

Mule Spinners Strike

Introduction	This activity places students in an 1875 role-play, in which they assume the role of either a mill agent or one of two different groups of workers who are in competition with each other. It is a suggested follow-up for the Tsongas Industrial History Center's Workers on the Line field program.
Time	One class period
Target grade	8-12
Lesson Preparation	Print out copies of the three "character" information sheets – Ring Spinner, Mule Spinner and Agent.
Background Information	<p>The first labor unions were craft organizations, modeled on the guilds of medieval Europe. Members of these groups were skilled artisans, who had studied their crafts as apprentices and journeymen before becoming master printers, cobblers, silversmiths, and the like.</p> <p>The Industrial Revolution, with products mass-produced by machines, reduced the importance of skilled labor. Jobs that once required skilled workers were increasingly performed by semi-skilled "operatives" on more automatic machinery. The resistance to change from the skilled workers was often fierce. Workers formed craft unions as an attempt to gain power with management to meet demands over issues including wages, hours, conditions or more.</p> <p>Craft unions were organized for a specific job. Sometimes were ten or twenty different unions in a single mill, representing weavers, mule spinners, loom fixers, or carders. Over time these separate craft-based unions became less efficient and didn't make sense as the composition of the work force changed.</p> <p>Industrial unions were a response to the multitude of small craft unions. An industrial union organized whole industries, without regard to type of job or level of skill. All textile workers were part of one union, all miners, or steelworkers, or railroad workers, etc. were organized together.</p> <p>Knowing the difference between craft and industrial unions is absolutely critical to an understanding of labor history. The craft unions had more success negotiating their demands because the skills they possessed were valuable. However, they did not represent a large group of workers. Furthermore, there was frequent conflict between craft unions and industrial unions.</p>
Vocabulary	<p>Craft Union: A union representing workers engaged in a particular craft or skill, but who may work for different employers and at various locations.</p> <p>Industrial Union: Organizing method through which all workers in the same industry are grouped into the same union—regardless of skill or trade.</p> <p>Mill Agent: The person who controlled all aspects of the company's day to day</p>

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	<p>operations. The mill agent arranged for the maintenance, repair, and replacement of the machinery, oversaw all the production activities in the workrooms, and had the power to hire and fire employees.</p> <p>Mule Spinner: A skilled worker spinning finer yarn on a mule spinning frame.</p> <p>Ring Spinner: A semi-skilled worker attending a ring spinning machine, traditionally used for the coarser yarn.</p>
Anticipated Student Preconceptions/ Misconceptions	Mule Spinners and Ring Spinners are names for both the machine and the worker who tended the machines.
Frameworks	<p>Massachusetts Social Studies Frameworks</p> <p>Concepts and Skills, Grades 8–12</p> <p>General Economic Skills</p> <p>14. Explain how people or communities examine and weigh the benefits of each alternative when making a choice and that opportunity costs are those benefits that are given up once one alternative is chosen</p> <p>17. Explain how opportunity costs and tradeoffs can be evaluated through an analysis of marginal costs and benefits.</p> <p>20. Describe how the earnings of workers are affected by the market value of the product produced and worker skills.</p> <p>US History I</p> <p>USI.28 Explain the emergence and impact of the textile industry in New England and industrial growth generally throughout antebellum America.</p> <p>US History II</p> <p>USII.1 Explain the various causes of the Industrial Revolution. (H, E)</p> <p>USII.2 Explain the important consequences of the Industrial Revolution.</p> <p>USII.5 Explain the formation and goals of unions as well as the rise of radical political parties during the Industrial era.</p> <p>Grade 12 Economics</p> <p>E.3.3 Recognize the role of economic institutions, such as labor unions and nonprofit organizations in market economies.</p> <p>E.3.9 Describe how the earnings of workers are determined by the market value of the product produced and workers' productivity</p>
Guiding Question	How did the differences between craft and labor unions affect the balance of power for workers in management negotiations?

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Objectives	<p>Student will be able to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Explain the difference between craft union and industrial union.• Discuss how the balance of power shifted for workers between craft or industrial unions in negotiations with management.
Activity	<p>Introduction</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Introduce the concepts of craft and industrial unions. Explain the difference between skilled and unskilled workers.2. Choose two students to be Mill Agents. Divide the rest of the class in two groups – half will be the Ring Spinners and the other half the Mule Spinners. <p>The Activity</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Distribute corresponding sheets to each group, and have someone read the first section of each sheet to the whole group to provide some basic context and set the stage.2. Each group should meet separately to read their sheet and discuss their response.3. Once the three groups have met separately, the Mill Agents should propose their plan to increase profits. Then allow the other two groups to respond.4. The activity will take the form of a three-way debate. The teacher can facilitate the discussion.5. The sheets are written in such a way as to encourage the Agents to cut wages, touching off a strike by the Mule Spinners. The Ring Spinners responds tends to vary quite a bit. The debate elicits a variety of responses and directions. Often the two groups of workers will be on opposite sides and the Mill Agents may understand this dissension works to their benefit. <p>Conclusion</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. To conclude you may say something like, “Which one of these groups, if any, has gained anything?” Students will (almost always) realize that the Mill Agents have “won,” and all the workers have been exploited.2. Use this as a lead-in to discuss craft versus industrial unions and power in the labor struggle. Craft Unions relied on the fact that skilled workers were necessary in specific operations, and that unskilled workers are replaceable. How would management most benefit from this? Which group benefits more?
Assessment	<p>Write a two-paragraph reflection:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• How do you feel, from the perspective of your role, as Agent, Ring Spinner, or Mule Spinner, about the conflict and its resolution?

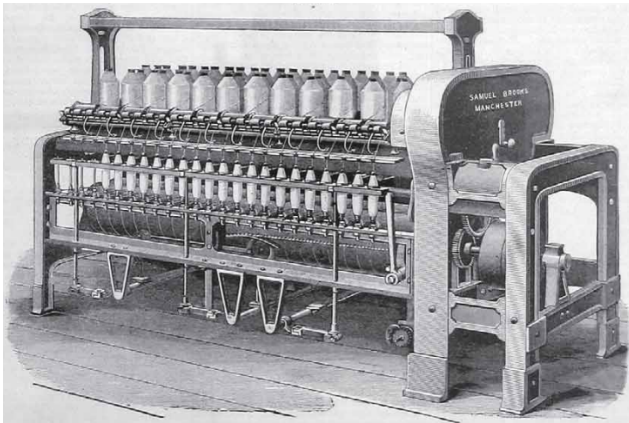
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What new understandings do you now have of labor/management relations? <p>See rubric.</p>
Differentiated Suggestions	For classes that may have trouble reading the sheets, the teacher can present the information to the whole class.
Adapting the Activity for Other Grades	This activity is aimed at 8 th grade or higher.
Bibliography	<p>Skurzynski, Gloria. <i>Sweat and Blood: A History of U.S. Labor Unions</i>. Minneapolis, MN: Lerner Publishing Group, 2008.</p> <p>McNeese, Tim. <i>The Labor Movement: Unionizing America</i>. New York: Chelsea House, 2008.</p>

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Ring Spinner

A semi-skilled worker; responsible for spinning warp (or vertical) thread for looms.



Spinning had been a very skilled job in the early days in Lowell. Traditionally men of English backgrounds spun most of the thread, while women had done most of the weaving and other jobs. A new machine, called a ring-spinning machine, was introduced in the 1870s. It did not require great strength or skill to operate. Most ring spinners were women, often immigrants who spoke little or no English.

The Problem

You are a group of ring spinners in the Boott Mill. You hear rumors that mill management is looking for ways to increase profits by 10%. Last month in Fall River, a mill increased production by speeding up machinery and cutting the wages of the mule spinners. In addition, many mule spinners were laid off. If that happens here, the mule spinners will probably go on strike. If they do, management may ask you, the ring spinner, to spin all of the thread, in effect do the work of the mule spinners.

Your Response

What are you going to do?

Right now, you spin warp thread and the mule spinners spin weft thread. **Both** are necessary to make cloth, but the mule spinners make a lot more money than you do.

If the mule spinners go on strike, will you support them, or will you help replace them?

Keep in mind that the mule spinners are a proud group, and look down on other workers.

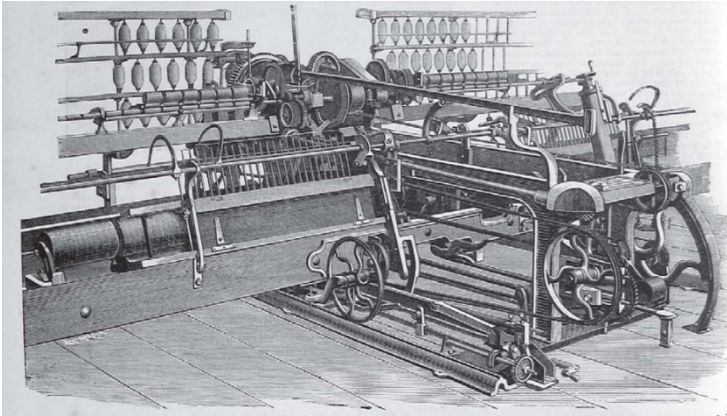
Also, what will you do if management cuts your wages?

What is your plan?

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Mule Spinner

A highly skilled worker; responsible for spinning weft (or horizontal) thread for looms.



Virtually all mule spinners were men, and most were of English or Irish backgrounds. The job was physically demanding, it involved pushing a large machine along a track. The machine had arms extending about ten feet to each side, and as it moved it stretched and twisted about 100 strands of cotton roving into thread. The spinner had to keep just the right amount of tension on the machine, or the thread would be worthless. It

took a long time to learn the job, they were paid more, and the proud mule spinners often looked down on less skilled workers.

The Problem

You are a group of mule spinners in the Boott Mill. You hear rumors that mill management is looking for ways to increase profits by 10%. Last month in Fall River a mill tried to do this by increasing production, at no extra cost to the mill. You heard they did this by increasing the speed of the machinery and cutting wages. In addition, many mule spinners were laid off.

Your Response

What are you going to do?

Your problem is more difficult because a new spinning machine has just come on the market. It is called a ring spinner, and it does not require as much strength or skill to operate. The workers who tend these machines are mostly women, often immigrants from other countries who speak no English. The ring spinning machine is best at making warp thread, but it is likely that it can be adapted to make weft thread (which is what you make). Both kinds of thread are necessary to make cloth.

What is your plan?

Mill Agent

The highest ranking manager at the mill; responsible for all aspects of mill operation.



Each large company had an Agent, who was appointed by a treasurer or Board of Directors who usually lived in Boston. The Agents were the highest-ranking people in Lowell. The Mill Agent was responsible for supervising all aspects of mill operation. He made decisions about production, hiring, expansion, and change.

The Problem

You are the agent for Boott Mills. The Board of Directors has just informed you that they are not satisfied with mill profits. They order you to increase profits by 10%. The Board is convinced that this must be done if the mill is to stay in business. The Board demands that you immediately develop a proposal explaining how this can be done. One possibility might be to cut labor costs. Right now, you have two different types of spinning machines in your mill: mule spinners, which spin weft thread, and ring spinners, which spin warp thread. Both types are needed to weave cloth. You have heard about recent changes in mill machinery. A mill in Fall River just replaced mule spinning machinery with ring spinning machinery. This allowed the mill Agent to replace the higher paid, male mule spinners with immigrant women, who earn lower wages operating the ring spinning machinery. In the past, mule spinners have made demands because they felt they were not replaceable. As a matter of fact, they have requested to meet with you soon because they are unhappy with their wages and working conditions. The ring spinners have never given you trouble.

Your Response

What will you say to the mule spinners when you meet with them?

What changes will you make in order to achieve the increase in profits required by the Board?

How do you think they will react to your decisions?

What will your response to their reaction be?

What is your plan?

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	Below Expectations	Meets Expectations	Above Expectations
Students participation in activity	Student did not actively participate.	Student participated in activity playing their role.	Student participated in activity with role and added additional insights to the debate/discussion.
Understanding of topic.	Shows an adequate understanding of the topic.	Seems to understand the main points of the topic.	Clearly understands the topic in-depth and presents their information forcefully and convincingly.
Explanation of character's point of view	Cannot explain one way in which his character "saw" things differently than other characters.	Can clearly explain one way in which his character "saw" things differently than other characters.	Can clearly explain several ways in which his character "saw" things differently than other characters and can clearly explain why.