

New report: Labor's story left out of high school history textbooks

Key union contributions to American democracy and way of life ignored or distorted

WASHINGTON, D.C. — The nation celebrated Labor Day earlier this month, yet few Americans have any idea why. A new report on how the history of labor is treated in high school history textbooks offers an explanation — most Americans never got any education about the labor movement's proper place in our country's history and its many contributions to the na-

tion's development.

"American Labor and U.S. History Textbooks: How Labor's Story is Distorted in High School History Textbooks," sponsored by the Albert Shanker Institute, in cooperation with the American Labor Studies Center, surveys four major textbooks that together account for most of the market in U.S. history textbooks. The report notes that these textbooks often present labor history in a biased, negative way. For example, they focus on strikes and strike violence while giving little or no attention to the employer abuse and violence that were usually at the root of

such actions. Their persistent focus on conflict overrides any attention to labor's central historical role in bringing generations of Americans into the middle class.

In addition, while the report credits the textbooks with some accurate reporting, it notes that the textbooks virtually ignore:

- The vital role of union activism in passing broad social protections and reforms such as the eight-hour work day, Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, occupational safety and health, the end of abusive child labor, and environmental protection;

- Organized labor's support for the civil rights movement; and the role organized labor played in the 1960s in particular, when the rise of public sector unionization brought many more Americans into the middle class and gave new rights to public employees.

"This report explains why so few Americans know much about labor's history and contributions," said American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and Albert Shanker Institute President Randi Weingarten. "It paints a devastating picture of distortion and omission. Too often, labor's role in U.S. history is misrepresented, downplayed, or

ignored. The result is that most American students have little sense of how the labor movement changed the lives of Americans for the better. A vital piece of U.S. history is disappearing before our eyes."

Weingarten added that contemporary media treatments from such sources as Fox News only make matters worse. "For example, the Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa poll released in August indicates that 68 percent of the American public surveyed hears more negative than positive stories about teachers in the media," she said.

The reports' sponsors will be sending a letter to each of the four textbook publishers asking to discuss the issue in person and to recommend more accurate accounts of what labor has done. Their hope is to encourage all publishers and curriculum developers to take another look at the social studies materials they have produced to correct these kinds of inaccuracies and omissions.

"We urge all textbook companies and authors to reconsider their treatment of labor history and tell this crucial part of the American story," said Eugenia Kemble, executive director of the Albert Shanker Institute.

The report notes that the problem of negative or incomplete coverage of the labor movement in school textbooks dates back at least to the New Deal era, and that scholars began documenting this biased treatment beginning in the 1960s. It concludes that U.S. history texts have essentially "taken sides" in the intense political debate around unions — the anti-union side.

The report's sponsors estimate 16 million currently enrolled public and private high school students will never be exposed to a serious account of labor's history.

"In order to fulfill their responsibilities as citizens today, our students need to understand the past sacrifice of working men and women, individually and through their unions, that gave us the quality of life most of us still enjoy," said Paul Cole, executive director of the American Labor Studies Center. "That quality of life is threatened today by well-funded anti-union groups."

"The central argument of this report is not simply to plead for equal treatment for labor in history textbooks," Weingarten noted. "It is that American history itself is incomplete and inaccurate without labor history. Textbooks that leave out or slant labor history simply aren't fully reflecting our nation's history."

The report reviewed hard-copy student editions of textbooks published by Harcourt/Holt (2009), Houghton Mifflin/McDougal (2009), McGraw Hill/Glencoe (2010), and Pearson/Prentice Hall (2010) for high school U.S. history classes. It is designed to be both a critique and a resource for teachers, students, and others that can help fill in the gaps left by many standard textbooks.

The full report is available at www.shankerinstitute.org.

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