

TEACHER'S GUIDE
Document Based Activity
Part 5: Uprising of the 20,000
MISSION 4: "City of Immigrants"

Strike

On November 23, 1909, twenty thousand young Jewish immigrant women launched a strike in New York's shirtwaist industry. Shirtwaists, or blouses, became popular in the 1890s and became a symbol of the independent, working woman. Like Lena and Rosa, the women who worked in the shirtwaist factories shared a variety of workplace grievances, including low wages, long hours, arbitrary fines, and forced overtime. In what became known as the Uprising of the 20,000, the strikers courageously picketed for eleven weeks, while facing opposition from the manufacturers, the courts, and even the police. The strikers' cause was supported by a variety of progressives, including the Women's Trade Union League, a group of middle-and upper-class women who supported the reform efforts. Although not a complete victory, by February 1910, many employers had signed union contracts. The uprising became a powerful symbol within the garment industry, signaling the strength of women organizing. In this activity, students examine a variety of primary sources exploring the strike from different perspectives: the garment workers, their employers, and some of the strike's supporters.

A NOTE TO THE EDUCATOR

While Lena's journey to America is fictional, her story is based upon the actual experience that millions of immigrants went through at the turn of the twentieth century. The primary source documents included in this activity complement Lena's story and will introduce your students to historic records exploring the Uprising of the 20,000. Each primary source highlights an aspect of the strike experience. Information about each source and guiding questions are also included to support student exploration of each document.

Activity Components

- *About the Documents: Information about each source to help you prepare to use it in the classroom*
- *Guiding Questions: Prompts to support student exploration of each document.*
- *Primary Sources:*
 - *Document 1: The Cooper Union Meeting of 1909*
 - *Document 2: "Miss Morgan Aids Girl Waiststrikers"*
 - *Document 3: Statement of Shirtwaist Employers*
 - *Document 4: Photographs documenting the Uprising*
 - *Document 5: "Women in a Labor War" Article*
- *Culminating Activity to help students explore the multiple perspectives surrounding the strike.*

This activity is designed for you to determine how many components to use with your students. The following procedure is recommended and can be adapted based on your curricular goals and timing constraints.



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Steps to Complete

The following procedure is recommended for this activity and can be adapted based on your curricular goals and timing constraints.

1. *Distribute primary source document(s) to students.*
2. *Have students work independently or in small groups to investigate the document(s) with the goal of learning as much as they can about the Uprising of the 20,000. Students can record their findings in the included chart.*
3. *Select guiding questions to help your students investigate each source. You can give your students all of the guiding questions or choose a few for them to respond to.*
4. *Have students present their findings to the class or a fellow student and share what was learned.*
5. *Assign students to take on the perspective of the people involved in the Uprising of the 20,000. Divide students into three categories: garment workers, employers, and wealthy supporters. Students should use the information they uncovered from the primary source document(s) to determine their group's argument regarding the merits of the strike. Students can share their views in the form of a live debate or as a written statement articulating their ideas regarding the strike.*



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About the Documents

Document 1: The Cooper Union Meeting of 1909

On November 22, 1909, Samuel Gompers and other political activists and labor leaders gathered at Cooper Union for a mass meeting to address the shirtwaist workers. While many leaders like Gompers noted the terrible working conditions faced by workers, they also urged workers to consider the impact of a strike in light of the loss of pay it would bring. During the meeting, 19-year old Clara Lemlich interrupted the speeches and addressed the crowd. In Yiddish, Lemlich appealed for united action against manufacturers in the form of a general strike by the shirtwaist workers in New York. Her motion was unanimously approved and sparked the beginning of the Uprising of the 20,000.

Document 2: "Miss Morgan Aids Girl Waiststrikers"

Anne Tracy Morgan became a member of the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL), a group of educated women that supported the struggles of working class women, which some newspapers dubbed "The Mink Brigade." Anne, the daughter of the powerful financier J.P. Morgan, used her family's wealth and connections to support the Uprising of the 20,000. The WTUL was organized in 1903 by middle and upper class women to help working women unionize and improve their working conditions. They helped fund the strike, picketed with the workers in the hopes that their presence would limit police brutality, and provided legal representation for women who were arrested.

Document 3: Statement of Shirtwaist Employers

Shirtwaist Employers did not want to make concessions to the strikers. As employers, they did not want to have regulations regarding wages, work conditions, and hours their employees could work as this would limit their profit. In this editorial, George S. Lewy, a representative of the Dress and Waist Manufacturers' Association, wrote to the New York Times to clarify the view of the shirtwaist employers and why a strike was bad for business and for all New Yorkers.

Document 4: Photographs of the Strike

Throughout the Uprising of the 20,000, women united to fight for the right to organize the shirtwaist industry even when threatened with police brutality and the risk of unemployment. These images show women raising their hands to pledge support for the strike, picketing on the streets, and being taken to Jefferson Market Prison after being arrested for their involvement.

Document 5: "Women in a Labor War" Article

This article was published in Munsey's Magazine, a popular weekly magazine, in April 1910. The article describes the shirtwaist strike and the young women's efforts to win better working conditions and the right to organize labor unions. The article aims to show the women's strength and commitment—that they went without wages and sometimes even food, and refused to stop striking before all of their demands were met.



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Guiding Questions

Document 1: The Cooper Union Meeting of 1909

- Read the account. What information does it provide about the meeting?
- Look carefully at the photograph. What can you learn about the people in the audience and on stage, (gender, clothing, appearance, numbers)?
- Based on the article, what are the pros and cons of going on strike?
- Compare and contrast Samuel Gompers' speech with Clara Lemlich's?
- Why were the workers motivated to strike after Clara Lemlich's speech?
- What questions does this document raise for you?
- In what ways can this document inform our understanding of Lena's experience as a garment worker?

Document 2: "Miss Morgan Aids Girl Waiststrickers"

- Read the account. What information does it provide about the strike?
- What does this document tell us about Miss Morgan?
- Why does Miss Morgan support the strike?
- In what ways will the strike protect the workers according to Miss Morgan?
- What questions does this document raise for you?
- In what ways can this document inform our understanding of Lena's experience in America?

Document 3: Statement of Shirtwaist Employers

- Read the account. What information does it provide about the strike?
- What tone does this article take? Can you provide examples?
- What are the pros and cons of the strike from the perspective of the employers?
- How do the employers view the strikers?
- According to the owners, what are the consequences of the strike for New York City?
- What questions does this document raise for you?
- In what ways can this document inform our understanding of Lena's experience in America?

Document 4: Photographs of the Strike

- What do these images tell us about the Uprising of the 20,000?
 - Describe the people striking? What can we learn about them from the images (age, gender, etc.)?
 - If you were an employer, how would you feel about the strikers in the pictures?
 - If you were a worker, how would you feel about the strikers in the pictures?
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- If you could "enter" a photograph, what might you hear, feel, and smell?
- Based on an image, how would you describe the experience of being a shirtwaist striker?
- What are the risks of being a striker?
- What questions do these documents raise for you?
- In what ways can these documents inform our understanding of Lena's experience in America?

Document 5: "Women in a Labor War" Article

- Read the account. What information does it provide about the strike?
- Based on the article, how would you describe the experience of being a shirtwaist striker?
- What are the risks of being a striker?
- What were the terms offered by the employers?
- Why was union recognition important?
- Why were the workers motivated to continue to strike after the older man spoke?
- In what ways have women changed based on the article?
- What questions do these documents raise for you?
- In what ways can these documents inform our understanding of Lena's experience in America?



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Uprising of the 20,000

Use the organizer to record your findings on the Uprising of the 20,000

Arguments in support of the strike

Arguments against the strike



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Document 1: "The Cooper Union Meeting of 1909" *The Call*, November 23, 1909

*The Uprising of the 20,000 began with a mass meeting at Cooper Union where the decision to strike was made. This photograph shows the labor leader Samuel Gompers addressing the great crowd. This excerpt is from an article, first published in *The Call*, a pro-union newspaper, on November 23, 1909.*



Cooper Union Meeting, taken by Brown Brothers, November 22, 1909, Kheel Center Collection

The decision to strike was reached yesterday at the Cooper Union meeting which was addressed by Samuel Gompers, president of the AFL. Gompers was given an ovation when he was introduced by Chairman Benjamin Feigenbaum. The vast crowd rose to its feet and cheered him very enthusiastically for several minutes.

Gompers said: "I have never declared a strike in all my life. I have done my share to prevent strikes, but there comes a time when not to strike is but to rivet the chains of slavery upon our wrists."

Speaking of the possibility of a general strike, Gompers said: "Yes, Mr. Shirtwaist Manufacturer, it may be inconvenient for you if your boys and girls go out on strike, but there are things of more importance than your convenience and your profit. There are the lives of the boys and girls working in your business."

Appealing to the men and women to stand together, he declared: 'If you had an organization before this, it would have stood there as a challenge to the employers who sought to impose such conditions as you bear.

"This is the time and the opportunity, and I doubt if you let it pass whether it can be created again in five or ten years or a generation. I say, friends, do not enter too hastily but when you can't get the manufacturers to give you what you want, then strike. And when you strike, let the manufacturers know you are on strike!



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"I ask you to stand together," said Gompers in conclusion, "to have faith in yourselves, to be true to your comrades. If you strike, be cool, calm, collected and determined. Let your watchword be: Union and progress, and until then no surrender!" This was greeted with a storm of applause.

Clara Lemlich, who was badly beaten up by thugs during the strike in the shop of Louis Leiserson, interrupted Jacob Panken just as he started to speak, saying: "I wanted to say a few words." Cries came from all parts of the hall, "Get up on the platform!" Willing hands lifted the frail little girl with flashing black eyes to the stage, and she said simply: "I have listened to all the speakers. I would not have further patience for talk, as I am one of those who feels and suffers from the things pictured. I move that we go on a general strike!"

As the tremulous voice of the girl died away, the audience rose en masse and cheered her to the echo. A grim sea of faces, with high purpose and resolve, they shouted and cheered the declaration of war for living conditions hoarsely.



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Document 2: "Miss Morgan Aids Girl Waiststrikers"

Source: New York Times, December 14, 1909

Anne Morgan was the daughter of the powerful financier J.P. Morgan. She used her family's wealth and connections to bring attention to the plight of immigrant women workers. In 1909, she joined the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL), which helped mobilize worker strikes across the city during the Uprising of the 20,000.

MISS MORGAN AIDS GIRL WAISTSTRKERS

We Can't Live Our Own Lives, She Says, Without Doing Something to Help Them

Miss Anne Morgan, daughter of J. Pierpont Morgan, is a recent applicant for membership in the Women's Trade Union League and when her name has been passed upon she will become a regular member, paying \$1 a year, which is the fee. This is the league to which the striking shirtwaist makers belong, and the application for membership means that Miss Morgan is interested in the attempt these girls are making for their own betterment. In joining the league she gives her moral support. . . .

Miss Morgan Tells of Strike,

"I have only known something of this strike for a short time," said Miss Morgan to a Times reporter last night, "and I find other people to whose attention it has not been brought do not know anything about it. If we come to fully recognize these conditions we can't live our own lives without doing something to help them, bringing them at least the support of public opinion.

"We can see from the general trade conditions how difficult it must be for these girls to get along. Of course, the consumer must be protected, but when you hear of a women who presses forty dozen skirts for \$8 a week something must be very wrong. And fifty-two hours a week seems little enough to ask.

"Rose Schniederma told me of a woman who had worked in box shop in Chicago for thirty years and could not get in ten hours a day make enough to live on-she could only do by working twelve to fourteen hours. Those conditions are terrible, and the girls must be helped to organize and to keep up the organizations, and if public opinion is on their side they will be able to do it."



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Document 3 : Statement of Shirtwaist Employers, Editorial by George S. Lewy

Source: The New York Times, December 18, 1909

SHIRTWAIST EMPLOYERS

Their Statement of the Issues Involved In the Strike.

To the Editor of the New York Times:

...The employers are not ready to make practically all the concessions asked for. They will not agree to employ only union labor; they will not agree to give up their right to employ and to discharge whom they see fit; they will not consent to having prices for work established without having a voice in the matter, nor will they allow a delegate to interfere in the running of their factories.

They cannot agree to keep at work employees for whom there is no work to do, as they are not running eleemosynary [supported by charity] institutions, nor are they able to regulate the law of supply and demand which governs the waistmaking industry as it does all other. If the workers will so regulate the demand of the consumer that it shall run evenly through the year instead of being divided in "seasons," as at present, the employers will be glad to keep everyone at work all the time....

The strikers cannot win if they refrain from intimidation and violence, as the shops are gradually filling up with satisfied workers. That they do not refrain is evidenced by the by the nightly riots in the district occupied by the waistmaking industry and the Police Court records. They attack workers, not only as they leave the shops, but as they leave and arrive at their homes. And we manufacturers are practically requested to sit supinely and have our working people beaten without attempt to give them protections.

The ultimate result of the strikers' present tactics, if successful, would be to drive from New York to other cities an industry employing over \$75,000,000 capital...



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Document 4: Photographs of the Uprising of the 20,000

Source: The Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives

During the Uprising of the 20,000, women fought for the right to organize the shirtwaist industry. These images show women raising their hands to pledge their support for the strike, picketing on the streets, and being taken to Jefferson Market Prison after being arrested for their involvement.



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Document 5: "Women in a Labor War" Article

SOURCE: Allan L. Benson, "Women in a Labor War," Munsey's Magazine xliii:1 (April 1910): 68-76.

Women In a Labor War: How the Working Girls of the New York East Side Have Learned to Use Men's Weapons in a Struggle for Better Conditions

When they "picketed" the factories and tried to prevent other women from taking their places, there were excitement and some disorder in the streets. In the scuffling, some of the girls were grabbed by the hair, and their heads were bumped against the curbstones. Never mind—let the strike go on!

More than six hundred were arrested, and a score were sent to the workhouse. What of it? Merely incidents of industrial warfare—let the strike proceed!

The six thousand who stayed out to the bitter end after the other twenty-four thousand had won their victory were actually starving. One day, on a single street, out of thirty pickets, twenty-eight fell in their tracks. It was not magnificent—just industrial war. Forget it, and remember the strike!

Then came the day when the employers of the remaining six thousand offered terms of peace. Back to the Cooper Union—read the terms. What were they?

As terms go, they were liberal. Every demand was granted except one. But that one rejected grievance—no union! Not recognized! Spurned, ignored, thrown out of court!

Starving girls were called upon to say what they would do. They filled the hall. A patriarchal Jew of seventy began to speak. He told his hearers that he was one of the few men engaged in the shirtwaist industry. He was the father of nine children. he knew what hunger was; he knew what cold was; he knew what work was. Also, he knew what visions were made of, for he himself had dreamed of a happier day when the union should protect them all. . . .

Some of them had only an apple for breakfast, and nothing afterward. If the strike were to be ended upon the proffered terms, conditions would be better than they had ever been before. If the strike were to go on, there would be an indefinite continuation of bread and soup—and, in a little while, there might be no bread. An advance (progress) of twenty years had been made in the last two months; wouldn't it be better to rest content for a while—even without the union?

When he finished speaking, no one replied. Three thousand girls sat in stunned silence. For twenty full seconds, there was not the rustling of a foot nor the sound of a voice. Then, in unison, as if the three



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thousand girls had been trained for a month to do what they were about to do, there swept over the hall a mighty sob. . . . But the assembled girls had not yet spoken. Having sobbed, they were ready to speak. And, what was the order that these starving strikers unanimously gave? Here it is:

"Burn the [offered] terms of the employers and go on with the strike."

And they went out again into the cold, with their shivering bodies, their empty stomachs, and their heavy hearts. They had kept their oath.

Yes, indeed, women have changed.

Fifty years ago, women would never have waged such a desperate fight, in mid-winter, against five hundred employers. They hadn't been prepared. They hadn't learned to fight the world as men fight it for a living. But they are learning—learning in the same school in which man learned.

