAVEd
Asian American Voices for Education

Kindergarten

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

Georgia Social Studies Standards

SSKH1 Identify the purpose of national holidays and describe how they are celebrated (ie: Labor Day).

SSCG1 / SSCG16 Demonstrate civic traits such as cooperation, fairness, and working together to solve classroom or community problems.

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 buildings. The workforce consisted primarily of young Jewish and Italian immigrant girls. After the tragic Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire in 1911, the government was forced to enact strict building safety codes, fire laws, and factory regulations. The International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) rose as a necessary shield for working families.





Rise of Chinatown's Garment Enclave

Following the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, Manhattan's Chinatown transformed. After decades of discriminatory laws, thousands of working-class families from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and mainland China were finally reunited. Arriving during a severe citywide economic crisis with limited job options, new families turned to a rapidly growing neighborhood industry: the garment trade.

Chinese entrepreneurs built the Chinatown garment industry out of small-scale apparel assembly shops. The backbones of this neighborhood economy were thousands of newly arrived immigrant mothers.

"Piecework" System and Exploitation

These factories relied on an intense division of labor that was exhausting and unstable for workers. Workers were not paid a guaranteed hourly wage. Instead, they were compensated per item or 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 paid the price.

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The 1982 Watershed Strike

The breaking point came in the summer of 1982. Factory owners banded together and attempted to strip the workers of their hard-won healthcare, vacation pay, and child care.

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 work stoppage paralyzed the New York apparel market, forcing the factory owners to capitulate and sign the union contract within days.

Complete Article and Lesson Plan

Photo Credit:
(Top to Bottom, Left to Right)

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. Calhoun, Paul. Woman At Work in Chinatown Factory. c.1979-1982. New York City, NY, USA.
3. Glick, Robert. Chinatown Garment Factory Floor. c.1979-1984. New York City, New York, United States.
4. Lee, Corky. Women Supporters at Rally. 1982. Chinatown, New York City, NY USA

Contact us at
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History is the context of "**now**", "**why**", and "**how**".

Teach interwoven history.



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