



Civil Rights and Labor: Joint Struggles for Justice

by Corinne Geballe

Introduction: The civil rights movement and the labor movement in the U.S. shared many significant similarities in their respective struggles for dignity and equality for all. This curriculum unit with its six lessons illuminates the key similarities between the two movements.

The unit will help students:

- make connections and identify similarities between the labor movement and the African-American and Latino civil rights movements in the U.S.
- understand Dr. King's role in the U.S. labor movement, including Dr. King's desire for a unified force to fight against discrimination, given the similarities between the movements for civil rights and labor rights
- examine similarities and differences in the socioeconomic circumstances of Americans in the 1960s and the present
- read and interpret primary source documents

Grade: 4

CA State Standards:

English Language Arts for Grade Four: Writing Strategies 1.1-1.2; Writing Applications 2.4; Listening and Speaking Strategies 1.1 – 1.3; Speaking Applications 2.3

Essential Question:

How is the labor movement in the U.S. similar to the African-American and Latino civil rights movements?

Sub Questions:

1. Why was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. an important ally for the labor movement?
2. Why did Dr. King advocate for a strong connection between rights for African Americans and the labor struggle?
3. What groups of people in California today would have been inspired by Dr. King's messages in his speeches and articles on the labor struggle? Why?



Unit Parts:

1. NALC's Drive against Job Discrimination
2. "If the Negro Wins, Labor Wins"
3. Illinois State AFL-CIO Convention of 1965
4. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Telegram to Cesar Chavez
5. Sanitation Workers March to Memphis
6. March to Memphis



Part One: The Drive against Job Discrimination by the Negro American Labor Council (NALC)

Materials Needed:

- Handout A: Press Release, Negro American Labor Council, “[Institute and workshop mark launch of drive against job discrimination.](#)”

Activities/Instructions:

1. Opening Activity:

a. Briefly review the definition of *discrimination* with students. Ask students to brainstorm, as a class, about possibilities of job discrimination and specific types of discrimination that workers might face. In what ways might an employer unfairly treat an employee while s/he is working on the job?

b. Write the following union groups on the board or on a flip chart. First discuss with students those groups with which they might be familiar. Allow more time to introduce and discuss those union groups with which students may be less familiar.

Union groups: Sheet metal, electrical workers, carpenters, plumbers, bricklayers, International Longshoremen Association, Brotherhood of Railway and Steamship Clerks, International Moulders and Workers, International Association of Railway Employees, Baltimore Fire Fighters, Seafarers International Union and the International Hood Carriers, Building and Common Laborers.

2. Classroom Activity: Introduce the following mini-lesson to students:

In Feb. 1961, 800 people came to a meeting in Washington D.C. to begin a movement against job discrimination. They created a plan to use 15 different ways to stop discrimination by workers’ unions. They noted that twice as many African-American workers (13.8% of them!) were out of work the previous month, compared to just 7 % of white workers. Explain that all the groups discussed earlier (on the board or flip chart) were the unions that were discriminating against the workers.

Using the jigsaw teaching strategy, select 4 points out of the 15 points listed in the handout. Divide the class into jigsaw groups of 4 members each. Have each group discuss the point it were assigned. Then have each team member from the jigsaw groups explain



their point clearly within new expert groups. In reports back to their original jigsaw group, ask students to discuss all four points by responding with one clear sentence to the prompt, “What do the conference participants want?” ([Here](#) is more information on the jigsaw teaching strategy).

3. Classroom Activity:

Model for students what is expected in the activity, using this second point from the handout as an illustration, using **Point 2: Eliminate exclusion from unions:** Within 6 months, unions must “abolish the practice of exclusion of workers of color from membership by *tacit consent* (implied or suggested agreement).”

Clarify this point by elaborating in the following way:

“Let’s clarify some new words here. So the NALC wants the unions to **abolish** – or stop – letting unions **exclude** – or leave out – non-white workers by having them subtly agree not to join. Basically, it sounds as if the white union leaders simply don’t ask if the others want to join, so they don’t get to join as a result of not being asked. That certainly doesn’t seem fair! So how could we summarize this for our team? Here’s one way: They want the unions to quickly stop excluding non-white workers by making the leaders ask *everyone* if they want to be a member.”

Now use the following point from the handout as an illustration:

Point 6: Integration into AFL-CIO: “Integration of qualified Negro office and staff workers into all departments of the general headquarters of the AFL-CIO in Washington, D.C., as an example to the national and international unions.”

Ask students these questions:

Who remembers what **integration** means? What do you think it means to get **qualified** blacks into all **departments**? Why would that set an example to the national and international unions? What do they want the national and international unions to do? Do you think it would solve the problem, or at least help to fix it? (Guide the students to a response such as, “They want more blacks working for the AFL-CIO in the capitol to help increase the number of integrated unions in the U.S. and around the world.”)

4. Extension Activity:

Assign one member from each jigsaw team into a new team, so that there is a new total of 4 teams. Each team is responsible for analyzing and summarizing one of the following points from the handout:



Point 8: *Representation in national politics:* The Civil Rights Department needs to “serve as an example of the application of the principles of the Civil Rights Movement to the entire labor movement.” The department must be led by a Negro trade unionist with the help of a native white Southerner who believes strongly in civil rights. The whole department needs to have an “adequate interracial office force.”

Point 9: *Hiring practices in national government:* The president must demand an investigation of “employment policies of all the departments of the Federal government” with the goal of “eliminating the practice of race bias.”

Point 10: *Promotion based on ability:* The president must investigate promotions to make sure people are given “equal opportunity regardless of race or color” to have a job that matches his/her ability. 70% of black government employees do *not* have professional jobs.

Point 15: *Equal rights to work:* The Presidents of the nation and the AFL-CIO and the leaders of industry, demand that the government, the workers and management will “respect, recognize and support the God-given right of every human being, regardless of race or color, to earn a living in the sweat of his brow.”

Once the groups have finished discussing and summarizing their bullet points, each group member returns to his/her original team to share what was discussed. Team members brainstorm and collaborate to answer the guiding questions (listed above) about connections between civil and labor rights. Finally, ask students to share their ideas with the whole class either orally through a presentation or by creating a poster.



Part Two: “If the Negro Wins, Labor Wins”

Materials Needed:

- Handout B: “[If the Negro wins, Labor wins,](#)” Speech given at the AFL-CIO Fourth Constitutional Convention, 2/12/1962

Activities/Instructions:

- 1. Opening Activity:** Review with the class the drive against job discrimination that the Negro American Labor Council (NALC) started. Ask students to recall and name some of the demands or ideas that were changed in the way workers and unions operated. Write these on the board.
- 2.** Explain to students that they will be reading a shortened version of a speech that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. gave at the AFL-CIO convention. Tell students that they will initially use reciprocal teaching to read the speech in their teams.
- 3. Guided Practice:** Either read aloud – or ask students to read aloud – the following excerpts from Handout B. Pause for discussion questions as noted in italics below.

“Less than a century ago...the children of workers had no childhood and no future. They too worked for pennies an hour and by the time they reached their teens they were worn-out old men, devoid of spirit, devoid of hope, and devoid of self-respect.”

Let’s stop to clarify some terms. What do you think “devoid” means? Do you think people working with very low salaries would have a lot of spirit, hope, and self-respect? Or would they have none? So, could “devoid” mean “not having” or “lacking”? Let’s ask some questions. Possibilities may be: Why did they get only pennies each hour? Why couldn’t they go to school instead of work?

Let’s make a prediction for the next section. We may learn about how blacks have historically faced a similar challenge as workers.

Read together as a class:

“History is a great teacher. Now, everyone knows that the labor movement did not diminish the strength of the nation but enlarged it. By raising the living standards of millions, labor miraculously created a market for industry and lifted the whole nation to



undreamed levels of production. Those who today attack labor forget these simple truths, but history remembers them.”

If necessary, clarify the terms “diminish” and “living standards.” Next, ask students the question: *Why and/or how are people attacking labor today?*

Read together as a class:

“If we do not advance, the crushing burden of centuries of neglect and economic deprivation will destroy our will, our spirits, and our hopes. In this way, labor’s historic tradition of moving forward to create vital people as consumers and citizens has become our own tradition, and for the same reasons.

This unity of purpose is not an historical coincidence. Negroes are almost entirely a working people. There are pitifully few Negro millionaires and few Negro employers. Our needs are identical with labor’s needs, decent wages, fair working conditions, livable housing, old age security, health and welfare measures, conditions in which families can grow, have education for their children, and respect in the community.”

Stop to *summarize* before moving on to reciprocal teaching for the rest of the selections from the speech.

4. **Extension Activity:** In teams, use reciprocal teaching strategy to predict, read, clarify, question, and summarize the following passages. Here is a [handy reference](#) on how to employ reciprocal teaching strategy.
 - a. “Our society, with its ability to perform miracles with machinery, has the capacity to make some miracles for men – if it values men as highly as it values machines. To find a great design to solve a grave problem labor will have to intervene in the political life of the nation to chart a course which distributes the abundance to all instead of concentrating it among a few. The strength to carry through such a program requires that labor know it friends and collaborate as a friend. If all that I have said is sound, labor has no firmer friend than the 20 million Negroes whose lives will be deeply affected by the new patterns of production.”
 - b. “The two most dynamic and cohesive liberal forces in the country are the labor movement and the Negro freedom movement. Together we can be architects of democracy in a South now rapidly industrializing...”
 - c. “I look forward confidently to the day when all who work for a living will be one with no thought to their separateness as Negroes, Jews, Italians or any other distinctions. “This will be the day when we shall bring into full realization the American dream – a dream yet unfilled. A dream of equality of opportunity, of privilege and property widely



distributed; a dream of a land where men will not take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few; a dream of a land where men will not argue that the color of a man's skin determines the content of his character; a dream of a nation where all our gifts and resources are held not for ourselves alone but as instruments of service for the rest of humanity; the dream of a country where every man will respect the dignity and worth of human personality – that is the dream.”

In conclusion, suggest these insights to students and ask them if they agree or disagree:

1. The labor movement hasn't yet helped African Americans as much as it should.
2. In fact, some unions have actually contributed to the degraded economic status of African Americans.
3. Labor must root out discrimination, eliminating it altogether both internationally and domestically.



Part Three: Illinois State AFL-CIO Convention: 1965

Materials Needed:

- Handout C: [Address at the Illinois State Convention of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations](#) (AFL-CIO), 10/7/1965

Activities/Instructions:

1. **Opening Activity:** Share with students the following: We have already read and discussed a speech that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. gave in 1961 at the national AFL-CIO Convention. Today, we will look at part of a speech that Dr. King gave about four years later in Illinois which addresses similar problems. We will return to our guiding questions from the previous lesson and use these last two speeches to help us think more deeply about the connections between labor and civil rights, and particularly how and why Dr. King tried to connect the two movements.
2. **Active Involvement:** Ask students the following question: Based on what we've learned so far, who would like to make a prediction about the kinds of themes or big ideas that Dr. King might have liked to discuss with local AFL-CIO members?
3. **Guided Practice:**
 - a. *Read* the following excerpts from Handout C together as a class. Ask students to take turns reading aloud (popcorn style) each sentence of the following two paragraphs from Dr. King's speech.

“Thirty years ago the young labor movement made government create tens of millions of jobs in a great hurry, and benefited all of society in the process. Today labor can resume its pioneering role for its own security and at the same time it will dissolve America's most acute and distressing problem – Negro equality and freedom. In creating full employment, the poverty of Negroes will be eliminated; their migrations which swell ghettos causing turmoil and suffering will diminish; their family life will have an economic base on which to find stability and structure. The Negro will be able to shape his new life by his own efforts freed from the mothering prison of poverty that stifles him generation after generation.”



“Education for our children is second class and in the higher levels so limited it has no significance as a lever for uplift. The tenements we inhabited thirty years ago, which were old then, are three decades more dilapidated.”

b. *Clarify* less familiar terms, such as the following: “benefited” (*use cognate*), “pioneering” (*remind students of examples of pioneers*), “dissolve” (*just a new context – infer from literal meaning and context*), “acute and distressing,” “swell,” “turmoil,” “diminish,” “stifles,” “uplift” (*word parts*), “tenements,” “dilapidated” (*infer from context*).

c. *Question*: Ask students: How exactly will more employment help families? What was education like for African Americans? *What do you think their apartments looked like?*

d. *Summarize*: A possible view: Labor was good for America. It helped African Americans escape from poverty and improved their quality of life.

4. **Extension Activity:**

a. Ask students to *predict, clarify, question, and summarize* as they read, similar to the Guided Practice above. Students read the rest of the article with a partner of a slightly different reading level, pausing after each paragraph to monitor their own understanding and record their thoughts in their notebooks.

“If a coalition of conscience between the forces of labor, the church, the academic community and the civil rights movement does not emerge to make these issues inescapably clear and demand their solution, then I am afraid that hostility and violence will breed a crisis of nationwide proportion. Anyone who remembers how quickly the nonviolent movement spread across the South, first in the bus boycotts and then within a year to almost 200 cities in the sit-ins, will shudder in horror at the thought of violence spreading with similar speed. I do not come to you as a prophet of doom; I come to you as one who has accepted the challenge of our urban ghettos. This is a more difficult challenge than the one we face in the South, for we will not be dealing with constitutional rights; we will be dealing with fundamental human rights. It is a constitutional right for a man to be able to vote, but the human right to a decent house is as categorically imperative and morally absolute as was that constitutional right. It is not a constitutional right that men have jobs, but it is a human right. And so I call upon labor as the historic ally of the underprivileged and oppressed to join with us in this present struggle to redeem the soul of America and to revitalize the life of the poor and downtrodden.

The two most dynamic movements that reshaped the nation during the past three decades are the labor and civil rights movements. Our combined strength is potentially enormous. We



have not used a fraction of it for our own good or for the needs of society as a whole. If we make the war on poverty a total war; if we seek higher standards for all workers for an enriched life we have the ability to accomplish it, and our nation has the ability to provide it. If our two movements unite their social pioneering initiative, thirty years from now people will look back on this day and honor those who had the vision to see the full possibilities of modern society and the courage to fight for their realization. On that day, the brotherhood of man, undergirded by economic security, will be a thrilling and creative reality.”

- b.** Ask each pair of students to share their summaries and questions from the reading with another pair. Then, ask the two pairs to choose something to share with the whole class. Add any questions that can be answered to a “Guiding Questions” chart. Add lingering questions or ones that are not related to the guiding questions - but are still interesting and important - to “Future Questions” for attention at a later time.



Part Four: Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Telegram to Cesar Chavez

Materials Needed:

- Handout D: [Telegram to Cesar Chavez](#), 9/9/1966.

Activities/Instructions:

1. **Opening Activity:** Tell students the following: We know that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. cared a lot about the national labor movement. Today, we will see what he did to encourage leaders of other labor organizations to fight for rights.
2. **Active Involvement:** Ask students the following questions: Who are some labor leaders – whom we've discussed in class – who were contemporaries of (i.e., lived around the same time as) Dr. King? Which of these leaders might have communicated with Dr. King about labor issues?
3. **Guided Practice:** Distribute **Handout D** to students. Ask students to take turns reading sentences in the telegram aloud and clarify less familiar terms as they arise. You can block out the name on the telegram and ask students to make an educated guess as to who wrote it.

As brothers in the fight for equality, I extend the hand of fellowship and good will and wish continuing success to you and your members. The fight for equality must be fought on many fronts—in the urban slums, in the sweat shops of the factories and fields. Our separate struggles are really one—a struggle for freedom, for dignity, and for humanity... We are together with you in spirit and in determination that our dreams for a better tomorrow will be realized.
4. **Independent Practice:** Ask students to individually write a response from Cesar Chávez to Dr. King. In their response, ask students to include: a) an expression of appreciation to Dr. King for his telegram and b) note questions that they have (or that they think Cesar Chavez would have had) about labor organizing happening in other parts of the country or in other communities. Ask for a few volunteers to read aloud their return telegrams to the class.



Part Five: Sanitation Workers' Strike in Memphis

Materials Needed:

- Handout E: [Address at Mass meeting at the Bishop Charles Mason Temple, 3/18/1968](#)
- Handout F: Excerpts from Dr. King's speech at the Mass meeting at the Bishop Charles Mason Temple, 3/18/1968 (end of lesson)
- Handout G: Matching and Rephrasing (end of lesson)

Activities/Instructions:

- 1. Opening Activity:** Tell students the following: "We have recently learned a lot about strikes, such as janitor strikes in L.A. and railroad workers' strikes in the 1860s. What do you think sanitation workers might have been demanding with their strike in Memphis, Tennessee in 1968? (Write down some student responses on the board or flip-chart). One of the last speeches that the late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. gave was in Memphis, Tennessee in support of these sanitation workers on March 18, 1968 at the Bishop Charles Mason Temple.
- 2.** Read Handout F: Excerpts from Dr. King's speech, aloud in front of a podium, pretending to be Dr. King himself. Pause after inspirational lines (these lines are in italics). Also pause periodically for responses. Students may choose to share their responses orally, or in writing. Tell students that they will be asked to select some key lines for use in a later activity – a reader's theater.
- 3. Discussion/Reflection Questions:** In teams, students will first share their thoughts from the speech, using the following questions as a guide:
 - What is MLK encouraging the people of Memphis to do?
 - What are some of his examples of economic inequality?
 - How does MLK believe that society needs to change?
- 4.** Distribute Handout G to students. Ask students to match a part in Column A with an appropriate part in Column B, then rephrase the sentence they have created – through matching – in their own words.

Here are the correct pairings for your reference as the instructor:

A) Whenever you are engaged in work that serves humanity,



B) it has dignity, and it has worth

A) You are reminding the nation that it is a crime

B) for people to live in this rich nation and receive starvation wages

A) Now our struggle is for genuine equality

B) which means economic equality.

A) What does it profit one to have access to the hotels of our city and the motels of our highway

B) when we don't earn enough money to take our family on a vacation?

A) Let it be known everywhere that along with wages and all of the other securities that you are struggling for,

B) you are also struggling for the right to organize and to be recognized.

5. **Extension Activity:** Divide students into groups and ask them to select parts of Dr. King's speech in Handout E that they would like to rehearse and perform as part of a "Readers' Theater" where they may paraphrase as much or as little as they would like. You can find more information "Readers' Theater" [here](#).



Part Six: Memphis March

Materials Needed:

- Handout H: [Memo to all Marchers](#), 4/8/1968

Activities/Instructions:

1. Opening Activity:

Give students this opening introduction to the unit: “We recently listened to and performed excerpts from one of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s last speeches given in Memphis, Tennessee. The march that Dr. King had gone to support – the Memphis sanitation workers’ strike – went on as planned. In this lesson, we will read and work with a copy of the letter sent to all the marchers, reminding them of the importance of their endeavor and giving them practical advice for a smooth march. This form letter to all marchers was not written by Dr. King; it was instead written by James M. Lawson. For more details on Mr. Lawson, read [this article in the King Encyclopedia](#).

2. Classroom Activity:

Using [reciprocal teaching](#), teams read the memo and discuss the big ideas, first alone and then as a whole class. The focus will be on phrases such as the following: “economic justice;” “to win as human beings and as men – not as animals who use violence;” “honor[ing King] for great love and sacrifice for us...by making sure that the Sanitation Workers win their rights non-violently;” “do not lose our heads... stand united, let no man, black or white, trick us into violence.”

3. Extension Activity:

Choose a civil rights and/or labor rights issue that relates to your life. Design a brochure for marchers modeled after this one, with a brief introduction (about three short paragraphs) and a list of items to remember. Consider the following questions as you draft your brochure:

What is the goal of your march? What tactics or strategies will most effectively help you reach that goal? Where is the march and how many people are involved? Are there certain chants or slogans you want people to say or write on signs? Is there a person or group of people that the march is supporting and whom you would like to especially thank or honor?



Handout F: Excerpts from Dr. King's Speech at the Mass meeting at the Bishop Charles Mason Temple, 3/18/1968

"This really is a great movement here in Memphis," I said to my friend and organizer. ... You are demonstrating something here that needs to be demonstrated all over our country. You are demonstrating that we can stick together and you are demonstrating that we are all tied in a single garment of destiny, and that if one black person suffers, if one black person is down, we are all down.

... [We also must] unite beyond class lines. *The Negro "haves" must join hands with the Negro "have-nots"*.

You are doing many things here in this struggle. You are demanding that this city will respect the dignity of labor. So often we overlook the work and the significance of those who are not in professional jobs, of those who are not in the so-called big jobs. But let me say to you tonight, that whenever you are engaged in work that serves humanity, it has dignity, and it has worth. One day our society must come to see this. One day our society will come to respect the sanitation worker if it is to survive, for the person who picks up our garbage... is as significant as the physician, for if he doesn't do his job, diseases are rampant. *All labor has dignity.*

But you are doing another thing. You are reminding, not only Memphis, but you are reminding the nation that *it is a crime for people to live in this rich nation and receive starvation wages...* Do you know that most of the poor people in our country are working every day? And they are making wages so low that they cannot begin to function in the mainstream of the economic life of our nation... It is criminal to have people working on a full-time basis and a full-time job getting a part-time income. You are here tonight to demand that Memphis will do something about the conditions that our brothers face as they work day in and day out for the well-being of the total community. *You are here to demand that Memphis will see the poor.*

We've fought the civil rights battle over the years. We've done many electrifying things. Montgomery, Alabama in 1956, 50,000 black men and women decided that it was ultimately more honorable to walk the streets in dignity than to ride segregated buses in humiliation... In 1960, by the thousands in this city and practically every city across the South, students and even adults started sitting in at segregated lunch counters... Then in 1965 we went to Selma. We said, "We don't have the right to vote." And we stayed there,



we walked the highways of Alabama until the nation was aroused and we finally got a voting rights bill.

Now all of these were great movements. They did a great deal to end legal segregation and guarantee the right to vote. With Selma and the voting rights bill one era of our struggle came to a close and a new era came into being. *Now our struggle is for genuine equality which means economic equality.* For we know it isn't enough to integrate lunch counters. What does it profit a man to be able to eat at an integrated lunch counter if he doesn't earn enough money to buy a hamburger and a cup of coffee? What does it profit a man to be able to eat at the swankiest integrated restaurant when he doesn't earn enough money to take his wife out to dine? *What does it profit one to have access to the hotels of our city and the motels of our highway when we don't earn enough money to take our family on a vacation?...*

Now let me say a word to those of you who are on strike. You have been out now for a number of days, but don't despair. *Nothing worthwhile is gained without sacrifice.* The thing for you to do is stay together, and say to everybody in this community that you are going to stick it out to the end until every demand is met, and that you are gonna say "We ain't gonna let nobody turn us around." Let it be known everywhere that along with wages and all of the other securities that you are struggling for, you are also struggling for the right to organize and to be recognized. *We can all get more together than we can apart; we can get more organized together than we can apart....*



Handout G: Matching and Rephrasing

Whenever you are engaged in work that serves humanity,
You are reminding the nation that it is a crime
Now our struggle is for genuine equality
What does it profit one to have access to the hotels of our city and the motels of our highway
Let it be known everywhere that along with wages and all of the other securities that you are struggling for,

you are also struggling for the right to organize and to be recognized.
which means economic equality.
it has dignity, and it has worth
for people to live in this rich nation and receive starvation wages
when we don't earn enough money to take our family on a vacation?