

## **Using Primary Sources in the Classroom: The Great Depression Unit**

This lesson was created by educators working with the Alabama Department of Archives as part of the "[Using Primary Sources in the Classroom](#)" project in 1996.

### **Lesson 5: STRIKE!!!**

#### **Background information for teachers:**

The economic dislocations of the Great Depression created fear and anxiety in Alabama's citizens. Urban areas like Birmingham and Huntsville were especially hard hit. Heavily dependent on industry, these cities suffered greatly when the wages and/or hours of its citizens began to be cut back in an effort to combat the economic problems.

The severity of the economic problems prompted political groups to agitate for fundamental changes in the economic and political systems of the nation and their arguments found a larger audience among the increasingly desperate workers. In 1930 the Communist Party concentrated its southern efforts in Birmingham and began organizing and publishing a newspaper, the *Southern Worker*.

Labor unions and the "strike" weapon seemed, to many workers, the only way to gain relief and recognition. Unions experienced an increase in membership after the passage of Section 7(a) of the National Industrial Recovery Act which guaranteed workers the right to organize and bargain collectively. This "legitimized" union membership in the eyes of many Alabama workers, especially miners and textile workers, who began responding to the efforts of union organizers.

Many Alabamians responded to the call for changes to the status quo from labor and political organizations. Even racial and gender divisions that were so common for so long in Alabama became blurred in the resulting confrontations between workers and management.

#### **Identifications:**

- a. T.C.I.: Tennessee Coal, Iron and Railroad Company. The largest single employer in Alabama in 1930, it was primarily involved in the production of iron, steel and coal.
- b. N.R.A.: National Recovery Administration created in 1932 by the Roosevelt Administration to, among other tasks, adjust wages and hours nationally in an attempt to keep business and industry operating.
- c. U.M.W.A.: United Mine Workers of America. A union formed to assist steel and mine workers in labor issues such as wages and safety/health.
- d. I. L. D.: International Labor Defense Fund. A Communist-front organization that agitated among coal and steel industry workers in the city of Birmingham during the Great Depression.
- e. Scottsboro Boys: Nine African-American men convicted of the rape of two white women on a train near Scottsboro, Ala. The case became a symbol for the injustices of the southern legal system in the 1930s.

## Content Standards:

### Alabama Course of Study: Social Studies (2010)

- 4<sup>th</sup> Grade:
  - 12. Explain the impact the 1920s and Great Depression had on different socioeconomic groups in Alabama.
    - Examples: 1920s—increase in availability of electricity, employment opportunities, wages, products, consumption of goods and services; overproduction of goods; stock market crash Great Depression—over cropping of land, unemployment, poverty, establishment of new federal programs
    - Explaining how supply and demand impacted economies of Alabama and the United States during the 1920s and the Great Depression
- 6<sup>th</sup> Grade:
  - 5. Explain causes and effects of the Great Depression on the people of the United States.
    - Examples: economic failure, loss of farms, rising unemployment, building of Hoovervilles
    - Identifying patterns of migration during the Great Depression
    - Locating on a map the area of the United States known as the Dust Bowl
    - Describing the importance of the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt as President of the United States, including the New Deal alphabet agencies
    - Locating on a map the river systems utilized by the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA)
- 11<sup>th</sup> Grade:
  - 6. Describe social and economic conditions from the 1920s through the Great Depression regarding factors leading to a deepening crisis, including the collapse of the farming economy and the stock market crash of 1929
    - Assessing effects of overproduction, stock market speculation, and restrictive monetary policies on the pending economic crisis
    - Describing the impact of the Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act on the global economy and the resulting worldwide depression
    - Identifying notable authors of the 1920s, including John Steinbeck, William Faulkner, and Zora Neale Hurston
    - Analyzing the Great Depression for its impact on the American family
    - Examples: Bonus Army, Hoovervilles, Dust Bowl, Dorothea Lange
  - 7. Explain strengths and weaknesses of the New Deal in managing problems of the Great Depression through relief, recovery, and reform programs, including the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), the Works Progress Administration (WPA), the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), and the Social Security Act.
    - Analyzing conditions created by the Dust Bowl for their impact on migration patterns during the Great Depression

## National Standards for History

- Era 8 The Great Depression and World War II (1929-1945)
  - Standard 1: The causes of the Great Depression and how it affected American society
  - Standard 2: How the New Deal addressed the Great Depression, transformed American federalism, and initiated the welfare state

## National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies

- Standard 2 – Time, Continuity, and Change
  - Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of the past and its legacy
- Standard 3 – People, Places, and Environments
  - Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of people, places, and environments
- Standard 5 – Individuals, Groups, and Institutions
  - Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of interactions among individuals, groups, and institutions
- Standard 6 – Power, Authority, and Governance
  - Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of how people create, interact with, and change structures of power, authority, and governance.

## Learning Objectives:

Upon completion of this lesson, students should be able to:

1. Discuss some of the fears and needs of workers in Alabama during The Great Depression.
2. Discuss the racial and gender issues being raised.
3. Identify a strike and its participants.
4. Identify some of the issues of a labor strike.
5. Discuss some of the economic and political issues of the time period.
6. Evaluate the multiple views presented by historic documents.

## Suggested Activities:

1. Give each student a copy of a different document.
2. Students should use the general suggestions for analyzing a written document found at the introduction.
3. After reading and analyzing his/her assigned document, each student should write a statement to the press as Governor concerning the proposed actions of the documents.

4. At the completion of this activity, give each student a copy of the letter from J. A. Murphy and Governor Miller's response. Allow the students to decide if they support Governor Miller or Mr. Murphy after reading the documents.

**Primary Sources:**

Communist Party handbills, [1](#), [2](#), [3](#) Governor B.M. Miller, Administrative files, SG19922, folder 18, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama.

[Document 2](#): The Lincoln Mills of Huntsville strike settlement records, Alabama Department of Labor, Labor dispute case files, SG4191, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama.

[Document 3](#): Letter, Mr. J.A. Murphy, [Governor B.M. Miller](#), Administrative files, SG19922, folder 18, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama.

[Document 4](#): "Photograph of mine foreman" WPA Alabama Writers Project, photographs, LPP 1, container 2, folder 11, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama.