SWEAT

BY LYNN NOTTAGE

DIRECTED BY RON OJ PARSON

School Matinee Series Study Guide

THEATRE GOODMAN
SWEAT
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America’s economic system seems to have produced fewer and fewer jobs in the last decade. Most of the jobs it has produced are in the lower-paying service sector. Tax cuts for the wealthy, wage suppression tactics, undercutting unions, and other deliberate practices have increased corporate profits at the expense of workers. Many Americans have to work two or even three jobs, sacrificing family time and even adequate rest just to break even. This anxiety about the declining economy spurred much of the electorate in 2016, and both high- and low-wage workers’ precarious positions were evident again with the recent federal government shutdown.

Work – what we do for a living – is often a large part of our individual identity, and to be deprived of it, to be unable to provide for our families and ourselves, can damage our self-worth and personal dignity.

This individual impact, and its cascading consequences, are at the root of Lynn Nottage’s Sweat developed from months of interviews the playwright conducted with residents in Reading, Pennsylvania.

There is much to unpack in this dense, complex work. What happens to our associations when we feel afraid and besieged? Do we always look for someone or some group to blame when we lose the illusion of control we have over our lives? Why does our individual ambition and desire for “more” – better jobs, better wages, better chances, more advancement – sometimes disrupt our inner circle of friends and family? How do we remain committed to our ideals of equity and inclusion when it challenges our own privilege and place? How is it possible that so many suffering so much have been relatively invisible in a time of such abundance and wealth?

By the time you see a performance of Sweat, Chicago will have elected a Black female mayor. At this moment in Chicago, as we look to our future being less encumbered by machine politics or a slavishness to real estate development, and with a hope for a more equitable city for all Chicagoans, this play echoes the challenges we face with historic community disinvestment, rapid gentrification and displacement in communities of color, and a past troubled by racial and ethnic discord that color the very fabric of who we are as the third largest city in the country.

These are some of the issues – and the questions they inspire – in this most American of plays at this unique moment in time. We are excited for you to see this production, to learn more about these issues in your classrooms, and to engage with us in conversations about the play, and about the issues that face us as a city and a nation.
Blue-Collar Blues

Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Lynn Nottage explores the damage done when shrinking opportunities pit worker against worker

by THOMAS CONNORS

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As historians often try to make clear, the us-and-them divisiveness that defines American life today did not spring full-blown from the election of 2016: our cultural discord goes back decades. And while its causes are varied, the threads of race and the economy are woven deep into the fabric of this dilemma. With Sweat—for which she won her second Pulitzer Prize—playwright Lynn Nottage unravels these knots and reminds us that so much of what sets us at odds is often beyond our control.

Set in a bar in blue-collar Reading, Pennsylvania (one of the poorest cities in the country), Sweat moves back and forth between 2000 and 2008 as it charts the achievements and defeats of residents whose lives depend upon the fortunes of a local factory. It’s a rough ride, not only for the strains of the work (or the lack there of), but for the way in which the pinch of physical and emotional hunger can gut the deepest friendships.

“The plays deals with the heartbeat of America,” says director Ron OJ Parson. “I know that sounds like an old Chevy commercial, but that’s really what it is all about. It deals with all the societal issues we are dealing with today, including drug addiction, alcoholism, racism, the loss of jobs, class.”

A resident artist at Court Theatre and a co-founder and former artistic director of The Onyx Theatre Ensemble, Parson is drawn to plays that have an historical element to them, such as the work of August Wilson, which he has directed a number of times. Although Nottage isn’t diving into the deep past with Sweat, in the ever-accelerating age we live in, today is quickly yesterday and the present is history before we know it. “Richness of character also interests me,” notes Parson. “I like audiences to feel what’s on stage—not just see it, not just hear it. I think when you have a richness of character, as you do in Lynn’s plays, you’re able to make people do that.”

Keith Kupferer, whose Goodman credits include appearances in Ellen Fairey’s Support Group for Men and Yasmina Reza’s God of Carnage, is one of the actors charged with bringing audiences into the world his character inhabits. Kupferer plays Stan, who once did factory work but is now behind the bar. “I know exactly from where my character is coming,” says the actor. “I’ve worked many jobs and am attuned to the blue-collar sensibility. The play may be educational to more affluent members of the audience, but I already know the realities of how the ‘other half’ lives. That’s why I believe this play is so important and beautiful and necessary at this point in time.”

Like Kupferer, Casillas thinks Sweat hits home in its realistic depiction and artful dissection of lives tottering on the edge. “What I love about the play is that it is a big eye-opener on how a lot of Americans live and struggle. Living here in Chicago you can be distracted by the city lifestyle. It’s easy to forget that there are small towns all over America that depend solely on work in factories. It makes brunch and cupcake shops seem extremely inessential.”

Although Nottage is fearless in exploring the social disintegration that so often trails the struggle to make ends meet, Sweat is a play about people, not an editorial. It may be just a play, but if an audience can “feel what’s onstage,” as Parson hopes, perhaps hearts and minds can be altered. “Theater should make us think about who we are,” asserts Parson. “Theater can change the world.”

Thomas Connors is a Chicago-based freelance writer and the Chicago Editor of Playbill.
Before *Sweat* came to the Goodman, the play had a life in previous productions in different parts of the country. Playwright Lynn Nottage was commissioned (hired) to write *Sweat* by the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in Ashland, Oregon and Arena Stage in Washington DC. In order to conduct research for the play, Nottage spent about two years in Reading, Pennsylvania interviewing over 100 people of varying occupations and socio-economic statuses. She then used these interviews to generate material for the new script.

Originally, *Sweat* was a co-production, in which two or more different theatre companies work together and pool their resources to produce a play. Often in co-productions, the play will be performed at both theatres, which was the case with *Sweat*. After premiering at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in 2015, the play moved to Arena Stage in 2016, as highlighted in this video.

After its performances in Oregon and DC, in late 2016 *Sweat* began an off-Broadway run at the Public Theater in New York City. The day after the final performance of the production at the Public, the cast, crew, and Playwright travelled to Reading, Pennsylvania to perform *Sweat* for the town that the play was based on. Nottage called the response from the audience “overwhelming” and said that the citizens “felt that it was enormously reflective of their experience.” The play then transferred to Broadway in 2017, marking Lynn Nottage’s Broadway debut.
In this New York Public Library Podcast, CNN Contributor Michaela Angela Davis moderates a conversation between playwright Lynn Nottage, several members of the original Broadway cast of Sweat (Michelle Wilson, Carlo Alban, and John Earl Jelks), and a live audience. Listen to hear the artists’ views on how the play interacts with race and white privilege, and what it means that even though the original production opened before the 2016 election, Sweat is considered a response to the Trump era.
In plays, playwrights give the setting for each scene: where in the world of the play does this scene take place, when does it happen, and who’s on stage. This information is often referred to as “At Rise”, indicating what is to be seen by the audience when the curtain rises or, in more modern times, when the lights come up. In Sweat, Lynn Nottage sets not only the scene of her characters, but includes the scene of what’s happening politically in the United States and in and near Reading, PA with real accounts of news items.

**Act 1, Scene 6**  
May 5, 2000  
Outside it’s 84 F.

*In the news:* The U.S. unemployment rate tumbles to a 30-year low, 3.9%. The City of Reading fires a dozen employees, fearing a deficit of $10,000,000. Allen Iverson and the Philadelphia 76ers prepare for Game 1 of the Eastern Conference Semifinals.

**Transition between Act 2, Scenes 6 and 7**  
September 24, 2008  

*In the news:* President Bush prepares to present a very dire warning to the American people. He will suggest that unless Congress approves a $700,000,000,000 bailout for Wall Street, and it is approved within a matter of only a few days, there will be ominous consequences for the entire U.S. economy and for millions of Americans.

These specific newsbreaks speak to the very real economic reality of the characters in the play. This convention serves as a reminder for those of us that were old enough to remember precisely what was happening, and as documentation and archive for those who weren’t. The dramaturg (a person who works on a play in various capacities including researching and compiling educational materials and history related to the play or past productions) doesn’t have to search for what was going on in any particular day, Nottage gives it to them. At least, she provides the things she thought relevant to her characters and events. While some of the “in the news” sections refer and give context to the larger socio-political and economic situation, the news lines also elevate and reflect very particular elements of the play’s actions.

**Act 2, Scene 2**  
July 17, 2000  
Eight years earlier.  
Outside it’s 82F.

*In the news:* Federal eligibility guidelines ease, allowing more families in Reading public schools to receive free and reduced school lunches. Several U.S. companies, including 3M, Johnson & Johnson, and General Electrics, increase leadership development internally, expanding opportunities for minority employees.

By this point in the play, we know that Cynthia has been hired into a management position. This news line reflects the more widespread trend to hire greater numbers of minorities into leadership positions, but in conjunction with the way events unfold in the play, it makes the reader and audience wonder what some of the underlying motives for that leadership move are. To this end, it seems that another function of including the news is to use the play’s scenarios to challenge, juxtapose, and comment on the realities of the times.

The news lines indicate not only what’s happening nationwide, but also locally in Reading, the real town the play is set in, though it is harder to fact-check these reportings. The formulaic “in the news” segments are very precise. The specific day is set, along with the weather—and those of us in Chicago know how much weather can impact the actions of a city’s citizens. In at least one of the scenes, the news bleeds into the scene and the characters respond to the news events.

**Act 1, Scene 4**  
March 2, 2000  
Outside it’s 48F.

*In the news:* In the Republican Presidential Debate, Alan Keyes, John McCain and George Bush. In Reading, an overnight fire leaves a mother with five children homeless. Baldwin Hardware Corporation, a brass hardware maker, announces plans to open a new 280,000-square-foot facility in Leesport.

television.

STAN: Who are you liking?
BRUCIE: Don’t matter. They’ll all shit on us in the end.
STAN: What do you think of this Bush guy?
BRUCIE: I dunno. He looks like a little fucking chimp. But, if I gotta go with someone, Bradley’s my man. Always liked him, cut through the bullshit, go to the ball, kept it up in the air.
STAN: Yeah, for sure, a real smart player. Like ‘im, don’t know how good a president he’d be, but I’d want him in a pickup game. You watching this?
BRUCIE: Nah.

Brucie and Stan interact with the real world around them. The play is fictional, the characters are fictional, but they are based on interviews with real people surrounding real events. The news headlines that occur at the beginning of each scene appear to be real, with many of these events actually reported near those dates.

The fact that the news highlights seem to be factual and appropriately timed add to the realness of the close-to-imaginary circumstances of the world of the play. It places the characters in conversation with the very things going on in the actual, real world, reminding the readers and audience that this is not a play about fake or made-up things. It sets up the social and political contexts, helping to illuminate why the events of the play are happening. In a “post-truth” society that almost allows for fake news to be passed off as real, there’s nothing fake about the circumstances or environment of this play.

Ronald Conner (Evan) and Mike Cherry (Jason) in rehearsal for the Chicago premiere of “Sweat” by Lynn Nottage, directed by Ron OJ Parson at Goodman Theatre. Photo by Cody Nieset.
Stranger than Fiction: Documentary Theatre
by SAM MAUCERI

While many plays are created in entirely fictional worlds with characters spawned from the playwright’s imagination, others are created directly from real-life events and people. Theatre that uses documentary materials, such as interviews, newspapers, journals, letters, and reports is often called documentary theatre. Documentary theatre techniques have been used over the past century to respond to pressing items in the news and to explore social issues from often unheard perspectives.

In the process of developing Sweat, Lynn Nottage interviewed 100 residents of Reading, Pennsylvania between 2012 and 2014. She then used these stories as inspiration for many of the characters and circumstances in the play, transforming real-life inspiration into a fictional work. Here are some other notable examples of American plays which present the facts on stage using a variety of documentary theatre techniques.

**Zoot Suit (1979) – Luis Valdez**
In 1942, the LAPD arrested 17 young Mexican-American men for the murder of Jose Diaz. This would become known as the Sleepy Lagoon Murder. The men were convicted despite minimal evidence to prove their guilt and little attention paid to due process. These unjust convictions highlighted the preexisting racial tensions between white and Mexican-American citizens of LA and the schism in how each group interpreted such events. This ongoing demonization of Chicano youth led to what is now known as the Zoot Suit Riots. In a week-long series of attacks in 1943, white American servicemen and civilians in LA attacked “zoot suiters”, young primarily Mexican-American men who wore a style of oversized suit derived from working-class Black communities. The white servicemen and civilians physically attacked the zoot suiters and publicly stripped them of their suits.

Reflecting on these injustices, Luis Valdez drew from letters written by the defendants from prison as well as court transcripts to create a loosely fictionalized theatrical account of the trial and subsequent riots. The resulting play with incidental music, Zoot Suit, was the first Chicano play to be performed on Broadway and

Luis Valdez with the original cast of “Zoot Suit”, 1978. Image courtesy of The Los Angeles Times.
received a New York revival in 2017.

**Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992 (1994) – Anna Deavere Smith**

Anna Deveare Smith is an American actor and playwright who you may recognize from her role as Bo’s mother on *Blackish*. Through her wide array of solo performance pieces, Smith pioneered **verbatim theatre**, a genre in which plays are constructed from the exact words of real people. In verbatim theatre, some playwrights may choose to use solely text gathered from real people throughout the play, while other playwrights may juxtapose text taken verbatim with imagined scenes.

In **Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992**, Smith **portrays dozens of real people** reflecting on the aftermath of the Rodney King trial, in which 4 LAPD officers were acquitted for the beating of unarmed citizen, Rodney King, despite the attack being caught entirely on video. The acquittal caused national outrage and, along with mounting distrust of the LAPD and the judicial system amongst Black communities, was the catalyst for the 1992 Los Angeles Riots. Smith created **Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992** using the exact words of community members from over 300 interviews she conducted around the events.

**The Laramie Project (2000) – Moises Kaufman and the Tectonic Theatre Project**

The Laramie Project is another example of high-profile verbatim theatre. In 1998, 21-year-old Matthew Shepard was murdered in Laramie, Wyoming in a violent, homophobic hate crime that captured national attention. In the wake of this devastating crime, Moises Kaufman and his theatre ensemble, the **Tectonic Theatre Project**, conducted hundreds of interviews with citizens of Laramie, which they compiled, arranged, and performed verbatim. The play notably includes the direct text from the testimony of one of the two perpetrators and the moving statement made in court by Matthew’s father, Dennis Shepard. **The Laramie Project** has been performed worldwide, won multiple awards, and has since become **the first in a two-play cycle** created by Tectonic, the second being *The Laramie Project: Ten Years Later.*

**Until the Flood (2016) – Dael Orlandersmith**

Playwright **Dael Orlandersmith**, who also wrote *Lady in Denmark*, which premiered at the Goodman in the fall of 2018 and was part of the School Matinee Series, is most known for her documentary one-woman plays, which she often performs herself. In 2016, **Orlandersmith created Until the Flood**, a one-woman show set in Ferguson, Missouri after the murder of unarmed Black teenager Michael Brown, based on interviews she conducted in Ferguson. Throughout the play, Orlandersmith portrays eight different characters, created from composites of real people she interviewed in and around Ferguson. Orlandersmith performed **Until the Flood at the Goodman** in spring 2018.
When *Sweat* made its New York premiere five days before the election of Donald Trump, it felt undeniably of-the-moment. Following a group of factory workers in Pennsylvania through the Great Recession, *Sweat* asks questions like, what does our country owe us? Does it owe everyone equally? Who do you blame when you don’t get what you deserve? Although these questions are finding new relevance today, they are not new. *Sweat* joins a lineage of plays which ask similar questions of the American Dream. For our purposes, we’ll call this tradition American working-class realism.

What Is Realism?
A work can be called realism if it tries to show the world as it actually is. There are realist paintings, novels, and films. Realism in theatre emerged in the mid-19th century as a reaction to “melodrama.” Melodramas are over the top; characters don’t speak the way we actually speak, they are usually either pure good or pure evil, and there’s occasionally even magic. Think *Riverdale.* Because realism in theater was a reaction to melodrama, defining realism is easiest by looking at what realism is not. The musical *Hamilton* is not realism because our founding fathers did not actually burst out into song and dance. The tragedy *Romeo & Juliet* isn’t realism because real people don’t speak extemporaneously in poetry, nor do they fall in love at first sight. The fairy tale *Beauty and the Beast* isn’t realism—not just because of the talking teacups—but because Belle is pure good and the Beast learns a lesson in the end, turning from evil to good. These works do not show life as it actually is. In realist plays characters talk the way real people talk, they aren’t just good or just bad, there’s no magic, people only sing and dance as much as we do in real life, and although the audience might learn a lesson by the end, the characters usually don’t. Realism remains in vogue after 150 years because it is malleable and broad enough to encompass many different styles and tastes. Very few plays are perfect examples of just one style; most realist plays contain elements of other styles, like naturalism or expressionism.

What about the working-class?
Often called “the father of realism” in drama, Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen popularized realism in Europe with plays such as 1879’s *A Doll’s House.* Russian playwright Anton Chekhov furthered realism in theater globally with plays like 1899’s *Uncle Vanya.* But Chekhov and Ibsen wrote about wealthy families, conflicted doctors, and wistful aristocrats. Working class characters usually only served as conduits for exposition about their wealthy employers.

Eugene O’Neill is frequently credited with bringing realism to the United States in the 1920s. Unlike Chekhov and Ibsen,

What’s Naturalism?
Naturalism is more brutally pessimistic than realism. It frequently shows particularly hopeless characters struggling to make moral choices and failing. The characters in naturalist plays are unable to overcome the miserable fate imposed by society and circumstance. The plays we are discussing are not perfect examples of naturalism, but many have naturalist elements.

What’s Expressionism?
Expressionism is less realistic and more symbolic than realism or naturalism. Expressionism in theatre frequently means the design of the play reflects the characters’ inner psychology, rather than the reality of the setting. It can also mean characters are symbols for concepts, without the nuance of real people. Once again, none of the plays in this article are examples of pure expressionism. But a few have expressionist elements.
his plays were not exclusively centered on the rich. He wrote *Beyond the Horizon* about farmers, *Anna Christie* about a sex worker, and *Emperor Jones* about a black porter. These plays, however, are also not exclusively realism. It is O'Neill’s expressionist plays, his adaptations of Greek plays, and his naturalist plays about middle and upper-middle-class families which define his career. O'Neill may have brought realism to the United States, but it was one of his successors who focused the genre on the working-class.

**American Working-Class Realism: The Greatest Hits, 1935-1985**

If O'Neill laid the foundation for American working-class realism, Clifford Odets set the cornerstone. Odets wrote *Awake and Sing!* in 1935. The play follows a Jewish family, the Bergers, as they struggle with money and their reputation in the Bronx. The mother, Bessie, forces her daughter, Hennie, to marry a man she does not love because she is pregnant and the family can neither afford to care for the child, nor can they weather the damage that an out-of-wedlock child would cause to their reputation. Odets took a popular theatrical form, realism, and used it to highlight untold stories. Yet, his contributions to working-class realism are overshadowed by some of the most famous plays and playwrights not only of the genre, but the century.

So, Willy takes his own life the day before he would have finally owned his house. Although Willy has many personal character flaws (he has an affair and treats his sons poorly), capitalism’s devaluation of the working man is what ultimately drives Willy to suicide. Miller adapts Odets’ working-class realism, adds the grim weight of naturalism and just a splash of expressionism to create a tragic challenge to the American Dream.

Chicago’s South Side and, critically, working class people of color take center stage in Lorraine Hansberry’s 1959 play, *A Raisin in the Sun*. The play, one of the foremost examples of realism in the 20th century, tells the story of the Younger family hoping to move out of their too-small apartment into a home in a white neighborhood. Lena, the mother, hopes to use the money from her husband’s life insurance policy to pay for the home, but her son loses it all
in a failed business venture. The play ends on a hopeful note with the family deciding to move even without the money. Hansberry complicates Miller’s challenge to the American Dream, asking what’s to be done about Black Americans’ dreams, deferred because of their race.

Playwright August Wilson documented 100 years of the African-American experience in his series of ten plays called the Century Cycle, with one play for each decade in the 20th century. Though written in 1985, Fences represents the 1950s in the cycle. It follows Troy, a trash collector who was barred from entering the then all-white Major Leagues, although he was an excellent baseball player. Troy has difficulty coming to terms with his life, especially when his son, Cory, is offered a football scholarship. The play concludes seven years later at Troy's funeral, where we learn that Cory has joined the Marines rather than going to college. Wilson adds to the canon of realism primarily through his exploration of theme. He reexamines Hansberry’s thematic question, showing how Black dreams deferred echo from Troy to Cory, across generation.

After ‘85
Movements in theater rarely disappear, but new examples of working-class realism like that of Odets became less common in the 1990s and 2000s. Realism took an upper-middle-class turn. Conversely, theater about the working class became less realistic, like Suzan-Lori Parks Topdog/Underdog, about a Black Abraham Lincoln impersonator.

In Sweat, Lynn Nottage borrows from these mid-century plays more than from those of her contemporaries. You will see challenges to capitalism, the American Dream, and racial injustice. But she also creates a style all her own. Sweat extends past the edge of the stage, hoping to bring the audience into a dialogue on the issues. Ultimately what’s remarkable about the play is exactly what was remarkable about Raisin in the Sun: the recombination of old styles in order to highlight unheard voices, building something entirely new.
Sweat shows us a slice of life in working-class America, and features characters who struggle to get by as the economy of their town changes drastically. The town in question is a real American city, Reading, Pennsylvania, which has seen more than its fair share of economic struggle over the past few decades.

Reading, Pennsylvania: A Snapshot
by SAM MAUCERI

Reading At A Glance
Reading, Pennsylvania is a city with surrounding suburbs in Berks County in southeastern Pennsylvania, and is the 5th most populous city in Pennsylvania, with a population of 88,082 according to the 2010 Census. The major employers in Reading include Reading Hospital, East Penn Manufacturing Co. (the US’s largest single-site producer of lead batteries), the Pennsylvania State government, and Wal-Mart. Reading’s population is primarily Latinx or Hispanic, as defined by the Census which includes Latinx people of all racial groups (64.7%), white and non-Latinx/Hispanic (23.2%), and multi-racial (19.6%). Reading has several cultural institutions, such as the Reading Symphony Orchestra and the Reading Public Museum, which features a planetarium and an arboretum. The city is also known for its now defunct Reading Railroad, which is the namesake for one of the four railroads in the board game Monopoly.

Economic Downturn
While Reading once had a booming iron industry, manufacturing plants, and prominent outlet shopping, citizens of the town have suffered from tremendous rates of unemployment and poverty over the past two decades. The Census estimates that in 2017, 36.6% of Reading’s population lived below the poverty line. This was the largest per capita rate of poverty in the United States, prompting the New York Times to call Reading “the nation’s poorest city” in 2012, when the poverty rate soared to 41.3%.

This economic downturn had serious ramifications for employees in many sectors,
and most notably for teachers in public schools. In the face of its $40 million budget deficit and a decision by Governor Tom Corbett to reduce funding for the Reading School District by $18 million, the school district laid off 110 teachers in a single week in June 2012. Not only did the layoffs contribute to the increasing unemployment of young people in Reading, it also directly affected access to quality public education for school-age children. The budget cuts created larger class sizes and overpopulation, particularly in elementary schools. Reading locals also raised concerns about anticipated decreased access to public pre-kindergarten and potential elimination of necessary resources and classroom supports for diverse learners.

This depletion of quality education in Reading is compounded with low college and high school graduation rates. The percentage of high school graduates in Reading is 66.5%, while the national percentage is 85%. Additionally, the percentage of Reading citizens with a bachelor’s degree is only 9.2%, while the national percentage is 33%. Lower graduation rates and education access generally correlate to a lower level of income in the United States, leaving many in Reading’s working population unable to secure full-time positions and positions with benefits, like reliable healthcare and retirement savings programs. Even citizens who have earned associate’s degrees or other forms of higher education have found themselves replaced or moved from their former full-time positions, in favor of the few who do have bachelor’s degrees. Meanwhile, the number of job opportunities in Reading that don’t require degrees is dwindling, resulting in an unemployment rate of 6.2% in 2018.

**New Neighbors**

Throughout the 2000s, the flagging economy coincided with numerous New York state residents relocating to Reading, leaving behind high rent prices and economic drought in their former hometowns. The bulk of the residents who relocated to Reading during this time were Latinx and Hispanic, severely underpaid in their previous jobs, and unable to afford the cost of living in other areas. Due to the wage gap, in which white workers are unfairly paid more than workers of color for equal work, Latinx and Hispanic employees are frequently offered wages that are already significantly lower than wages offered to white workers. In Reading, many of the Latinx and Hispanic residents who began working in lower-wage jobs were actually making more than they were in their previous city. These new wages were an upward financial move for historically underpaid Latinx and Hispanic workers, and employers knew that they would save money by hiring people who would jump at the chance for higher wages than they had made previously, but which were still lower than what the same employers were paying white workers.

Meanwhile, now that longtime Reading residents, who were primarily white and without higher education, were no longer considered eligible for full-time jobs, they began looking for...
lower-wage jobs. However, even lower-wage job opportunities had become scarce due to employers hiring newer residents for those positions. This newfound competition for jobs resulted in significant racial scapegoating and racial tension, which are prominent themes in *Sweat*. Nonetheless, it is important to remember that it was the employers and companies who manipulated their workers by offering such disparate wages. The companies in question are responsible for pitting different racial groups against each other by systematically underpaying workers to meet their bottom line.

**Looking Forward**

While Reading continues to struggle economically, the city is eager to find ways to move forward towards a brighter future. In 2018, Reading school district began weighing plans to reorganize middle school students into new buildings in order to accommodate its large number of elementary students (operating at 108% capacity), which began implementation in the 2018-2019 school year. In a State of the City address on January 31, 2019, Reading Mayor Wally Scott acknowledged that while the city faces challenges, he believes that a generation of new leaders will be able to pull it out of its current economic situation. Reading has also been the birthplace of many prominent artists and culture-makers, such as iconic visual artist Keith Haring, novelist and poet John Updike, and ubiquitous pop star Taylor Swift.

Although the current economic situation in Reading could certainly improve, we can see Readings future in the people who have strived for change in their communities and in their own lives. What do you think the citizens of Reading would be able to accomplish if their town’s economy actually supported the possibility of their upward mobility? How would Reading citizens treat each other differently if every member of their community was paid fairly and equally, without manipulation by employers? What similarities or differences do you see between Reading’s economic and educational opportunities and Chicago’s?

**Resources:**

You may sometimes hear about unions in the news, or maybe you know someone who is in a union. But what exactly is a union and what purpose does it serve?

Acting alone, it is often very difficult for an individual worker to demand higher wages, to secure better benefits, or to resolve disputes between employees and an employer. One person has very little leverage against a large company. However, when workers decide to join together in an organization that represents their interests in the workplace, their power to make these demands increases significantly. Acting collectively, employees in a workplace can slow down the functioning of a business or even go on strike, and this gives them a source of leverage. In short, a union is simply a body that represents workers and collectively bargains or mobilizes on their behalf. In general, the wages and benefits workers are able to win help raise the standard for wages and benefits for all workers.

Unions are also a vehicle that working people can use to fight for broader rights, not just those of the union’s members. Today, unions are mobilizing their members and the public in support of immigrant workers’ rights, for a higher minimum wage for everyone, for healthcare, and for other reforms to advance social and economic justice. Historically, unions were critical in winning us the 8-hour day, and, famously, the weekend.

In 1935, after a huge surge of organizing, workers and their unions got Congress to pass legislation giving workers the right to join a union if they so choose. The right to form a union is also enshrined in the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

However, opponents of unions argue that workplaces run more efficiently without union interference. Furthermore, they argue that while unions collect dues from their members, these organizations cannot guarantee better conditions. They view dues as a burden workers shouldn’t have to bear. (The amount workers pay in dues varies. In the United Auto Workers, dues are 1% to 1.5% of gross wages, representing about two hours of a worker’s pay per month.)

Some opponents also argue that by forcing employers to pay higher wages, unions limit the number of jobs available to others. Writes Paul Roderick Gregory, a research fellow at the right-wing Hoover Institution, in Forbes magazine:

Unions, such as the UAW [United Auto Workers], bring a small number of privileged workers into the middle class, while others with the same qualifications sit on the outside looking in. Their high pay limits the number of “middle class” jobs. Others with the same qualifications have to scratch their way into the middle class. They have not won the “union lottery ticket.”

Considering that unions are usually able to negotiate better salaries, benefits, and working conditions for the workers they represent, it should not come as a surprise that businesses seeking to cut costs and maximize profits would oppose
Unions. Employers typically fight tooth and nail to keep workers from successfully organizing. If workers do win a majority of votes in a union election, very often they encounter intense resistance in trying to win a first contract (an agreement with the employer that usually runs several years).

So do unions really make a difference? The U.S. Department of Labor’s Bureau of Labor Statistics looked at the numbers in a 2013 report. They found that union members not only earn significantly more than nonunion workers, they have better benefits.

- Union workers’ are higher: In 2011, they averaged $23.02 per hour compared with $19.51 per hour for nonunion workers.
- Union workers have much better benefits (such as health insurance) than nonunion workers, on average. In 2011, the average total value of the benefits that union workers received was $14.67 per worker per hour worked. But non-union workers got only $7.56 per worker per hour in benefits. According to the report: “While the difference between union and nonunion wages has remained fairly consistent over time, the difference between union and nonunion benefit costs appears to have widened” between 2001 and 2011.
- Union workers generally have more time off. This includes family leave to take care of a newborn or an ailing family member. Union workers have 20% more vacation days than non-union workers, on average.
- Private sector workers who were in unions were much more likely to have a retirement plan than nonunion workers (90% vs. 61%)

The influence of unions does not end in the workplace. Because they represent large numbers of people who can be organized to vote as blocs, unions are able to exert significant influence within electoral politics. As policy analyst Sean McElwee wrote in an April 15, 2015 article for Al Jazeera America, unions represent one of the few counterweights to the influence of wealthy donors in our political system. McElwee wrote:

Unions not only give their members a voice at work but also can have much broader political effects. By mobilizing voters and contributing to campaigns, organized labor is in effect the only lobbying group operating in the interest of ordinary Americans.

In a 1998 study, political scientists Benjamin Radcliff and Martin Saiz found that “the relative strength of the labor movement across the American states is one of the principal determinants of policy liberalism.” They found that the rate of unionization has a dramatic effects on spending for Aid to Families With Dependent Children and education as well as on tax progressivity and that these effects are stronger than

Democratic governors and Democratic legislatures. As Radcliff told me, “strong labor unions are able to influence public policy, so as to create programs ... that benefit everyone in society, not merely organized workers.”

One way unions reduced inequality was by boosting voter turnout, which gave them political leverage. It’s rarely noted, but the campaign for Seattle’s $15 minimum hourly wage could not have succeeded without a massive, union-led voter registration drive.

For Discussion
1. How much of the material in this reading was new to you, and how much was already familiar? Do you have any questions about what you read?
2. According to the reading, what is a union?
3. What are some of the arguments raised by opponents of unions?
4. According to the reading, what are some of the potential benefits of joining a union?
5. According to the reading, what value might unions have for society in general?
6. What do you think? Do you believe that joining a union is worthwhile?

For more information about Morningside Center, click here.
The emergence of a Black middle class in the United States was rooted primarily in two vocations – jobs for the US Postal Service and jobs as Pullman car porters on the railroads.

The US Postal Service employed newly-enfranchised Blacks as postmasters, clerks, and letter carriers after the Civil War ended. And even though racial discrimination and Jim Crow laws restricted advancement, many African Americans found steady, valuable jobs in urban post offices and railway mail clerks.

The railroad also provided opportunities to Black men and women as porters and maids on passenger sleeping cars. It was this group of workers that helped to found the first Black labor union in the country.

Chicago’s south side Pullman neighborhood was the home for the manufacturing of passenger cars that dominated railroad travel. George Pullman was an American industrialist who debuted the first railroad sleeping car in 1859. After several of the cars garnered national attention as part of the train that bore Abraham Lincoln’s body back to Springfield, they became the standard for luxury passenger travel for the rapidly expanding railroad.

Pullman heavily recruited African-Americans from the South to work as maids, waiters, porters, and nannies to his wealthy white passengers, relying on the conditioning of master-servant relationships of slavery to ensure perfect servitude on the trains. Because there were limited jobs for the newly-emancipated workforce, people quickly signed up, making the railway the largest employer of African-American men by 1920.

Trains were the only way to move across the country at the time, and the elegant and comfortable Pullman cars transported both the famous and the infamous. The education and experience porters and maids gleaned from their travel and proximity to the passengers, created an elite class of the African-American community that had social and cultural resonance across the country, but especially in the South. This elite class carried news of new industrial opportunities from the North, transported the music of jazz and blues to remote areas, and smuggled Black newspapers, printed in Chicago, to communities in the South where such publications were banned.

But despite the steady salary and adventure of travel, working conditions were not optimal.
Porters and maids worked long hours, had no opportunities for advancement, and were paid cheap wages, out of which they had to pay for their food and the uniforms they were required to wear.

Unable to be a part of the segregated American Railway Union founded by Eugene Debs in the late-1800s, a small group of disgruntled Pullman porters contacted A. Phillip Randolph, a labor activist, to form a separate union of sleeping car porters and maids. Randolph had successfully organized elevator operators in New York, and had been the president of the Brotherhood of Workers of America, a Virginia union of Black shipyard and dock workers.

Many African-Americans considered labor unions to be troublemakers that worked against Black workers’ interests, and certainly the racist, contentious history of American labor unions is problematic. But Randolph worked diligently to win over support, using the Black press to sway public opinion, and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and Maids (BSCPM), founded in 1925, became the first national Black trade union in America. By 1928, more than half of all porters and maids belonged to the Brotherhood.

Pullman, of course, refused to negotiate with the newly-formed union and branded Randolph a socialist, and communist, employing intimidation, threats and his considerable influence to turn Chicago’s Black leaders against the unionizing efforts. But after the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt as President in 1932, Congress passed the Railway Labor Act in 1934, which forced Pullman to bargain with the BSCPM. Membership in the Brotherhood skyrocketed to more than 7000, and the American Federation of Labor (AFL), the largest white labor union in the country at that time, recognized the growing numbers and power of Black workers and put its support behind the Brotherhood. After much struggle and negotiation, the Pullman Company signed a labor agreement with the Brotherhood in 1937, which mandated more than $2,000,000 in pay increases, a shorter work week, and overtime pay.

These wage gains, combined with passenger tips, the educative nature of travel and exposure, built an African-American class that sent their children and grandchildren to college in record numbers, ensuring a burgeoning Black middle class in Chicago and across the country.
Students Benefit When Teachers Unions are Strong
by CAROL CAREF, PhD, Education Policy Analyst for Chicago Teachers Union

Teachers’ unions have a special responsibility, not only to our members, but to the students we serve. Our members wouldn’t have it any other way! We did not go into education for the money. We are in schools because we care about our students. This is true not only of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), but of many teachers’ unions across the country, including Los Angeles and West Virginia, as shown by pro-student demands in their recent strikes and demonstrations.

The February strike of teachers and paraprofessionals at Chicago International Charter School (CICS) is a case in point. During their two weeks out in frigid weather, these champions never lost their spirit or determination to fight for their students. In the end, they won a pay raise (which contributes to the schools’ staffing stability), special education services, class size reductions, and protections for counselors and social workers.

Class size is an issue CTU has fought with Chicago Public Schools (CPS) about for decades. At 28-32 students, CPS has one of the larger class sizes in Illinois, and many classrooms exceed even this high limit. Multiple studies have proven the value of class sizes of 20, but instead of lowering class size, CPS has wasted hundreds of millions of dollars over the years on after-school programs, in-class curricula, and special training programs that give money to businesses but do nothing for students. To decrease class sizes, CPS would need to hire more teachers, and in some cases, change school boundaries so as to have a sufficient number of classrooms. Only 128 (of 513) CPS district schools have libraries staffed with a school librarian.

CPS’ 108 school nurses typically serve five schools a week, and the district’s 175 school psychologists and 250 social workers are also spread thin across 360,000 students. Bilingual and special education services are understaffed as well.

In the last contract fight, CTU won 20 Sustainable Community Schools (SCS). These schools are partnered with community groups and given extra funding to fill in some of the missing pieces. In our current contract campaign, CTU is proposing that the number of SCS be increased to 75. Also, we’re proposing class sizes of 20 for kindergarten, and 24 in lower grades, as well as sufficient numbers of paraprofessionals, nurses, social workers, psychologists, special education, and bilingual teachers.

Lack of affordable housing has played a major role in the flight of working-class families, particularly Black families, out of Chicago, and several contract proposals address this issue. Affordable housing is an essential need for families of our students, including the more than 20,000 homeless students, with that definition including students in shelters and families doubled up. Affordable housing is also necessary for CTU members, especially paraprofessionals, whose pay is below what is needed to live in Chicago.

Despite civil-rights era successes in making segregation of public schools in the US illegal, CPS schools are still functionally segregated, both racially and economically. 65% of Black students attend racially segregated schools. These are the schools most likely to be closed and/or to have insufficient services for homeless, traumatized, or special education students. CTU has continuously highlighted these issues and created contract proposals to address them.

CPS has gone out of its way to manipulate school boundaries (called gerrymandering) in ways that maintain segregation. One of many such examples is on the near west side, where two Black schools, Dett and Brown, sit within a mile of Skinner, a school in a gentrifying area with a growing school population. Instead of expanding the boundaries of Dett or Brown to absorb Skinner’s students, CPS is spending $20 million on an annex for Skinner. Across the city, CPS spends hundreds of millions of dollars in unnecessary new construction rather than taking advantage of opportunities to integrate.

The Chicago Teachers Union fights for our predominantly Black and Latinx students to have the same educational opportunities that students in wealthy suburbs have. This means fighting for changes within the school system, for full funding, and for an equitable city, with adequate housing, sanctuary for students and families without documents, employment and living-wage jobs, a fair justice system, and health care for all. Our students have lives outside the school walls and we have to pay attention to the issues that impact them both in and out of school.
The first labor unions in the United States were established in the 1700s by craftsmen (shoemakers, carpenters, bakers, etc.) in order to set prices for their goods and services. As these “skill-based” unions expanded and coalesced, they began to advocate for more expansive workers’ rights, including shorter work days and higher wages. Until the mid-1800s, craft unions primarily operated locally, using collective bargaining and the threat of city-wide strikes to negotiate with their employers. That changed in 1866 with the creation of the National Labor Union (NLU), a political organization that united craft unions across the United States to advocate for workers’ rights on the national level. The NLU also opened its doors to “unskilled” factory workers and farmers, who rarely had unions of their own. The NLU lobbied for the creation of the eight-hour work day - a demand that had been central to the Chicago labor movement for years - along with several other causes, including the abolition of prison labor. Notably, the NLU did not allow workers of color to join its organization; a move that prompted the founding of the Colored National Labor Union (CNLU) three years later. By 1873, both organizations had collapsed due to economic constraints. Almost immediately, the Knights of Labor (KOL) took up the mantle of workers’ rights. Unlike the National Labor Union before them, the KOL opened its organization to Black Americans, women, and unskilled workers. This diverse coalition protested egregious working conditions in factories across the country, fought for legislation outlawing child labor, and supported unions as they went on strike to secure fairer wages. The KOL supported the United States’ first nationwide strike - The Great Railroad Strike of 1877 - which mobilized 100,000 railway workers and halted half the freight cars in the country. While ultimately unsuccessful, this strike bolstered KOL membership and
inspired future actions by railway workers including the The Great Southwest railroad strike of 1886 and The Pullman Strike of 1894. Between 1881 and 1903, unions in the United States conducted 37,000 strikes.

In 1886, a peaceful rally in Chicago in support of the eight-hour workday turned violent when anarchists threw a bomb at a group of police officers who were attempting to break up the crowd. Police responded by firing upon the protesters. By the end of the night seven police officers and four civilians were dead; dozens more were injured. This event, known as Haymarket Affair or Haymarket Massacre, set off a wave of anti-labor and anti-immigrant sentiment across the country. Police arrested union leaders and left-wing radicals in Chicago and other major cities, often targeting German immigrants who made up much of the industrial workforce.

Unable to withstand mounting public distrust, the Knights of Labor disbanded. National leadership of the labor movement was taken up by the more moderate American Federation of Labor (AFL). Like the NLU before them, the AFL focused on organizing skilled laborers. Led by Samuel Gompers, the organization defended, but did not openly advocate for, strikes. Instead they supported labor-friendly politicians and employed collective bargaining on the local level.

Unions grew as the workforce expanded during World War I. In 1904, the AFL had 1.7 million members. By 1920, they represented over four million. Although the AFL did not endorse wartime strikes, the threat of mass mobilization helped the AFL gain ground in their fight for workers’ rights especially with regards to workplace safety and worker compensation. They did so despite the antagonism of the US Supreme Court, which struck down laws regulating child labor and consistently upheld the legality of anti-union actions on the grounds of “liberty of contract”.

AN ERA OF PROGRESS 1930 to 1947

Labor organizers achieved many of their most significant victories in the 1930s. In 1935 Congress passed the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA), a landmark piece of legislation that guaranteed the rights of workers to unionize and bargain collectively, and outlawed unfair labor practices meant to break unions. The NLRA also established the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), an independent government agency with the power to arbitrate labor disputes and enforce labor laws. The NLRA did not cover agricultural laborers (such as farmers and ranchers), federal workers (such as firefighters, postal workers, and some public school teachers), or independent contractors.

Despite many victories for workers’ rights, many members of the AFL believed the scope of their organization to be too limited. Like the Knights of Labor, this emerging faction - led United Mine Workers of America (UMW) president, John Lewis - believed that meaningful reform could not occur without the inclusion of unskilled industrial workers. In 1938, Lewis and a handful of other union leaders broke away from the AFL to form the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). In its early years, the CIO helped to organize workers in the emerging auto, rubber, and steel industries. By 1945, they represented six million workers.

When the United States entered World War Two both the AFL and CIO pledged not to allow any of their incorporated unions to strike until the conflict was over. While both organizations technically upheld this pledge, John Lewis led the United Mine Workers of America in a strike in 1942 after withdrawing them from the CIO. Mine workers demanded higher pay and safer working conditions; rather than recognize these demands, President Franklin D. Roosevelt temporarily seized control of the mining industry.

When the war ended in 1945, the United States saw an immediate rise in union action. Over the course of just two years, 4.6 million Americans went on strike, ranging from auto and steel workers to meatpackers, electricians and teachers. While President Harry Truman was generally supportive of organized labor, the American public quickly grew weary of work stoppages and fearful of communist activity within the labor movement. In 1946, they elected a Republican majority to the House of Representatives as a check to Truman’s power.

In 1947, the Republican-led congress overrode Truman’s veto.
to pass the Labor Management Relations Act. More commonly known as the Taft-Hartley Act, this legislation was perhaps the most significant blow to unions since the Haymarket Affair. The act gave the president the power to intervene in strikes that threatened national health or safety. It simultaneously weakened unions by criminalizing several forms of political action including secondary boycotts and sympathy strikes. Finally, Taft-Hartley allowed states to pass “right to work” laws, which outlawed compulsory unionism. These laws made it illegal to require anyone to join a union or pay union dues in order to get a job; in doing so, they defunded unions and weakened their bargaining power. As of 2019, twenty-seven states have passed such laws.

LABOR AND CIVIL RIGHTS 1880 to 1968

The relationship between labor unions and workers of color (especially Black workers) in the United States has always been contentious. Most unions in the nineteenth and early twentieth century were segregated. As white unions gained power and prominence, they acted as significant roadblocks for Black Americans attempting to find jobs in the Jim Crow era.

In 1909, for example, white railroad workers in Georgia went on strike to protest the hiring of ten Black firemen. Unions in Atlanta’s cotton mills also struck in the early 1900s, refusing to return to work until every Black employee who was not a janitor or a floor scrubber was fired. Although the AFL was founded in the 1880s as an inclusive organization, they refused to outlaw all-white unions and rarely represented all-Black organizations. Fearing an influx of unskilled labor from Asian countries, European countries, and Mexico, the AFL also supported anti-immigrant legislation including the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the Japanese Exclusion Act of 1924.

The CIO was less tolerant of racism within their organization than the AFL. In 1942 they established the Committee to Abolish Racial Discrimination, which aimed to eliminate racism in the workplace. The CIO also made a concerted effort to represent non-white factory workers; however, before the 1950s, they made few attempts to unionize the agriculture industry, which employed forty percent of African-Americans in the country at the time. This oversight left many workers of color unrepresented.

Drawn together by their mutual support for the pro-union Roosevelt administration in the 1930s and their shared objection to the anti-labor legislation of the 1940s, the AFL and CIO joined forces in 1955 to form the AFL-CIO, an umbrella organization representing over sixteen and a half million workers.

Using its newfound strength, this joint organization soon threw its support behind César Chávez and Dolores Huerta, the founders of the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA) who, in the 1960s, began the first major effort to organize agricultural workers in California. Under the leadership of Chávez and Huerta, Latinx and Filipinx workers joined together to fight for safer working conditions and fairer contracts. In 1965, the NFWA called for an international boycott in support of striking grape pickers. The next year they
joined forces with the AFL-CIO to form the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee (UFW), which continued the fight. The Delano Grape Strike and the surrounding boycotts lasted until 1970, when the UFW signed a new contract with Giumarra Vineyards.

The AFL-CIO’s outreach to communities of color was not limited to agricultural workers in California. Coincidentally, the same day that the AFL and CIO announced their merger, Black leaders in Montgomery, Alabama called for a boycott of the city’s segregated bus system in one of the earliest mass protests of the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement. Over the course of the next two decades, this movement would become inextricably intertwined with organized labor.

During 1950s and 60s, the AFL-CIO built upon the work of the Committee to Abolish Racial Discrimination by providing financial support and widespread publicity to civil rights organizations. The AFL-CIO lobbied for the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and helped organize the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom where Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his famous “I Have a Dream” speech.

After 1965, the focus of the Civil Rights Movement shifted from combatting the overt racism of Southern apartheid to addressing the implicit racism of the Vietnam War and widespread poverty, which disproportionately affected Black Americans. King argued that President Lyndon B. Johnson should redirect the millions of dollars he was spending on imperialist wars overseas to address poverty at home. In the year prior to his assassination, King began to organize the Poor People’s March on Washington to demand the Johnson Administration take action. King spoke in support of the labor movement and, in 1968, marched alongside striking sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee. He called for a general strike in support of these workers.

A SLOW DECLINE 1968 to 2018

In the mid-1950s, 35 percent of American workers were members of a union - an all-time high. By 1983, that number had fallen to 20.1 percent. Causes of this decline include the failure of labor movement to unionize industries in the South during “Operation Dixie”, a distrust of institutions that pushed the Democratic Party towards a pro-business neo-conservatism following the Vietnam War, and
an economic recession in the 1970s that forced workers to abandon unions and accept lower wages. Journalist Dwyer Gunn explores these causes in depth in her 2018 article “What Caused the Decline of Unions In America?”. At the same time, the lasting effects of the Taft-Hartley Act continued to weaken unions as more and more states adopted “Right to Work” laws.

During the Reagan presidency in the 1980s, the labor movement came face to face with one of the most anti-union administrations in American history. In 1981, Reagan famously broke the Air Traffic Controllers unions (PATCO), firing 11,000 federal employees who were striking for higher wages and a shorter workweek. Business leaders interpreted this dramatic action as a sign that the Reagan administration would do nothing to stop managers in the private sector from breaking unions as well. Their estimation proved to be correct; during his presidency Reagan appointed pro-business members to the Department of Labor and the National Labor Relations Board who did little to uphold existing labor laws, consistently siding with companies over their employees in labor disputes.

The rise of automation and the expansion of free trade in the 1990s and early 2000s continued to weaken unions as companies moved plants out of the United States and installed technology capable of replacing thousands of jobs.

During the Great Recession, the Obama Administration was often an ally to organized labor. In 2009, President Barack Obama signed the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, which “prohibits sex-based wage discrimination between men and women”. Throughout his time in office, Obama also called for a higher federal minimum wage and supported laws that made it easier for workers to unionize. Nevertheless, union membership continued to decline; by 2017, only 10.7 percent of the workforce was in a union.

Despite his support from union strongholds like Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin, President Donald Trump has taken a far more adversarial stance on organized labor than the Obama Administration. Trump has attempted to restrict the number or hours that federal workers can spend on union activity while simultaneously freezing their rate of pay. The president has also
appointed dozens of conservative judges to federal courts, including Supreme Court Justices Neil Gorsuch and Brett Kavanaugh, who in June 2018 joined three other conservative justices in ruling against federal labor unions in *Janus vs. AFSCME*. The ruling made it illegal to force workers in the public sector to pay union dues, despite the fact that they receive the benefits of collective bargaining agreements made on their behalf. Like the Taft-Hartley Act before it, this decision will further the fight to defund unions in the United States.

**LABOR TODAY**

Despite recent attacks on the labor movement, unions in the United States have continued to advocate for workers’ rights and even started to expand into new areas of the workforce previously thought untouchable.

In 2007, the National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA) was founded to represent the two million nannies, house cleaners, and care workers living in the United States. In recent years, the organization has seen tremendous growth with over 20,000 members as of 2019. In New York, California, and Hawaii, the NDWA has successfully lobbied state legislatures to pass Domestic Worker’s Bills of Rights. In 2019, the bill was introduced for the first time at the federal level.

In the last five years, teachers across the country have gone on strike, demanding higher wages, more affordable health care, and better classroom conditions. These strikes have been overwhelmingly successful.

In 2018, McDonald’s workers in ten cities struck to change the company’s lax sexual harassment policies and demand a living wage. Organizations like Fast Food Justice continue to advocate for workers’ rights in the food service industry and organize employees to take collective action.

Undoubtedly, unions in the United States will need to adapt in the coming years in order to combat the mounting challenges against them. However, if the last half decade is any indication, the history of organized labor is far from over.
Introduction
In December 2007, the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) declared that the United States was in a recession. This period of economic hardship, now known as the Great Recession, was the most significant financial crisis in America since the Great Depression and many feared the possibility of history repeating itself. Thankfully, America was able to avoid this possibility through controversial bank bailouts and government spending programs. However, the recession still left a lasting impression on our economy and our nation’s communities. To truly understand the devastating impact the Great Recession had on everyday life, we must first evaluate how the crisis began.

The Pre-Crisis Period
In the five years leading up to the recession, the global economic climate was expanding. In fact, this period was filled with such success that many economists named this the start of the Platinum Age of global growth. And in some ways, this was accurate – the boom of consumerism in developed countries lead to an increase in trade, investments, and spending which, in turn, fed the economic machine. However, this period may have been less stable than it was initially believed to be.

Typically, when there is a financial boom of this sort in capitalist countries, the effects can be seen in average income. This is because workers should be paid based on what the market can bear, therefore when the market grows, so should wages. Not only is this equitable, but it contributes to economic growth as workers have more capital to spend. Yet, as seen in Figure 1, the median weekly earnings of Americans remained fairly consistent despite the steady increase in consumption. Even so, there was an air of optimism as Americans watched the economy climb.

The American Housing Market
The real estate market in the U.S. was a prime example of business growth in the pre-recession period. Home values were steadily increasing, so investments seemed safe – if anything went wrong, you could sell the house and make back the cost (or possibly even turn a profit due to the increasing value). So, as it seemed less risky and more profitable, the housing market became a “bubble”, or a market that experiences rapid growth due to consumer confidence but that is, unbeknownst to consumers, likely to collapse. More and more families were interested in buying homes, which meant more mortgages were being signed. These agreements between banks and new home owners are the only way most Americans can buy a home, but previous to this economic boom a potential buyer had to have steady income and good credit in order to be seen by banks as a worthy investment. This was not only to protect the bank. While mortgages are often signed with a bank, the bank will typically sell the mortgage to a third party. Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac were prime examples of these lending sources that did not originate mortgages themselves. Before
the economic expansion, these financial institutions were primarily interested in buying mortgages associated with less risk, so those signed with verification of good credit and stable incomes were in higher demand. Once the housing boom began, banks lowered their criteria for who could get a loan, often leading to subprime mortgages, which are loans given to individuals regardless of low income or credit. But why would banks invest in Americans who were less likely to be able to repay their loans? One main contributor was that banks’ standards were majorly influenced by the firms buying mortgages. These institutions had started creating mortgage backed securities, which means they were buying thousands of mortgages and lumping them together so that they could sell shares to their investors. And since each of these mortgage backed securities relied on thousands of mortgages, they were in high demand. So, the banks started using predatory lending practices to increase the number of mortgages signed, and therefore increase the number of mortgages sold to third parties. By 2006, nearly 48% of all mortgages were classified as subprime or Alt-A (slightly less risky for the banks than subprime). But banks had persuaded many Americans into loans with low initial payments, and as these rates increased, more individuals began struggling to make payments and ultimately began defaulting on their loans. Legally, when a homeowner stops paying their mortgage, the institution that owns the loan may seize the home and put it back on the market. This process, called foreclosure, allows institutions to make back the money they were losing on the unpaid mortgage. Suddenly, a surplus of houses were back on the market through foreclosures and few Americans were willing to purchase a new home and risk foreclosure themselves. As a result of lower demand, housing values decreased – so even if foreclosed homes managed to be sold, the revenue made was often less than the amount owed for the original mortgage. Financial institutions were rapidly losing money through this process and therefore stopped buying subprime mortgages, so banks were stuck with the bad investments they had made and started to suffer financially as well. By 2007, large lenders like the Lehman Brothers were declaring bankruptcy and the NBER declared a recession.
Once the recession began, the trading and credit markets froze and in September 2008, the stock market crashed. Due to the housing market crisis, roughly 1 million homes foreclosed each year. During the 18 month period of recession in America, approximately 2.5 million businesses closed and even more downsized, leading to more than 8 million individuals losing their jobs. Even those who were able to keep their job were at risk – by 2010, approximately 42% of employed workers claimed that since the start of the recession, they had been forced into unpaid leave, received a pay cut, been scheduled for fewer hours, or had their benefits package reduced. From a more generalized standpoint, the net worth of the average American household decreased by approximately 20% during the recession. But while the strain of the recession was widespread, the effects were varied across demographics. People of color experienced a disproportionate share of both unemployment and housing struggles. As seen by Figure 2, Black and Latinx households were far more likely to face foreclosure. Additionally, the unemployment rate increased for people of color 38.1% more than it had for the white population from December 2007 to December 2008.

Age was another major variable that influenced how one was affected by the recession. Americans reaching retirement age saw the biggest decrease in life satisfaction, as many Americans had to postpone their retirement due to a lack of financial security. Middle-aged adults were by far the most vulnerable to foreclosures, as they were more likely to buy a home during the housing bubble than other age groups. Meanwhile, as seen in Figure 3, young adults (age 20-29) experienced the greatest strain in terms of employment. This is even more apparent when addressing youth unemployment. The youth unemployment rate (including Americans age 16-24) increased drastically during the recession, reaching a historic high in 2009. Figure 4 compares the overall national unemployment rate with the youth unemployment rate. The disproportionate increases in unemployment during the years of the recession display that the youth to adult unemployment ratio was stilted, and therefore...
that the youth labor market was suffering more severely. And within these demographics, a few variables remained; college graduates had greater job security than those with less education and men were more likely to be laid off than women.

**Recovery**
There was an overwhelming sense of fear that lingered over American communities as the recession threatened financial health, and therefore overall well-being. In response, the government took action and helped prevent the recession from escalating into an economic depression. There were three major laws which aided recovery: EESA, ARRA, and Dodd-Frank. In October 2008, the Emergency Economic Stabilization Act (EESA) was signed into action by George W. Bush after being passed by a Democrat majority in the House. Included in this act was the Troubled Assets Relief Project (TARP), which set aside $700 billion for bank bailouts to stabilize the financial system. After votes to reduce this amount, approximately $475 billion was invested in America’s financial institutions. ESSA was by far the most controversial law that aided the economy. While bailing out failing financial institutions was necessary for economic recovery, it also gave money to the very organizations that caused the recession. Unfortunately, the government failed to find a solution that could both hold these establishments accountable for their mistakes and revitalize the economy. This was partially rectified in 2009 by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), which was also passed by a Democratic majority in the House, but signed into law by President Barack Obama. While TARP targeted banks, the ARRA stimulus package was created to help struggling Americans and small businesses. While ARRA was criticized by those who wanted to cut government spending, this act devoted funds to tax cuts/credits, unemployment benefits, infrastructure, education, and other programs that would help rebuild the economy by rebuilding American citizens. As a preventative measure, the Dodd–Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act (often referred to as simply Dodd-Frank), was also signed into law by President Obama after passing through the Democrat-controlled Congress. This law was meant to decrease the probability of banks taking large risks as they had during the housing market boom. Dodd-Frank sought to increase transparency and reduce predatory lending within the American banking system.

**Conclusion**
The Great Recession was a period of significant hardship and while some were affected more than others, it was felt by the American population as a whole. Foreclosures and unemployment plagued the nation as a result of the housing bubble burst and the stock market crash. The struggling economy created financial hardships that left a lasting impression on many Americans. Yet, no matter how controversial they were, larger setbacks were avoided through government spending programs. Ultimately, EESA, ARRA, and Dodd-Frank gave America the room to grow and recover from the recession. And though we are still evaluating the limits of these aids and protections, they serve, at the very least, as a reminder that even in the face of controversy, our government can enact policies that help to heal our country.

**References**
*Discussed in multiple sources, including Verick and Islam, “How the Great Recession Has Changed Life in America,” and “Here’s What Caused the Great Recession”*

For cartoon source, see Parkins; for information regarding the title, see “Damocles”

*Data collected from “United States Unemployment Rate”*
Immigrants as Scapegoats

by CARLO ZENNER

A scapegoat is a term for a person or group blamed for wrongdoings and hardship, especially for reasons of expedience. The word also has a biblical significance that refers to a ceremony in which a priest would release a goat into the wild to rid a village of their sins. Today, in America and worldwide, immigrants are being used as scapegoats to explain the many issues society deals with, such as economic hardship, unemployment, or national security. These accusations are baseless and filled with xenophobic hatred that has the power to disenfranchise entire communities.

Xenophobia: Then and Now

Xenophobia describes the hatred and prejudice applied to people from another country. While this type of prejudice is extremely relevant now, it’s important to note that it has existed for thousands of years. The Holocaust, one of the modern world’s largest genocides, was fueled by xenophobia. Millions of people died including Jews, people living with disabilities, and queer people.

Those who survived warn against similarities between Hitler’s hate speech and Donald Trump’s xenophobic rhetoric. Irene Weiss, a Holocaust survivor who was rescued from the infamous Auschwitz concentration camp, spoke about Trump’s Muslim ban, saying she was “worried about the tone of this country” (Weiss qtd. in Telegram and Gazette). This comment was in reference to Executive Order 13769 entitled Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States. Though it was blocked by many courts, it took effect from January 2017 to March 2017 and lowered the number of refugees admitted to the United States, basically claiming that all Syrian refugees were suspects of terrorism.

Hitler persecuted entire communities by blaming them for economic and societal hardships in the same way that Trump and his administration does immigrants from Central/South America and the Middle East today. These similarities include not only hateful rhetoric, but also legislation that is blatantly racist and xenophobic. However, these attitudes are
not only from high-ranking politicians. The rise in Neo-Nazi groups and the popularization of white supremacy groups like the Ku Klux Klan show how xenophobic the fabric of the United States is. In reality, the US is founded in the work that immigrants do, but targets these communities as pathogens to society.

**Japanese Internment**

World War II spurred vicious xenophobia in the United States alongside Hitler’s genocide in Europe. After Imperial Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, President Franklin Roosevelt ordered the displacement and incarceration of about 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry. Many of these people lived on the Western Coast of the US and nearly 62% of those incarcerated were United States citizens. About 80,000 were second generation Americans (Smithsonian Institution).

American History textbooks will tell students this internment process was to reduce the threat of terrorism, but a closer look at the statistics show that it was based in racist paranoia that aimed to use Japanese people as a scapegoat. There were prisoners that had as little as 1/16 Japanese ancestry that were forced into these camps. Japanese-Americans also had their privacy violated by the US government.

The United States Census Bureau provided confidential information on Japanese-American residents through spy tactics. The Bureau did not publicly admit to this until 2007.

Jimmy Carter’s administration appointed the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians to investigate if claims of Japanese disloyalty were justified. The Commission found in their report, *Personal Justice Denied*, that there was little to no evidence of a threat to national security by Japanese residents and that the internment of these people was a blatant product of racism.

Into the twenty-first century, the United States continued its tradition of xenophobia and racism after the September 11th attacks in 2001. These acts of terror were the deadliest on US American soil and prompted widespread paranoia and racism against people of Middle-Eastern descent. The main targets for this prejudice were Muslim people. Specifically, there were multiple hate crimes committed against Sikhs and other groups of people who wear turbans as a religious expression.

On September 15th, 2001 Balbir Singh Sodhi was fatally shot in Arizona after being mistaken for a Muslim person. According to a 2003 study from Ball State University, the(Component)
University, Muslim people experienced a “1,600-percent surge in anti-Islamic hate crimes in the days following the 9/11 attacks.” This shows how quickly a nation can scapegoat an entire community. Like the internment of Japanese people in the twentieth century, the Islamophobia after 9/11 was based off of purely racist attitudes not concerns of national security.

**Economics of Immigrant Workers**

More recently, Trump’s xenophobia has attacked Latinx groups in the US. He is responsible for the longest government shut down in history because of his wish to build a wall between Mexico and the United States. This is a microcosm for the larger prejudice against Latinx workers. Here, Trump single-handedly caused a monumental shutdown that drastically affects government workers while putting the blame on the Latinx community.

According to the US Department of Labor, there are 21.5 million Hispanics employed in the USA (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012), accounting for 15.2 percent of all USA employees. It’s important to note that “Latinx” and “Hispanic” are not interchangeable terms. “Hispanic” refers to people descendant from Spanish-speaking countries while “Latinx” refers to people for descendant from Latin America. Hispanics constitute a larger portion of the US work forces than any other racial/ethnic group. Many of these workers are Latinx and work extremely hard to stimulate a large portion of the economy while also being blamed for economic hardship.

**Dangerous Rhetoric**

In early 2019 Trump planned to declare a state of national emergency in order to secure funding for the construction of a wall in order to bypass Congress. This is in direct opposition to comments he made in the past and the Constitution itself.

According to CNN, In November 2014, he was asked about executive actions by Barack Obama to halt deportations for undocumented parents of children born in the United States. He publicly disapproved of Obama’s actions, claiming that using executive orders undermines the concept of democracy (Kaczynski 2019). This shows how politics are used to debilitate immigrants despite their contributions to the national economy.

Language is one the most dangerous tools that the current administration is using to promote the vilification of immigrants. Politicians use vague and inaccurate words to incite fear into the American people. Trump offers general statements like “You look what’s happening in Europe,” and “We can’t allow that to happen in the United States.” What exactly is happening? The public isn’t supposed know. These statements are not based in truth or specificity. They are simply used to conflate asylum-seeking families at the southern border with criminals and terrorists (Rieger 2018).

One of Sweat’s most integral characters is Latinx. Oscar is a Colombian-American working as a bar back at the beginning of the play. He is immediately stereotyped by Tracey who assumes he is Puerto Rican and knows how to burn down buildings for insurance money. This type of prejudice is not only offensive, it contributes to dangerous attitudes that allow promote scape-goating.

There is a cliché that says history doesn’t repeat itself, it rhymes. However, the treatment of immigrants under this administration is eerily similar to xenophobic history seen in the past. Now, hateful rhetoric has the means to reach millions of people instantly through the popularization of technology. However, this also allows for disenfranchised communities to come together and speak out in ways that were not possible in past centuries. Looking forward to the rest of the twenty-first century, xenophobia will continue to plague nations. It is up to lawmakers and those with social and fiscal privilege to raise the voices of the oppressed to disassemble the system that allows for a xenophobic and racist society.
2000 in Pop Culture
by SAM MAUCERI

Big Events in the US
- Y2K Panic: the fear that computers would not properly adapt to the new millennium and cause massive global problems
- The Dot-com Bubble bursts: the extreme growth in financial investment in the internet comes to a head

Fashion Trends
2000 fashion featured many holdovers from late 90s fashion: bright colors, halter tops, platform shoes, and plenty of hair doodads. Midriff-baring shirts and spaghetti strap tops were paired with bootcut jeans.

Entertainment
2000 saw the continued popularity of multi-cam sitcom shows like Friends, and the advent of reality shows like MTV’s Cribs and Survivor. The teaser poster for the highly anticipated first Harry Potter film was released, while a popular Superbowl Budweiser commercial prompted millions to say “WASSSSAAAP!”. Top movies that year include Cast Away, X-Men, and Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon.

Music
The beginning of the new millennium was all about boy bands and teen pop stars. Destiny’s Child, ‘N Sync, and Britney Spears topped the charts. Check out more hits from 2000 in our Spotify playlist!
2008 in Pop Culture
by SAM MAUCERI

Big Events in the US
- 2008 Presidential Election: Barack Obama vs. John McCain
- Hollywood Writers Strike
- Recession & Financial Crisis
- Fight for LGBTQ marriage equality rights; Prop 8 passes in CA

Election in Entertainment
Popular TV shows like The Colbert Report and Saturday Night Live provided commentary on the Republican McCain/Palin ticket.

Fashion Trends
2008 gave us fedoras, tiny vests, shutter shades, and plenty of big belts worn around the waist. “Scene” and emo styles continued to gain popularity.

Entertainment
2008 was a big year for celebrity couples: Beyonce and Jay-Z tied the knot, and Angelina Jolie had a high-profile pregnancy with partner Brad Pitt. Regressive debates raged on about whether women in comedy were funny, a controversy highlighted in a photoshoot with SNL stars Kristen Wiig, Maya Rudolph, and Tina Fey. The Dark Knight was a huge hit at the box office, as well as Iron Man, WALL-E, and Twilight.

Top TV Shows
- American Idol
- Grey’s Anatomy
- Mad Men
- The Office
- CSI

Music
Towards the end of the decade, women solo artists, like Lady Gaga, Taylor Swift, and Beyonce, began to dominate pop music. Meanwhile, indie rock artists found mainstream popularity and hip-hop and rap continued their reign. Listen to our Spotify playlist of the top songs from 2008!
Capitalism does not permit an even flow of economic resources. With this system, a small privileged few are rich beyond conscience, and almost all others are doomed to be poor at some level. That’s the way the system works. And since we know that the system will not change the rules, we are going to have to change the system.

-Martin Luther King, Jr.

Capitalism has not always existed in the world and will not always exist in the world.

-Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez

In *Sweat*, the characters’ lives unravel due to forces outside their control. Like the real people these characters are composites of, the effects of major shifts in the United States economy hit them hard. Since its inception, the American economy has been one primarily of capitalism, with our country’s founders and capitalists today equating the freedom to pursue monetary gain with the pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness. This article attempts to give a brief overview of what capitalism is and who it impacts in order to provide some context for the circumstances and characters in *Sweat*.

What Is Capitalism?

Webster defines capitalism as “an economic system characterized by private or corporate ownership of capital goods, by investments that are determined by private decision, and by prices, production, and the distribution of goods that are determined by competition in a free market”. So, what does that mean? That capitalism is one way of organizing an economy, and that its primary feature is the controlling of both capital (goods, land, labor, and other assets and resources) and the means of production (how those goods get made, or people’s labor) by private companies or owners. This is the way an economic system functions in a capitalist nation. Other characteristics of a capitalist nation as described by a recent *Teen Vogue* article include “heavy focus on private property, economic growth, freedom of choice, and limited government intervention”.

They describe capitalists as the individuals who partake in and benefit from the system of capitalism: “Individual capitalists are typically wealthy people who have a large amount of capital (money or other financial assets) invested in business, and who benefit from the system of capitalism by making increased profits and thereby adding to their wealth.”

Where did it come from and why?

Late-medieval Europeans, and perhaps specifically the British, developed what came to be known as capitalism because they needed to resolve a problem. The Black Death of the 1300s, a deadly disease...
that killed some 30 - 60% of the European population at the time, was one main cause of the end of feudalism. Feudalism was the main system of power and wealth in European countrysides and indebted peasants, or serfs, to their landowners. As there was less quality land to be tended to by the amount of people around (due to population growth before the Black Plague), this system of land-based wealth turned to one of money-based (the burgeoning of capitalism) with former peasants now having to sell their labor to have roofs over their heads. At the same time, merchants started exporting goods and trading internationally, in turn diminishing local trade and altering production altogether. Eventually, the Europeans’ desire for goods and resources from foreign countries grew into colonialism and imperialism (both systems of exerting power of another group of people) and globalization, one major consequence being American slavery.

The Idea vs. Practice of Capitalism

Given this history, it seems that capitalism is rooted in exploitation of many for the profit of a few. In the idea of capitalism, people’s freedoms to invest and pursue businesses are protected because the government is not to intervene except to regulate and ensure monopolies aren’t being formed. The price for goods is set based on the demand for those goods (this is called the law of supply and demand), creating healthy competition between the companies providing those goods or services, which in turn helps to drive innovation (like the creation of smartphones and Netflix, for example). In practice, governments can be influenced their own interests and alliances with private companies and drive regulation to support those interests as opposed to protecting the common good. Another output of capitalism at work is that often capitalists, the owners of wealthy companies, take larger shares of the wealth than the workers who helped to attain it, creating a gap in wealth and perpetuating economic inequality.

Who does it Impact?

While capitalism has allowed for great product innovation and increases in the basic standards of living, it also has allowed for extreme poverty, destruction of natural resources, and systemic oppression and exploitation. In the origin story of capitalism, the peasant class was exploited for their labor. Today, many workers are often still exploited in not-so-different ways. Fast food workers in Chicago and nationwide are still “Fighting for $15”, a campaign to raise the minimum wage to one that is livable. The onset of NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) in the 1990s allowed for companies to move oversees and take advantage of labor laws in other countries. This resulted in companies paying workers very little (in some cases $6-$11 per day) to work in substandard factory conditions in places such as Mexico, mass producing items like jeans and gym shoes, and resulting in a loss of between 500,000-750,000 US-based jobs.

The city of Reading, PA, where Sweat is set, was labeled the 5th poorest city in America when Nottage began her research. It had undergone the closing of manufacturing plants and factories, with the loss of over 300,000 jobs by 2012. The factory in the play is being downsized because, like many real companies following NAFTA, they are outsourcing work to Mexico, where they can pay workers less and thus reap exponentially greater financial gain. By the end of the play, friendships have been destroyed, some characters have succumbed to drug or alcohol addiction, and two have gone to and been released from prison. The characters were based on real people in Reading, who had to deal with vast economic loss.

Capitalism pervades American life and impacts us all even when we are not aware, from the jeans and gym shoes we wear, to our nights with Netflix. For some, particularly the wealthy, it can have positive effects, and is seen as the way to achieve the “American Dream”. People have become wealthy by having innovative ideas and starting successful businesses. For many more like the working class and impoverished, capitalism is a driving factor in income inequality, as often those successful leaders of the businesses (the capitalists) are receiving a greater percentage of income than their workers, and thus it is often used to uphold systems of power and oppression.
In a second article, written about five months later, Sainato outlines Amazon’s labor abuses in more detail, interviewing Amazon workers in New York about their experience working for the trillion dollar company and their current attempts to unionize.

Here Are The Most Outrageous Incentives Cities Offered Amazon In Their HQ2 Bids
In 2017, Bezos announced that the company would be building a second headquarters - dubbed HQ2 - in the United States. The announcement set off a year-long competition between cities attempting to offer financial and cultural incentives for Bezos in exchange for a promised 50,000 jobs the headquarters would bring to their city. After the winners - New York City and Arlington, Virginia - were announced in November, 2018, Buzzfeed published an article summarizing the public offers cities around the country had made.

Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos Becomes World’s Richest Person
By Todd Spangler | @tspangler

These ranged from tax incentives and infrastructure improvements to new transportation systems and universities. The list underlines the willingness of many politicians to bend over backwards in order to win Amazon’s favor.

Amazon and New York Unions Had ‘Productive Meeting,’ Then Came a Shock
Three months after announcing his HQ2 decision, Jeff Bezos abruptly canceled Amazon’s planned operation in New York. In her article for the New York Times, Economy Reporter Natalie Kitroeff tells the story of how Amazon’s disagreements with New York City’s powerful labor leaders may have led to a breakdown in negotiations. A second article in the Times provides further context, including the role that left-wing activists and politicians, like freshman congresswoman, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, had in pressuring Amazon to leave.

Exploited Amazon workers need a union. When will they get one?
In his 2018 article for The Guardian, environmental and civil rights writer Michael Sainato summarizes Amazon’s antagonistic relationship with organized labor and describes the heinous working conditions under which Amazon employees are asked to perform every day.

Amazon drivers ‘are asked to deliver up to 200 parcels a day for less than the minimum wage and they even have to urinate into bottles to keep pace’

Report: Amazon workers collapsed on the job after 85-hour workweeks, high targets

Amazon workers in Scotland are still not paid real living wage

How Amazon Crushed the Union Movement

An image juxtaposing Jeff Bezos’ wealth with poor Amazon working conditions. Courtesy of KnowYourMeme.com.
“JOBS!” A word yelled into a microphone by our current president, in place of a well-thought-out idea around increasing employment for Americans. In the lead up to the 2016 presidential election, Trump unceasingly criticized every living presidential predecessor’s economic contributions, promising a change that would result in domestic production and a stateside increase in employment. He threatened rival countries’ economies with trade wars, stating these wars are “good, and easy to win” by increasing tariffs on aluminum and steel and claiming this would protect the American worker.

Trump also stated that the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was “the worst deal in the history of the country.” This lead to a renegotiation of the deal with the heads of state of Mexico and Canada, our nation-partners in NAFTA. Though these decisions may be recent, some of the effects are already being felt. Notably, Harley Davidson, a company that Trump claimed would benefit from his trade negotiations, made the decision to move manufacturing from the United States to the European Union.

Nonetheless, Trump remains steadfast in his idea that “traditional” jobs, such as coal mining and trucking, can flourish once again and only require firm stances against outsourcing and reliance on imported goods. He is undeterred by notions of evolving technologies, or independent geo-political influences that could reshape our economic landscape. That is why so many Americans are asking what NAFTA meant when it was implemented and what its benefits are.

To try to answer, media outlets have reflected on what defined NAFTA, attempting to decipher retrospectively if it was a good deal. The answer depends on who you ask.

CNN Money sums up the reasons why an agreement like NAFTA was ever up for consideration at the end of the 20th century and highlights why a straightforward answer to the question of ‘did it help?’ is complicated.

Vox delves into the nuanced parameters of the trade agreement by using a toy model of a 2014 Ford Mustang. By looking at a specific scenario, we can get a better idea of how NAFTA meant to make consumer products affordable and local manufacturing possible.

For most people, the availability of consumer goods is a positive outcome of NAFTA, but journalist Maria Hinojosa learns about the international impacts of exported processed foods in the Latino USA episode, The NAFTA Diet.
In December 2011, the Alabama House of Representatives passed HB 56, a far-reaching anti-immigration bill meant to encourage “self-deportation” by significantly restricting the rights of immigrants in the state. Speaking at a Republican Party breakfast that morning, state senator Scott Beason announced, “if you allow illegal immigration to continue in your area, you will destroy yourself eventually. If you don’t believe illegal immigration will destroy a community, go and check out parts of Alabama around Arab and Albertville”

In 2017, journalists for This American Life conducted over one hundred interviews in Albertville to see how these assertions stacked up against the facts on the ground. They compiled these interviews for the two-part episode, “Our Town”, which examines the effects of immigration on Albertville, Alabama.

**Part One** focuses on how the town’s poultry plants changed following the influx of Mexican immigrants to the United States in the 1990s. Journalists Ira Glass and Miki Meek interview white and Latinx workers, floor managers, and a labor economist who discusses the relationship between immigration, unemployment, and wage stagnation in Albertville and similar cities across the country.

**Part Two** explores the greater Albertville community. Glass and Meeks discuss immigration with white city residents who are staunchly opposed to the changes in their neighborhoods. In the episode’s penultimate act, they interview economists in order to debunk immigration myths that are raised during these conversations. The episode concludes with a look at Albertville today.
Every year for at least the past decade, between 600,000 and 650,000 people have reentered society from state and federal prisons. **Reentry** is the process of transition from incarcerated life—in juvenile detention centers, jails, or prisons—to life in the community. People who go through this process may be referred to as **returning citizens**.

As when in prison, returning citizens have fundamental human rights upon their release. Because they have been imprisoned, they often still experience prejudices that make transitioning from prison into community difficult, and there are real barriers that hinder their participation in daily life. The most common barriers are access to stable housing, opportunities for education, lack of resources for mental and physical health and social services, and employment support. Research has indicated that few individuals receive health or substance abuse treatment or job training while in prison, and thus the carceral, or prison, system at large does not support the future transition of these citizens.

Almost half of formerly incarcerated individuals are expected to return to incarceration within three years of release. This is called recidivism. **Recidivism** occurs when a person who was formerly imprisoned is rearrested or goes back to jail or prison within a certain time period of getting out. Without proper resources, training, and support, recidivism rates will remain high.

The following is a list of myths and
facts related to returning citizens and their federal rights in areas of employment, housing, and social services. This information comes directly from the Reentry Myth Buster toolkit from the Federal Interagency Reentry Council.

**Employment**

**MYTH:** People with criminal records are automatically barred from employment.

**FACT:** An arrest or conviction record will NOT automatically bar individuals from employment. If an employer is aware of a conviction or incarceration, that information should only bar someone from employment when the conviction is closely related to the job, after considering:

- The nature of the job,
- the nature and seriousness of the offense, and
- the length of time since it occurred.

Since an arrest alone does not necessarily mean that someone has committed a crime, an employer should not assume that someone who has been arrested, but not convicted, did in fact commit the offense. Instead, the employer should allow the person to explain the circumstances of the arrest. If it appears that they engaged in the alleged unlawful conduct, the employer should assess the conduct.

**MYTH:** The Federal Government’s hiring policies prohibit employment of people with criminal records.

**FACT:** The Federal Government does not have a policy that prohibits employment of people with criminal records from all positions. The Federal Government employs people with criminal records with the requisite knowledge, skills, and abilities.

**MYTH:** An employer can get a copy of your criminal history from companies that do background checks without your permission.

**FACT:** According to the Fair Credit Reporting Act (FCRA), employers must get one’s permission, usually in writing, before asking a background screening company for a criminal history report. If one does not give permission or authorization, the application for employment may not get reviewed. If a person does give permission but does not get hired because of information in the report, the potential employer must follow several legal obligations, as seen below.

**Key Employer Obligations in the FCRA**

An employer that might use an individual’s criminal history report to take an “adverse action” (e.g., to deny an application for employment) must provide a copy of the report and a document called A Summary of Your Rights under the Fair Credit Reporting Act before taking the adverse action. An employer that takes an adverse action against an individual based on information in a criminal history report must tell the individual – orally, in writing, or electronically:

- The name, address, and telephone number of the company that supplied the criminal history report;
- that the company that supplied the criminal history information did not make the decision to take the adverse action and cannot give specific reasons for it; and
- about one’s right to dispute the accuracy or completeness of any information in the report, and one’s right to an additional free report from the company that supplied the criminal history report, if requested within 60 days of the adverse action.

A reporting company that gathers negative information from public criminal records, and provides it to an employer in a criminal history report, must inform the individual that it gave the information to the employer or that it is taking precautions to make sure the information is complete and current. If an employer violation of the FCRA is suspected, it should be reported to the Federal Trade Commission (FTC). The law allows the FTC, other federal agencies, and states to take legal action against employers who fail to comply with the law’s provisions. The FCRA also allows individuals to take legal action against employers in state or federal court for certain violations.

**Housing**

**MYTH:** Individuals who have been convicted of a crime are “banned” from and not eligible for public housing.

**FACT:** Public Housing Authorities
FACT: The 1996 Welfare ban applies only to convicted drug felons, and only eleven states have kept the ban in place in its entirety. Most states have modified or eliminated the ban.

Section 115 of P.L. 104-193 (Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996) imposed a lifetime ban on Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (known as TANF or cash/public assistance) benefits for people with felony drug convictions after August 22, 1996, unless their state passes legislation to opt out of the ban.

In some states (Alabama, Alaska, Delaware, Georgia, Illinois, Mississippi, Nebraska, South Carolina, South Dakota, Texas, and West Virginia), you currently cannot receive TANF if you have a felony drug conviction. All other methamphetamine on the premises of federally assisted housing.

Social Services

MYTH: Eligibility for Social Security benefits cannot be reinstated when an individual is released from incarceration.

FACT: Social Security benefits are not payable if an individual is convicted of a criminal offense and confined. However, monthly benefits usually can be reinstated after a period of incarceration by contacting Social Security and providing proof of release.

MYTH: A parent with a felony conviction cannot receive TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) or welfare.

FACT: There are only two convictions for which a PHA MUST prohibit admission – those are:

- If any member of the household is subject to a lifetime registration requirement under a State sex offender registration program; and,
- if any household member has ever been convicted of drug-related criminal activity for manufacture or production of methamphetamine on the premises of federally assisted housing.

PHAs have great discretion in determining their admissions and occupancy policies for people with criminal records. While PHAs can choose to ban ex-offenders from participating in public housing and Section 8 programs, it is not policy to do so. In fact, in many circumstances, formerly incarcerated people should not be denied access.

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states have modified the ban or eliminated it entirely.

Thirteen states (Kansas, Maine, Michigan, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont, and Wyoming) have enacted laws that allow people with drug felony convictions to receive TANF.

Nine states (California, Hawaii, Iowa, Kentucky, Maryland, Nevada, Oregon, Tennessee, and Utah) have amended the ban to allow individuals who are receiving or have completed drug or alcohol treatment to receive benefits. Other examples of state modifications to the ban include:

- Providing assistance to individuals who have been convicted of drug possession while banning those convicted of manufacturing, selling, or trafficking drugs (Arkansas, Florida, and North Dakota).
- Restoring an individual’s eligibility after a certain time period if they do not violate the terms of their supervision or become convicted of a new crime (Louisiana and North Carolina).
- Imposing successful completion of drug-testing requirements as a condition of eligibility (Minnesota, Virginia, and Wisconsin).

**MYTH:** Individuals convicted of a felony can never receive Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly the Food Stamp Program) benefits.

**FACT:** This ban applies only to those convicted of drug felonies, and only thirteen States have kept the ban in place in its entirety. Most States have modified or eliminated the ban.

**MYTH:** An individual cannot apply for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly the Food Stamp Program) benefits without a mailing address.

**FACT:** A person can get SNAP benefits even if they do not have a mailing address.

**MYTH:** A person with a criminal record is not eligible to receive federal student financial aid.

**FACT:** Individuals who are currently incarcerated in a federal, state, or local correctional institution have some limited eligibility for federal student aid. In general, restrictions on federal student aid eligibility are removed for formerly incarcerated individuals, including those on probation, on parole, or residing in a halfway house.

Returning citizens have many rights, and there are federal policies in place to support them. Often times this information is not made readily available, nor are other services and resources which contribute to the difficulty of transitioning from prison to life in the community. Other citizens may also not realize the rights of returning citizens, or how best to support them. When community members do follow federal policies in place to support formerly incarcerated people, such as eliminating questions like “Do you have a criminal record?” from job applications, returning citizens are more easily able to re-integrate into community and restore life for themselves and others who may depend on them.

_Tarius W.'s “This Free Stuff” used courtesy of “Time To Go,” a collection of student of Nancy B. Jefferson Alternative School and freewriteartsliteracy.org._
Introduction by ANNA GELMAN

99% Percent Invisible is a podcast “about design, architecture, and invisible things that shape our world.” In October of 2018, they released a miniseries called “Articles of Interest,” which provided an in-depth look at the clothes we wear. In “Blue Jeans: Articles of Interest #5,” producer and reporter Avery Trufelman looks at the history of the blue jean, how jeans have adapted and changed alongside American history, and the stories that a pair of jeans can tell us. As you listen to the podcast, consider the following questions:

1. What does the history of blue jeans and denim tell you about the way production of clothing has changed in the United States?
2. What do you think that change means for other industries?
Si Se Puede
by JORGE SILVA

If anyone is owed credit for the success of modern day labor movements and their tie to civil rights, it is Dolores Huerta. Born in Dawson, New Mexico and of Mexican descent, Huerta fought alongside César Chávez in the 60’s and 70’s to unionize farm workers in the Southwest. She is often overlooked in history books that favor her male counterpart, but that has not stopped her from being an advocate for oppressed groups and a voice for the voiceless to this day. Her contributions are the subject of the 2017 film Dolores wherein many of her contemporaries reflect on the immensity of her work and the impact she has made over several generations. The film also includes the perspectives of her family who sacrifice in order to support their often-absent mother in her fight for justice. In an episode from Latino USA titled “Dolores Huerta and Her Daughter Talk Gender and Power,” Huerta’s daughter, Juana Chávez, discusses with her mother the struggle for equality, familial responsibility, and the legacy they leave behind as women and as activists.

Doloros Huerta, poster courtesy of Smithsonian Insider.
Navigating “New” Homes: A Connection Between Sweat and Blindspotting
by QUENNA BARRETT

On a plane ride from Puerto Rico to Chicago, long enough to finish two episodes of a TV series and watch a movie, I did just that. I probably should have been reading for school or some play or another, but I let myself relax as I’d just spent fourteen days in the perfect sun of San Juan, witnessing how theater makers and other artists supported each other and their communities in rebuilding post Hurricane Maria, and was coming home to Chicago’s polar vortex number two. Still thinking about what it means to be an artist in a space where natural or man-made disaster happens, I stumbled across the film Blindspotting, two real friends’ cinematic response to a different, man-made disaster: a gentrifying Oakland.

Want to Learn more?

Listen: NPR’s Michel Martin Interviews the stars and writers of the film, Daveed Diggs and Rafael Casal. They discuss their relationship as real friends, their respective characters in the movie, and being artists responding to a “changing Oakland”.

Watch: Purchase the film here on Youtube or here on Amazon.
What should I wear?
Dress according to your school’s dress code. The Goodman is air conditioned, so bring a sweater or extra layer in case you get cold in the theatre.

Be respectful to the artists onstage and to your fellow audience members. Wait until intermission and after the performance to talk, and remain in your seat during the performance. Be mindful of others seated next to and in front of you. Wait until after the show to use phones or electronic devices. The glow from the screen is distracting to your fellow audience members AND the actors, who can see your phone from onstage!

How should I respond to what’s going on on the stage?
Honestly and appropriately. Attending a theatre performance is different from watching a movie at home; in a theatre, you are in a room full of people who can hear your responses just as you can hear theirs. Most importantly, the actors can hear and see you. They will appreciate any appropriate feedback to what is happening onstage (laughter at jokes, gasps at surprising moments) but might be distracted if it is inappropriate (laughter at the wrong time, talking when it is not warranted). Whether we enjoy the play or not, we owe respect to the actors.

What if I need to leave the theatre during the show?
You should only leave the theatre if it is an emergency. Make sure to use restrooms before the show or wait until intermission.
What to do before the show:
When you arrive at the Goodman at 10:30am, you will wait to enter the theatre with your group. Once your group is called, a staff member will lead you to your seats. Please promptly sit where you have been assigned. Remember that the show needs to begin on time and everyone needs to be seated.

What to do during intermission:
Most plays have a 15 minute intermission. This gives you time to stretch your legs, use the restroom (located on both floors), get some water, and discuss the play with your friends. When intermission is over, the lights in the lobby will flash several times. That is your cue to get back to your seat because the performance is about to begin!

What to do after the show:
There will be a post-show discussion immediately following the performance. Members of the cast will come out on stage and answer your questions. Feel free to ask any respectful questions you might have about the play, the job of the artists, or behind-the-scenes secrets.