

Taking Action at Work

Lesson Packet #10 – September 2016

The Change Agent <changeagent.nelrc.org>

Description: Use this selection (or a subset of the selection) of multi-level articles written (mostly) by students to teach reading skills and to spark discussion about the role of workers in determining what happens in the workplace.

Level: These texts are Levels 3-10 (grade level equivalent).

Purpose: The aim of this packet is to provide relevant and inspiring articles that show ordinary people playing a role in determining the conditions in their workplaces. Students will read stories of individuals and groups raising their voices and taking a stand on everything from cleaner bathrooms to better wages and dignity on the job.

Materials: PDFs of seven articles from the “Good Jobs, Not Just Any Jobs” issue (#36) of *The Change Agent*:

1. “Humans, Not Machines” – a student from Arkansas reflects on what a good job would be; includes an activity that gives readers the chance to do the same. Half page. (Level 6)
2. “Advocate for What You Want” a student from Brooklyn, NY, shares a time she got other workers together to confront their supervisor about the bad condition of the bathroom and the kitchen at their workplace. Includes an activity to brainstorm problems at work and what you can say and what you can do. Half page. (Level 5)
3. “Car Wash Workers Organize” – a student and an organizer tell the story of organizing *carwasheros* who were dealing with low wages, wage theft, and terrible conditions. One page. (Level 7)
4. “Putting a Stop to Discrimination” – an ESL student from NY discusses wage theft and poor conditions he and others experienced as grocery store workers. Includes a one-page article and a one-page graphic. Also includes a box listing 5 key rights that undocumented workers have. (Level 5)
5. “Fighting for Economic Protections: Protests Led to New Laws and Social Safety Net” – adapted article by Howard Zinn explaining the huge protests that led to major policy changes. Includes a CCR-aligned activity that asks readers to go back to the text and uncover evidence for various assertions. Two pages. (Level 10)
6. “Organizing for Our Fair Share” – a four-page spread by a restaurant worker and union member, telling the story of the effort in Boston to unionize the hotel where he works. Includes boxes, charts, and photos that help explain what a union does. (Level 7)
7. “Visions for the Future” – a very short dialogue (with illustration), taken from *Problem Posing at Work* by Elsa Auerbach, which helps students reflect on how to make change at work. Extensions and activities included. (Level 3)

How to Use These Materials:

We do not include classroom steps for teachers in this packet. Instead, we hope that by providing this set of materials, you can pick and choose the ones that are right for your students and build from there. Many of the pages include activities that you can start with. We also suggest connecting these readings to current events both nationally and locally. For example:

1. **Explore the minimum wage in your community.** Is there a ballot question (or has there been a recent ballot question) aimed at increasing the minimum wage or providing other protections for workers? Read the text of the ballot question and discuss. Connect to local organizing efforts if there are any.
2. **Look up workers' centers in your area.**
 - a. Restaurant Opportunity Center <rocunited.org> helps restaurant workers win fair wages and benefits, and it offers education and training.
 - b. Interfaith Worker Justice <iwj.org> has a list of workers centers all over the country.
 - c. Or...search for "workers center" + your city or region and find a workers' center near you.
3. **Learn more about organized labor.** Look up unions that are active in your area. Invite a union leader in as a guest speaker. Visit a union hall. Find out more about the history of the labor movement. Learn about labor law and what legal protections workers have.
4. **Find out more about inequality, including the role of race and gender. Visit:**
 - a. United for a Fair Economy <faireconomy.org>
 - b. The Institute for Policy Studies at < inequality.org>
 - c. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities <www.cbpp.org>
 - d. Institute for Women's Policy Research <www.iwpr.org>

Feedback?

We welcome your comments, concerns, lesson ideas, or insights gained from trying out these materials in the classroom. Please be in touch! You can contact us at:
<changeagent.nelrc.org/contact>

Find more *Change Agent* lesson packets at <changeagent.nelrc.org>, as well as PDFs of magazines on a wide variety of themes, articles in audio, CCR-aligned activities, and more. All of that is available for the price of an online subscription: \$20 per teacher per year.

Humans, Not Machines

Maria L. Hernández

A good job is where I do activities that I am prepared for. They are activities that I like to do and that make me feel important, happy, and satisfied. It should be a place that has a good working environment, good co-workers, and good pay.

A bad job is one that I do only for the pay. I had a bad experience at one job where the company only needed our hands to do the work. The hours were exhausting. They acted like we weren't humans but only machines.



Maria L. Hernández, originally from Mexico, is an ESL student in Fayetteville, AR. She is a kind and compassionate person who has two sons. She wants to help them and be a good example for them. Maria enjoys bettering herself. She wants to learn English well so she can continue her studies.

What do you think?

Write down the qualities of a good and bad job. Revisit your list after reading some articles.

| A good job: | A bad job: |
|-------------|------------|
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SOME QUESTIONS TO KEEP IN MIND WHILE YOU READ

As you read Maria's story and others in the magazine, think about *who decides*—if you are treated like a human or a machine, what your pay is, whether your job is good or bad? Who *should* decide?

Advocate for What You Want

Carolyn Allen

At my last job, we had a big problem. The place was never clean. The bathroom was nasty and smelled terrible. The guy who was supposed to clean it never did. He just walked around the warehouse as if there was nothing to do. The kitchen was a mess. The refrigerator had things growing inside it.

I got some women together and we went to see the supervisor. We asked him to talk to the janitor about the health of the people in the warehouse. I was a little nervous, that he would not listen to us, but he did.

After our talk with the supervisor, things got a little better. Our bathroom and lunchroom were clean. It felt so good to have a clean refrigerator that I went and bought some food just to put it

inside. The floor was so clean you could eat off it. We had a problem at my workplace, and we advocated for a change. We asked our supervisor for a cleaner warehouse, and we got it.



Carolyn Allen is a student at Brooklyn Adult Learning Center. At BALC she has gotten her confidence back and is eager to gain knowledge and receive her GED. She has always been a hardworking, loving, dependable mother and wife. Her goal is to become a social worker.

Taking Action at Work

| Problem: | What Can You Say? | What Can You Do? |
|----------|-------------------|------------------|
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |

Fill out the chart. Name some problems you have had at work and some things you could say or do about that problem. Read the articles on pp. 37, 40, and 48-53. Add to the chart based on the ideas you get from these articles.

Car Wash Workers Organize

Carlos Linarez and Rocio Valerio

We Want Wages and Respect

Car wash workers have had enough abuse and humiliation. We are just like any other person in this world who wants to have honest work and respect. Therefore, we are uniting for a good cause. We are asking for benefits such as a minimum wage, overtime, adequate equipment, set work schedules, vacation time, and health insurance, as well as sick days.

To make ourselves stronger, we work together with several community organizations and a labor union. Our campaign is called WASH NY.

Many Bad Experiences

I got involved in WASH NY after a friend who had been working for 17 years got fired because he went to get a cup of coffee. This ugly and unjust situation made me angry and sad and inspired me to join the campaign to organize for rights for the car wash workers.

Before our campaign started, we *carwasheros* had many bad experiences. Sometimes the owners did not allow us to keep tips. We had to work with toxic cleaning chemicals, and we did not have the right safety gear. When it was really cold, we weren't allowed to take breaks to warm-up. And the bosses mistreated us. The managers called us bad names. When we spoke up about working conditions, the managers often got back at us by cutting our hours, which hurt our paychecks.

Starting to Win

After only six months of organizing, we started winning some big victories. In the fall of 2012, car wash workers in Queens voted 21-5 in favor of being represented by RWDSU. Later, car wash workers in the Bronx won another union election. As of January 2013, we have four car washes organized into unions.



WASH NY is a collaboration between NY Communities for Change, Make the Road New York, and the Retail, Wholesale, and Department Store Union (RWDSU).

Now, workers have better wages and better working conditions. At the carwash where I work, we were getting paid \$5.50 an hour for 60 hours of work, with no overtime, and we had to share our tips with the managers and cashiers. Then we won a raise to \$6.25 an hour, and we don't have to share the tips with the managers and cashiers.

The owners gave us gloves, but we are still fighting for proper gear. A good thing is that the managers stopped calling us names and insulting us. Also, the boss told the managers that they couldn't fire us without first checking with him.

We feel a bit better now going to work since the managers are not mistreating us like before. Since there has been some change, it has encouraged us to continue fighting for more respect, better pay, and better working conditions.

Carlos Linarez is a "carwashero" in the South Bronx. He is from El Salvador and has been in New York for two years. Rocio Valerio, originally from Mexico, is a lead organizer at New York Communities for Change.

Putting a Stop to Discrimination

Roberto Ramirez

Terrible Conditions, Insults

I started working at Golden Farm Grocery in 2005. The job was very hard. There were days that we worked from 4am to 7pm. We didn't have a lunch or food break. Then they hired a new manager and things got even worse. He demanded that we work faster and we couldn't answer back at all. If we did, we would be automatically fired. He hit some of my co-workers and insulted them.

Wage Theft

We spoke to our boss and told him what was happening, but he ignored us. Then we went to look for help outside of the store. We went to the Department of Labor, and they did an investigation of our situation. They found out that we were getting paid \$360 dollars a week for 72 hours of work. They also discovered that in his accounting books, the owner wrote that we had been paid \$637 dollars per week. He forced us to sign for it, even though we were getting paid much less.

Looking for Help

The Department of Labor investigated our employer, but we still saw no change in our situation. We decided to look for help from other groups. We met Lucas Sanchez and Kate Baruc who work with New York Communities for Change (NYCC). We decided to file a lawsuit for back wages and at the same time request an election to join a union.

After my boss found out about all this, he got us all together and asked us to drop the lawsuit. He tried to bribe us by offering to pay us minimum wage (\$7.25 an hour) plus \$10.85 for overtime. When bribery didn't work, he threatened us. Every day, he threatened to call immigration. He told us, "Keep the door open because one of these days immigration will come and you'll need a quick escape."



Above, Roberto joins with other workers calling for a just wage for everyone.

Due to this, my co-workers were scared and wanted to forget about the lawsuit and the union. But there were six of us who weren't scared. We kept organizing more people in the store. Finally, we won the election and the lawsuit for back wages. However, our boss refuses to give us a work contract. That's why we have called for a boycott of the store. Our struggle continues. This is the sad reality of the Golden Farm workers. That's why I've joined my friends and co-workers to learn English so that we will be able to stop the abuses by bosses like Sonny Kim.

Besides being a supermarket worker, Roberto Ramirez is a dedicated community organizer, a student, and a loving father. He has spent over two years fighting for better conditions at the store where he works in Brooklyn, NY. Roberto participates in classes through the NYCC ESL Program.

If you are an undocumented worker, you still have rights!

1. The right to be paid: You have the right to be paid minimum wage and overtime. If you do not receive all of your pay for time you worked, you can recover that pay.



Cartoon by Ethan Heitner. Used with permission. www.freedomfunnies.com

- 2. The right to organize:** It is illegal for an employer to punish or threaten you for organizing to improve your work conditions.
- 3. The right to be free from discrimination:** It is illegal for an employer to discriminate against you based on race, religion, age, or sex.
- 4. The right to be safe on the job:** Workplace health and safety protections apply to you.
- 5. The right to remain silent:** After you are hired, you do not have to answer if your employer asks about your immigration status.

Fighting for Economic Protections

Protests Led to New Laws and a Social Safety Net

Howard Zinn

In the 1930s, the Great Depression left one third of the working population unemployed. Working class people and poor people began to join together to demand economic rights.

One of the first major actions was in 1932 when veterans of World War I came to Washington, DC. These veterans had children who were going hungry. They had been promised bonuses as a result of their service in World War I. They never

Roosevelt faced pressure from massive numbers of unemployed people organized together in councils.

received their bonuses. So 20,000 of them came from all over the country and they set up a camp near Congress to demand their bonus. Ironically, the government called on the police and army to destroy their tent colony.

But this was just the first of many rebellions that would take place through the rest of the decade.

When Franklin Delano Roosevelt came to office in 1933, he faced large and powerful working



World War I veterans came to DC to demand the post-war bonus they had been promised.

120 UNIONS VOTE ON CALL OF 45,000 TO GENERAL STRIKE

National Guardsmen Patrol Battle Zone on Waterfront

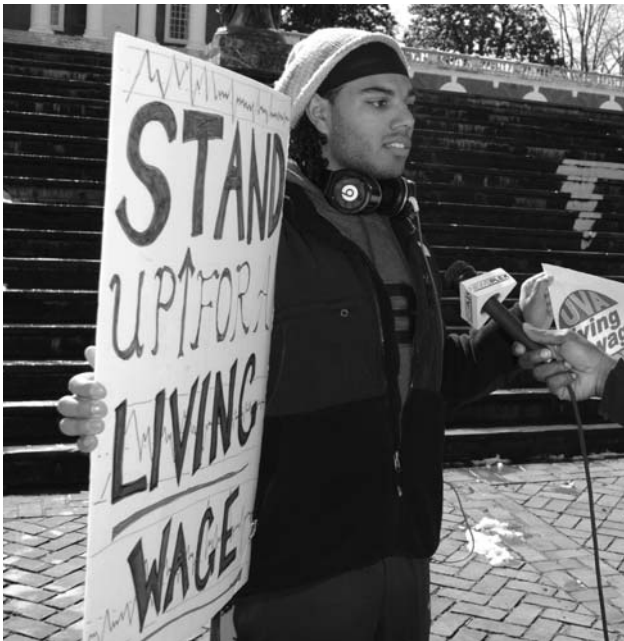


Headlines report the 1934 general strike in San Francisco.

class and poor people's movements. A lot of people think, "Roosevelt was a kindhearted man, and he wanted to help people, so he helped pass a lot of economic reforms." It is true that Roosevelt was more sensitive than most presidents have been to the plight of the poor. Furthermore, he had Eleanor Roosevelt at his side, and she was even more sensitive than he was, and she was a good influence on him.

But Roosevelt faced turmoil all over the country, and *that* is what pushed him to take action. He faced pressure from massive numbers of unemployed people organized together in councils; he faced tenants' councils organizing rent strikes. He faced a general strike in Minneapolis and a general strike in San Francisco. He faced 400,000 textile workers in the South going on strike in 1934.

The country was in danger of having the whole system torn apart, and Roosevelt under-



Students at the University of Virginia staged a hunger strike and numerous protests in support of workers' right to a living wage.

stood that. The result was the “New Deal” reforms of the 1930s: Social Security, unemployment insurance, a minimum wage, and subsidized housing — a “social safety net,” which did not eliminate poverty by any means, but it did offer some basic protections to many people. Also, for the first time, workers won new labor laws, such as the National Labor Relations Act, which gave some rights to labor unions.

People have continued to fight for economic rights. While the labor movement is not as powerful or as well organized as it was in the 1930s and 1940s, working people still fight for better jobs. One of the current demands — for a living wage — has brought together students, factory workers, janitors, and bus drivers. So the fight for economic justice is a long struggle, which still continues.

Howard Zinn (1922-2010) was the author of *A People's History of the United States*. This piece was excerpted from “History of Workers' Movements in the U.S.,” <www.pbs.org/pov> and adapted by Cynthia Peters. Find more teaching materials on this topic at <zinnedproject.org>.

Thinking Further about Economic Rights

What economic demands does Howard Zinn mention or allude to in the article?

According to Zinn, what pushed President Roosevelt to create the “New Deal” reforms of the 1930s?

Write down some current debates about economic policy happening in the U.S.

Organizing for Our Fair Share

A worker talks about the struggle to bring a union to a hotel in Boston

Nestor Garcia

Work Hard and Organize

In my life, I've been a janitor, an airport worker, a welder, and a hotel worker. Now I am a union organizer. I fight for working-class people to have a good job with decent pay and dignity.

I believe everyone should be empowered to have their fair share. Everyone should be able to support their family and realize their dreams. If you are willing to work hard, you should be able

to make it here in the U.S. But working hard doesn't mean keeping your mouth shut and doing your job. Part of the hard work is fighting for what is right.

Sometimes you might feel disappointed, but don't give up. When the economy goes bad, businesses lay people off. They get more aggressive with discipline. A union gets the workers together to educate them. We join together and say to the owners, "No, you're not going to take our jobs away. You are not going to lower our wages."

We also reach out to the politicians, churches, and the general public – to let them know about our

We say to the real estate developers, "This is not just a place to make money. This is a community."

struggle. How workers are treated is not just a workplace issue; it is also a community issue.



Nestor Garcia (front) on a UNITE HERE picket line.

The real estate developers come to our city to make money in the big hotels. They are just thinking about how much profit they can make on each room. We say to them, "This is not just a place to

struggle. How workers are treated is not just a workplace issue; it is also a community issue.

Collective Bargaining

If you are not in a union, you negotiate one-on-one with your boss for your pay and benefits. If you are in a union, you unite with other workers and negotiate collectively.

make money. This is a community. We live here and shop here, and our children go to school here. The wages you pay us circulate through the whole community and make this a better place." United, we can make sure they see us as a community, not just a way for them to get rich.

Bringing the Union to the "W" Hotel

Before I started working in hotels, I was a welder. I helped build the "W" Hotel. But the economy crashed and there were no welding jobs. I trained to become a prep cook and got a job working for \$15 per hour at the "W" Hotel. As a welder, I had been making \$36 per hour.

When I started working at the "W," it was not a union hotel. Working conditions were not good.

They didn't pay overtime. They fired people for no reason. The cocktail waitresses had to wear very short skirts and high heels. They worked 10-hour shifts. They had to put up with a lot of disrespect and harassment.

The housekeepers had to clean 18-20 rooms per day. It is very strenuous work.

We had no set schedule, so we could never make plans because

we never knew when we were working from one week to the next. I was paying \$116 per week for

They didn't pay overtime. They fired people for no reason. The cocktail waitresses had to wear very short skirts and high heels.

continued on next page

Training, Better Pay, and Benefits at Local 26

The most important thing about my job is the feeling that I belong to an organization that cares about my family and me, and puts me at the top of their agenda. Before getting a union job, I had worked as a supervisor in a hotel, and the benefits were almost nonexistent. The medical insurance was expensive, and I had a co-payment every time I visited the doctor.

At that time, my wife who was a union member (Local 26) told me about the opportunity to attend the Basic Culinary Skills class at the BEST Corp. Hotel Training Center. The class was taught by a skilled instructor, and BEST Corp. provided us with a professional mentor who assisted us in making our resumes and applying for jobs.

After this class, I decided to transfer to a union position and I immediately started to benefit from the opportunities the union offers its members. Being a union member opened many doors for me.

Most importantly, Local 26 provided us with excellent medical insurance. With

help from the union's homebuyers assistance program, and legal advice provided through the union benefits, my wife and I were able to buy a home in the fall of 2012.

The Hotel Training Center offers many free classes to union members and their families, such as technology classes, On-Call Banquet Server classes, Food Safety training, Room Attendant training, and the GED. The computer lab gives us the opportunity to study and do research. Being a union member gives us the security that we are backed by qualified professionals who will help us fulfill our dreams and push us to be the best that we can be.



Khalid Jaouahir is the Food and Beverage Supervisor at the Ritz Carlton Hotel in Boston, and he is a member of Local 26.

my family’s health and dental insurance. Even with health insurance, when my wife had a baby, we had to pay a \$2700 deductible.

Five of us started talking. We held meetings with other workers. We met off the premises – secretly – at the McDonald’s or the food court across the street. We didn’t want management to know because we knew they wouldn’t like it and they’d find a way to punish the leaders. We brought housekeepers and cocktail waitresses together – people who had never had any reason to talk to

each other before. But now we found out what we had in common – low wages and no respect. And we found we could connect around the idea of making the “W” a better place.

Many Challenges... then Victory

The hardest thing about organizing a union was trying to get people to understand that they have to stand up and fight for their rights. We brought in documents and charts that showed how much money the hotel was making off of us. We showed people that we were only asking for what was fair.

We spent three months having

meetings at all times of the night in order to reach all the shifts. We had 15 committees and many new leaders in all the departments. I remember the day we had our union vote. It was May 11, 2010. We won by a huge majority.

It took about a year, and then we started seeing the benefits of being in a union. Family insurance decreased to \$12

What is a Strike?

When workers are organized, they are in a better position to negotiate for what they want in the workplace. One way to get an employer’s attention is to go out on strike or to threaten to go out on strike. A strike is when a majority of workers vote to stop working.



Got a Grievance?

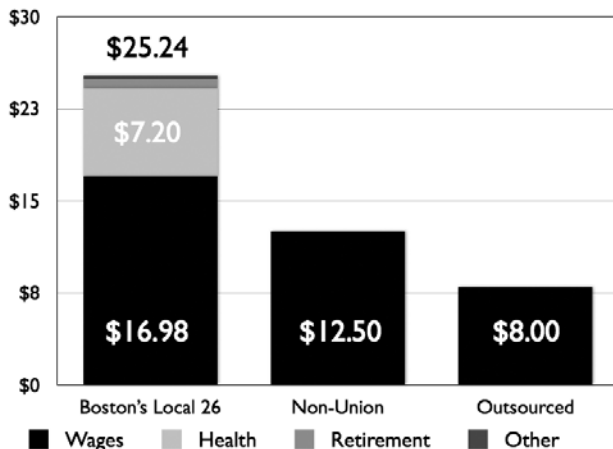
Grievance: a reason for complaining or being unhappy with a situation.

Workers in a union have the right to make a complaint when management does something wrong against them.

The worker and his or her union steward go through a series of steps to address the problem, finally ending in arbitration, which includes a neutral third party.

The rules for your grievance procedure are negotiated in the workers’ contract with the employer, and the employer is legally bound to uphold the terms of the contract.

Comparing Hourly Wages: Union, Non-Union, and Outsourced



Source: UNITE HERE, Local 26. Note: Outsourced workers do not work directly for the hotel, but for another company. The hotel subcontracts that company to provide a service.

Paying Dues

Who pays for unions?

The member do! Every union member is required to pay dues, which are usually subtracted from the member's pay check and given directly to the union. The union uses these dues to pay staff, support political campaigns, and provide supports to members.

Boston's Local 26 members pay dues of about \$735 per year.



per week. The hotel put \$7.20 per hour into a trust fund to pay for our pensions, education, and other benefits. The hourly pay for a prep cook went up to \$18.45. We had job security, seniority, clear work schedules, and other protections. And the cocktail waitresses no longer have to wear high heeled shoes, and they got new uniforms—much more dignified!

Most importantly, we had a grievance procedure. If you feel like you aren't being treated right, you are not alone. As a union, we back each other up.

About three months after we got the union, people started feeling more comfortable. They got more outspoken. They had a clear understanding of their rights and a way to fight for them.

I felt pretty good. I had done something for my fellow human beings. My wife worried that I would get fired. But all those co-workers, they trusted me. I became a shop steward. And now I am an organizer with the union, and I am trying to help other hotel workers get organized to bring in a union so they can fight for their rights.

Nestor Garcia is from the Dominican Republic. He's been in the U.S. for 21 years. He is currently an organizer with UNITE/HERE Local 26 in Boston.



Making Sense of What You've Read

Have you ever been in the position of bargaining one-on-one or collectively? Describe those experiences—whether they happened at work, in the family, or in the community.

Have you ever been in a union? What was it like?

The author says that when the economy goes bad, workers still have power. What power does he say they have? Do you agree or disagree?

Study the chart on the left. Write some true statements based on the information in the chart. Why do you think outsourced workers get paid so much less?

According to the information in the chart on p. 50 and the box on union dues above, what is the net benefit annually of being a union hotel worker in Boston as compared to non-union hotel worker?

At the "W" Hotel, who decides what working conditions are like?

Visions for the Future



Jose: I'm sick of this place. They own you here. Nothing ever changes.

Mario: Well, it's better than it was 10 years ago. I've seen a lot of changes since I started here.

Jose: Like what?

Mario: We have longer breaks, better pay, and medical insurance. It took a while, but we won them.

Jose: Yes, but I came to this country to get ahead. I didn't come here to fight for every penny. I'll never make it at this rate. I'm looking for another job.

Mario: Well, wake up. It's the same everywhere. The only way things get better is if we stick together. Things can change. And now a lot of people are supporting us.

Source: *Problem Posing at Work*, Elsa Auerbach and Nina Wallerstein, used with permission from Grass Roots Press.

Thinking about Change

Describe how Jose and Mario each feel. Share a story of when you felt the same way.

Drawing from the articles you read in this issue of *The Change Agent*, list some of the actions people can take to bring change to the workplace. Which of these could you try in your workplace?

Revisit the activity on p. 3. Now that you've read some of the stories in "Good Jobs, Not Just Any Jobs," describe your ideal job. Is your description different from the one you did before you read the magazine?

What is your vision for what work could like? And who should decide?