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## ***GOLDEN LANDS, WORKING HANDS: THE HISTORY OF THE FUTURE***

by **Michelle Vesecky**

Over the past semester I was fortunate to have an internship with the California Federation of Teachers (CFT) through the Center for Labor Research and Education's internship program. My work consisted of helping research one segment of a promising new high school curriculum currently in development. The project, called *Golden Lands, Working Hands*, will instruct high school students on the history of the California labor movement. The complete six week program consisting of 15 separate segments may be incorporated into U.S. history classes during a student's junior year or into economics or government classes taught in the senior year. The program is being designed to be flexible, so that it can meet the various needs of different teachers. In the CFT's *Labor in the Schools* newsletter, the project is described as follows:

"[I]t's our attempt to fill that big gap in curriculum materials for high school students. When it's done in a few years we'll have a complete curriculum on the history of the labor movement in California, from the exploitation of Native American labor in the missions to the Justice for Janitors campaign today.

"Students who go through the Golden Lands, Working Hands unit will be in the workforce within a year or two" said Fred Glass [the director of the project] "It will give them the knowledge necessary to be able to say, 'Union Yes! if they are working in a place where they have that choice."

Other states, such as Minnesota, Rhode Island, Wisconsin, Illinois, Massachusetts, Ohio, Iowa, Michigan, New Jersey, and Virginia have already developed labor history curriculums. However, Golden Lands, Working Hands scope is groundbreaking. No other state has developed a curriculum as comprehensive as the CFT's multi-media project. Golden Lands, Working Hands will be the first of its type to have both its own textbook and an hour long video.

### **The Curriculum**

To ensure top quality, a panel of California labor scholars is

working with the CFT to oversee the project's development. The curriculum, rather than focusing on "Great Men" such as industrialists, inventors, and politicians, will focus instead on those who made California and continue to make California the place it is today — namely ordinary working men and women.

This type of discussion does not take place in most classrooms. The CFT says, "Labor history is rarely taught, thereby leaving out an important aspect of what happened and continues to happen for a majority of people, i.e., workers, their families and communities."

History should offer something of personal significance to each student, unlike the traditional material which often alienates many students. One segment of Golden Lands, Working Hands will concentrate on the Chinese who built the railroads in 1860, another on the farm workers who struck and organized a grape boycott, and yet another on African Americans who migrated to work in West Coast shipyards and aircraft factories during World War II.

The primary goal of Golden Lands, Working Hands is to educate students about their history. The curriculum addresses

University of California at Berkeley Center for Labor Research and Education Institute of Industrial Relations  
2521 Channing Way # 5555 Berkeley, CA 94720-5555 (510) 642-0323

the history of the labor movement and includes discussion of weaknesses and difficulties as well as strengths and achievements. The negative aspects of labor history, such as the times when it has been infected by racism, are not glossed over or ignored. Instead, these times are confronted, so that their negative impact on both workers' solidarity and interests can be explored and can be avoided in the future. The CFT plans to raise awareness in future workers, future voters, and future policymakers. Through education, hopefully worker empowerment will result.

## Production

Golden Lands, Working Hands consists of a classroom curriculum, an hour-long videotape and a textbook. To produce this ambitious project the CFT's Labor in the Schools Committee has conducted an intensive fundraising campaign. So far \$65,000 has been raised, almost entirely from unions. Another \$20,000 is needed for the project's completion.

The program is well on its way to the classroom. The opening segment of the video has been both completed and well received by preview audiences of high school students.

## Presentation

If the students find labor history to be dull and boring, the effectiveness of the curriculum could be seriously impaired. The attention of these future workers and voters must be caught long enough for a strong impression to be made, one that will stay with them in the workplace.

The CFT has taken this into consideration in developing the program, as the opening segment of the videotape illustrates. The video begins with actor Joe Morton:

"Hi, I'm Joe Morton. You might remember me from Terminator 2 and other movies. I belong to the Screen Actors Guild. I'll be your host as we tour the history of the labor movement in California."

By using an actor from a movie popular among this age group, and by having him state that he belongs to a union, the video is attempting to reach mainstream students and make them receptive to the curriculum's content.

Following the introduction is a song that begins with a rap version of some well known folk lyrics. This version is played in the background of an animated cartoon. The song begins:

*So-so-solidarity forever  
So-so-solidarity forever*

and ends:

*And as we celebrate see what it took to create  
This great estate we call the golden state  
Yo G can't you see it's no mystery  
California workers made history*

*Yo G can't you see it's no mystery  
California workers made-history*

As can be seen from just this small sample, the CFT is making an effort to keep the students "awake," hoping this will increase their responsiveness to the history being presented.

## Delivering It to the Classroom

No statewide mandates for classroom curriculum at the high school level exist. In their place are guidelines and "recommendations" to school districts. Because Golden Lands, Working Hands fits into these guidelines, the CFT does not foresee difficulties in the program's implementation. Moreover, the CFT will promote the use of the curriculum in affiliated locals representing teachers throughout the state. The Labor in the Schools Committee also plans to submit the completed project to the State Curriculum Framework Committee. Here, Golden Lands, Working Hands may be deemed "recommended" material. This recommendation will allow the more rapid dispersion of the curriculum throughout the state's school districts.

The curriculum will be available as a standard lesson in California high school history classrooms, but will hopefully leave its mark in a larger realm. As the students who complete this curriculum progress from school into the workplace, they will arrive with a better understanding of labor history and the important role unions play.

## My Internship

As a CFT intern, my role was to research the 1946 Oakland General Strike, one of 15 topics which will be covered in the curriculum. My research involved reading old records, newspaper accounts, and literature devoted to the topic. To supplement this material, I conducted many oral history interviews with union members and others who were directly involved in the strike or who have studied the events.

I found that little has been written about the strike and surrounding events and that few non-participants have heard of it. To my surprise, when I called various libraries, even those devoted to labor, they were often unaware of the 1946 strike's occurrence.

Because of the lack of primary documents and secondary sources, I relied most heavily upon oral history. I found it necessary to track down people who were there and witnessed the events. I found studying the event through interviews more interesting than reading old records and written accounts. However, it was sometimes frustrating because the accounts of different individuals often contradicted each other. Substantiating details of an event which took place almost 50 years ago can prove impossible.

Despite these obstacles, I do believe I was able to obtain a good understanding of what motivated 42 AFL unions and their 100,000 members to strike for two days in 1946.

The conflict began when police escorted scabs during a strike by clerks at Kahn's department store and Hasting's mens' clothing store. The workers in other industries who stopped work in support of the retail clerks succeeded in paralyzing Oakland daily life. Most stores closed, public transportation ceased, four major newspapers halted publication, and most factories and shipyards shut down as well. Water, electricity, and gas remained in service, since their workers were CIO members who were not participating in the strike. If the AFL had asked these services to be discontinued the CIO would have probably honored the AFL's request.

Thus, while the original dispute was industry specific, the employers' response to the strike and the use of police to escort "scabs" were threats to the whole labor movement. The clear alliance of the police with management provided the spark that ignited the Oakland General Strike. Police had abandoned impartiality by interfering with the peoples right to picket peacefully.

The deal that brought the two day "work holiday" to an end provided that in the future police would not break legal picket lines. The workers were successful in exercising their power and in demanding that their rights be respected. This decisive action by workers almost 50 years ago remains an important lesson, whether it be taught inside or outside of the classroom, of what can be accomplished through worker awareness and solidarity.

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The majority of the funding for *Golden Lands, Working Hands* has come from labor organizations and individuals interested in seeing labor education taught in our schools. If you or your organization is interested in making a donation, please call Fred Glass at 510-832-8812 or mail it to him at CFT-AFT, AFL-CIO, One Kaiser Plaza #1440, Oakland, CA 94612.

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### LABOR UNION INTERNSHIP PROGRAM

Wouldn't it be great if students had an opportunity to work for a labor union before they graduated from college? Last spring semester, 21 juniors and seniors at U.C. Berkeley did just that by enrolling in the Labor Union Internship Program sponsored by CLRE and the Economics Department. This was our largest internship program ever. Students developed a variety of projects for local unions in the Bay Area. Michael Reich, professor of Economics, taught the course with help from John Sladkus, CLRE coordinator, and Rob Wrenn, CLRE graduate student research assistant.

"We have been really pleased with the quality of work and thoughtfulness of our interns. They've helped us with a variety of projects and we look forward to participating in the internship program in the future," reports Bob Boileu of the Operating Engineers Local 3.

The following is a sample of some of the projects students worked on:

- Health Care Reform's impact on health care workers for Local 250 SEIU
- A study of Cal/OSHA penalty system for the California Labor Federation
- Development of a membership survey on violence in the workplace for Local 790 SEIU
- Strategies for organizing in the fast food industry for Local 28 HERE and
- Researching the 1946 Oakland General Strike for the California Federation of Teachers's *Golden Lands, Working Hands*, a high school labor history project.

In addition to their research projects, students helped develop databases and research employers for contract campaigns. Students, for their part, got to learn about how local unions operate and the type of people involved with the labor movement. One student commented, "I couldn't believe how hard these people work. They were crammed in small shared offices and they worked for hardly anything. You can tell how much they care about the work they do and what commitment it takes."

We are pleased to inform you that we will be offering this course once again to students next fall. If your union is interested in sponsoring an intern, contact John Sladkus at (510) 643-6815.

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