LAWCHA
the Labor and Working-Class History Association

GUIDE TO TEACHING LABOR'S STORY

Incorporate the experiences of working men, women and children into your existing curriculum with professionally selected & resourced documents

Document Selection and Teaching Guide by: Leilah Danielson, Northern Arizona University

Historical Era	Document Title: **"Start! A Play in Seven Scenes"**
THE EMERGENCE OF MODERN AMERICA (1890-1930)	Document Type: **Play (Script)**
Document 7.7	BRIEF DESCRIPTION: This is an abridged excerpt of a play written and produced by two female members of the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) in 1927. The play, which students can act out in the classroom, provides insights into the struggles faced by workers, immigrants, and women in the 1920s. Themes include the 1920s, gender and the "New Woman," immigration/ethnicity, workers and the labor movement, Fordism and capitalism.

SOURCING THE SOURCE

Beckie Friedman and Eva Shafran, garment workers and members of the ILGWU, wrote and produced this play in 1927 while enrolled as students at Brookwood Labor College. Brookwood was a residential school for labor organizers who wanted to learn skills that would help them build stronger unions and attract more workers. Brookwood was part of a larger "workers' education movement" that swept the United States, Europe, and Latin America from around 1900 to 1935 to promote social and political change. In the excerpted scenes, union organizer Sonia and her supporters obtain the union's support for a campaign to organize New Jersey's garment workers.

Intended Audience: Brookwood students performed this play for working-class audiences and labor unions in New York City and New Jersey.

UNDERSTANDING THE SOURCE

In popular culture, the 1920s are remembered as the Jazz Age or the Roaring Twenties. Images of flappers, speakeasies and gangsters, Coney Island, Ford Motor cars, and a skyrocketing stock market suggest that Americans had left the concerns of the progressive era behind and entered the modern age of big business and consumerism with enthusiasm. However, historians often refer to the 1920s as the U.S.'s first "culture war" as rural, white Protestants organized to oppose the growing prominence of urban, ethnic America. A revitalized Ku Klux Klan targeted Jews and Catholics, racist views of African Americans led to events like the Tulsa Race Massacre, and Congress passed the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924, restrictive immigration legislation that discriminated against Asians, and Southern and Eastern Europeans. The prosperity of the 1920s was also uneven with a maldistribution of wealth, underconsumption, and a weakened labor movement. The postwar Red Scare and new employer tactics, such as Ford's $5/day and "Americanization" campaigns, put unions on the defensive. The labor movement responded by adopting an accommodationist posture during these years.

This source deepens our understanding of the 1920s by demonstrating that marginalized groups like women and immigrant workers explored new ways of organizing unions and building working-class power. That they did so at

Brookwood Labor College highlights how the workers' education movement brought workers together across boundaries of sex, ethnicity, race, region, nationality, and industry to reimagine and forge a more inclusive labor movement and American national identity. It also shows how workers and their unions responded to corporate-sponsored entertainment for workers by creating their own forms of cultural production to share with one another.

This excerpt is from the first two scenes of the play. The first opens with a garment union meeting in New York City in which Sonia, a young Jewish garment worker, expresses concern that their union shop is being undermined by manufacturers who have moved production "out of town" to New Jersey and Connecticut. She pleads for the union to invest in organizing these "scab states," in the process confronting an older, immigrant union member named "Payneck" who supports her motion, but wants to dominate the meeting. In the second scene, the union president explains to Sonia and her union "brothers" that the problem goes far beyond the northeastern United States and is really centered in the newly industrializing south, which hires not only "scab" labor, but has the extra advantage of being located where the cotton is harvested. Still, the president agrees with Sonia that organizing the northeastern states is the first step and is so impressed by her that he sends her to New Jersey to begin the work.

This excerpt can be used to explore several themes that relate to the 1920s as well as to the present day. First, the play reveals tensions between first-generation immigrant workers and their Americanized children. From the late nineteenth century through the 1920s, the garment industry was centered in New York and most of its workforce was female and first-generation immigrants (Jewish and Italian) and their American-born children. Male Jewish garment workers founded the International Ladies Garment Workers Union [ILGWU] as a craft union in 1900. The IGLWU re-organized on an industrial basis in 1909-1910 when a tireless group of young women organizers, including Clara Lemlich, led garment workers out on a general strike known as the "Uprising of the 20,000." While many of these young women were immigrants themselves (Lemlich was born in what is today Ukraine), tensions of age and gender shaped the union's trajectory and organizing for generations.

During the union meeting, Sonia and other younger members of the union express frustration with "Payneck" (pain-in the neck), because he speaks in heavily accented English, often strays off topic, and gives long-winded speeches. For example, when Payneck asks a "kvestchun," (question) the chairman responds, "Listen, brother, you always [slow us down]! Can't you shut up for a while and let us do some business?" Similarly, Sonia complains to Bill that "[Payneck] is always like this. He kills every meeting for us." This scene raises a myriad of questions that may resonate with today's students, many of whom may be immigrants themselves or whose parents are immigrants. Why did the play's authors portray first-generation immigrant workers in this manner? Were they expressing anti-immigrant sentiment? Were they suggesting that second-generation, Americanized workers, would be more effective union organizers than their parents' generation? Were they simply trying to make the play humorous and entertaining?

A second theme involves the challenges of organizing unions when "capital" has the prerogative to relocate production to anti-union regions. The ILGWU had successfully organized New York City, Boston, and Philadelphia, especially after the 1909 "Uprising of the 20,000," a strike involving thousands of women garment workers. By the 1920s, garment manufacturers began moving out of these high-density union areas. In the first scene, Sonia argues that organizing garment workers in New Jersey and Connecticut is "a question of life and death for our organization." In the second scene, Sonia and Bill learn from the union president that the garment industry is also relocating to the South, which not only has non-union labor, but is also where the cotton is grown, thereby reducing additional costs in the manufacturing process. He explains that this is because "Modern capitalism does not stay in one place. It tries to move, at least insofar as profits are concerned." This theme may be used to examine capitalism, and strategies workers and unions have used to curtail its power. It also demonstrates that the capital mobility we associate with globalization is not a new problem but rather one that workers have long faced.

A third theme is the activism of working-class women in the 1920s, an era often associated with the decline of feminism. Sonia is the only woman in this excerpt from the play, and, unlike Payneck, she is "serious looking" and well-spoken, persuades her fellow unionists of her cause, and impresses the union president who puts her in charge of the organizing campaign. Later in the play, when Sonia goes undercover as "Rose" in a New Jersey garment shop, she successfully forms relationships with the shop's young female workers. Despite ethnic differences, they bond over dance halls and Tin Pan Alley songs and stick up for each other when the boss tries to divide them. By casting Sonia as the heroine, the play's authors were likely criticizing the ILGWU leadership, which had only one woman, Fannia Cohn, on its executive board despite having a large female membership. Indeed, by the mid-1920s, the percentage of women in the union had begun to decline, in part because male unionists did not prioritize organizing them and instead focused on skilled male

workers. Sonia is an example of "labor feminism," working-class women and their allies who agitated for the organization of women workers, cultivation of their leadership skills, and the need for protective legislation for women workers.

Fourth, the play can be read as a criticism of the labor movement's male leadership. In the 1920s, the labor movement was in decline and dominated by leaders who advocated union-management cooperation, focused on organizing workers by craft rather than by industry, and were biased against unskilled workers, newer immigrants, women workers, and African American workers. "Start!" challenges this approach in several ways: First, Sonia asks the President if garment manufacturers will adopt Henry Ford's assembly line methods and "install the belt system," and the Chairman wonders aloud "whether the unions…realize this menace to their existence." Second, Sonia's contention that organizing the unorganized is "a matter of life or death" for the union can be read as a critique of the labor movement's reluctance to invest in new organizing campaigns. Third, whereas conservative labor leaders advocated a nonpolitical approach and cooperation with management, the play suggests that this won't work. Employers – even those who have signed contracts with the ILGWU – are hostile to unionism and will constantly seek to undermine worker power. Finally, in featuring a female heroine and distinctly ethnic workers organized by industry rather than craft, the play suggests that women, "new" immigrants, and less skilled workers can be good organizers and loyal union members.

Several years after Beckie Friedman and Eva Shafran wrote "Start!" the movement for industrial unionism took off, culminating in the formation of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in 1936 and serving as a base of support for the labor legislation of the New Deal era. Like Friedman and Shafran, the CIO emphasized the importance of organizing workers by industry rather than by craft, organized across ethnic and racial differences, and was more inclusive of women workers, though its central concern was the male worker. CIO unions and their working-class members became an important part of President Roosevelt's Democratic coalition. The play shows that union organizers like Friedman and Shafran helped to pave the way for the resurgent labor movement of the 1930s and the New Deal order.

Guide continued on next page

GLOSSARY

Americanization – Refers to the assimilationist movement of the early 20th century. Fearful of new immigrants with customs different from their own, many native-born Americans supported the idea of integrating them into American society by learning English and expressing patriotism. Employers added another layer, declaring unions and socialism as "foreign" and un-American.

Brookwood Labor College: Residential school for labor organizers who wanted to learn skills that would help them build stronger unions and attract more workers. From 1921-1936, it was a vibrant center of labor activism and experimentation. Many of its students and faculty would play a prominent role in the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO).

Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) – A labor organization formed in 1935-36 when a group of industrial unions broke away from the dominant labor movement and began organizing workers by industry rather than by craft. The CIO revitalized the movement and organized previously neglected constituencies of workers (frequently African Americans, women, and immigrants) to join the labor movement. It also provided critical support for the labor protections and reforms of the New Deal.

Craft Unions: Labor unions that organize workers based on their occupation. Often these are skilled workers, trained in a specific craft or trade.

Henry Ford – Founder and chief executive of the Ford Motor Company (1903-1945). He helped to pioneer the modern assembly line, producing cars so efficiently and quickly that he created a mass market. Although he is known for his invention of the relatively high wage of $5/day, he was strongly antiunion, and the Ford Motor Company was the last of the three big auto companies to sign a union contract in 1941.

Fordism – A term that refers to the system of mass production and consumption that dominated the American economy from the 1910s through the 1970s. It is characterized by assembly lines, a precise division of labor, and the goal of paying high wages so that workers could purchase the goods they produced.

International Ladies Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) – A labor union of garment workers founded in 1900 in New York City that would become one of the largest unions in the United States and was unique in having a primarily female membership. It was one of the most progressive unions of the era, advocating the organization all workers, especially African Americans and Latinos; and promoting workers' education; and was a founding member of the CIO in the 1930s.

Industrial Unions: Labor unions that organize workers based on their workplace or industry. Often these are workers in low paid, mass production industries; their jobs are frequently classified as low- or un-skilled.

Jazz Age: Also referred to as the "Roaring Twenties," the "jazz age" refers to the cultural and social changes associated with the 1920s and early 1930s. With the Great Migration of African Americans to northern cities, women gaining the right to vote, and second-generation immigrants coming of age, the period saw cultural experimentation characterized by the popularity of jazz music, dancing styles borrowed from African American culture, a new heterosocial youth culture, and the spread of mass culture.

Johnson-Reed Act: Also known as the National Origins Act, was a United States federal law passed in 1924 that prevented immigration from Asia and set quotas on the number of immigrants from Europe that were deliberately biased against Southern and Eastern Europeans. It is associated with the resurgent nativism of the 1920s and fears that Italian, Jewish, and Slavic immigrants were unassimilable.

Joint Board: A union committee that negotiates labor contracts with management.

Ku Klux Klan: Revived in 1915, the "second" Ku Klux Klan (KKK) portrayed itself as a respectable political movement dedicated to protecting what it defined as traditional American values. Those values rested on a presumption that middle-class White, Anglo-Saxon Protestants were superior to other socio-ethnic groups. Coming amidst a large wave of European immigration and labor struggles, the second KKK added anti-unionism, anti-immigration, anti-Catholicism and antisemitism to its hallmark pre-Civil War anti-Black agenda. This broadened the organization's appeal and political clout far beyond the states of the old Confederacy.

Labor Feminism – A variant of social feminism, labor feminism emerged in the early 20th century, particularly in the 1920s. It focused on improving the lives of working women and their families through protective legislation and through involvement in the labor movement.

New Deal Order – A term used to describe the reforms of the New Deal era and the political and economic landscape of the United States from the 1930s through the 1970s. It was characterized by federal intervention and regulation of the economy and relatively strong labor unions.

New Woman – A new ideal of womanhood that emerged in the early 20th century that was associated with educated, upper and middle-class women, some of whom identified as feminists, who sought personal autonomy, freedom of expression, and companionate marriage with male partners. It was also associated with urban, wage-earning women who pioneered a new cultural style characterized by fashionability, sexual expressiveness, and heterosocial friendship and romance. By the 1920s, the "New Woman" had become a widely commented upon social phenomenon and advertisers used her image to sell consumer goods.

Presser – A skilled male worker in the clothing and garment trades who handled heavy irons and pressed cloth.

Progressive Era – The Progressive Era refers to the era in US History from around 1890-1917, in which middle-class and some working-class reformers sought to use government action to solve mounting social problems brought on by the Gilded Age, including wealth inequality, poor labor conditions, and urban slums.

Red Scare – The first Red Scare occurred after World War I. Fearful of widespread labor unrest and the spread of Communism with the success of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, the government conducted raids on immigrants and radicals, often without a warrant or due process. The Red Scare contributed to the decline of the labor movement in the 1920s.

Scab (aka strikebreaker)
A person who works for an employer during a labor strike.

Workers' Education Movement – The workers' education movement flourished in the United States during the 1920s and 1930s, mobilizing tens of thousands of workers and their supporters as a means of strengthening their class consciousness and class power and of building a new social order. It was a transnational movement that included the United States, Europe, and Latin America.

Guide continued on next page

QUESTIONS -- DISCUSSION POINTS

Source Specific

- What is the significance of the "Payneck" character? Why do Sonia and other characters view him as a problem? Is this fair?
- What does this excerpt show us about how unions functioned and the challenges they faced?
- Why does Sonia want to organize garment workers in New Jersey and Connecticut?
- What does Sonia and other union members learn from the union president? Why is it important?

Historical Era

- What messages were playwrights Beckie Friedman and Eva Shafran trying to communicate by writing and producing this play? Why might they have decided to cast a young woman as the main character?
- How does the play depict first-generation immigrants? What does the generational tension in the play tell us about the experience of immigration and ethnicity in an era of Americanization programs and immigration restriction?
- In what ways were the challenges faced by workers in the 1920s similar to the problems workers face today?

Labor & Working-Class History

- In the 1920s, the labor movement was dominated by the American Federation of Labor, whose leaders preferred organizing workers by craft and who believed that immigrants and women were difficult to organize. How does the play challenge these ideas?
- How does the play foreshadow the rise of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in the 1930s?

CITATION & FAIR USE

Guide continued on next page

ADDITIONAL SOURCES

Web-based and other Media

Bauman, Suzanne, director and producer, and Rita Rubinstein Heller, producer. *The Women of Summer: An Unknown Chapter of American Social History* (Filmmakers Library, 1985). 57 minutes.

Editors, International Ladies Garment Workers' Union. Jewish Women's Archive. https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/international-ladies-garment-workers-union. Accessed July 29, 2025.

Books and Articles

Altenbaugh, Richard. *Education for Struggle: The American Labor Colleges of the 1920s and 1930s* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990).

Baring, Edward. *Vulgar Marxism: Revolutionary Politics and the Dilemmas of Worker Education, 1891-1931* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2025).

Bernstein, Irving. *The Lean Years: A History of the American Worker, 1920-1933* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2010, second edition).

Cobble, Dorothy Sue, Linda Gordon, and Astrid Henry. *Feminism Unfinished: A Short, Surprising History of American Women's Movements* (New York: Liveright, 2014).

Cohen, Lisabeth. *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, second edition).

Danielson, Leilah. *American Gandhi: A.J. Muste and the History of American Radicalism in the Twentieth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), esp. chapters 3 & 4.

Frye Jacobson, Matthew. *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

Judt, Daniel. "To Build Working-Class Power, We Need a Workers' Education Movement." *The Nation* (August 13, 2024) https://www.thenation.com/article/society/brookwood-labor-workers-education-movement/.

Katz, Daniel. All Together Different: Yiddish Socialists, Garment Workers, and the Labor Roots of Multiculturalism (New York: NYU Press, 2011).

Orleck, Annalise. *Common Sense and A Little Fire: Women and Working-Class Politics in the United States, 1900-1965* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

Peiss, Kathy. *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986).

CURRICULAR & PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT CONNECTIONS

Curricular Connections:

NCHS US Era 7 Standard 1: How Progressives and others addressed problems of industrial capitalism, urbanization, and political corruption.

Common Core Standards:

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.1 Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.2 Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.3 Evaluate various explanations for actions or events and determine which explanation best accords with textual evidence, acknowledging where the text leaves matters uncertain.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including analyzing how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term over the course of a text

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.5 Analyze in detail how a complex primary source is structured, including how key sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text contribute to the whole.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.8 Evaluate an author's premises, claims, and evidence by corroborating or challenging them with other information.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.9 Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.