

1.2.3 - Chinese Labor Strike of 1867

The Asian American Education Project

Grade Levels	7-10
Lesson Overview	Chinese laborers made up roughly 80% of the workforce of the Central Pacific Railroad company, yet their contributions to the Transcontinental Railroad are often overlooked. They faced harsher work conditions and lower pay than their White counterparts. In 1867, 3,000 Chinese workers held a labor strike. In this lesson, students will learn the history of this strike, the largest at the time in the country. Students will consider both the successes and failures of the strike. They will research other labor actions in APIDA history, and draw comparisons between those actions and the Chinese Labor Strike of 1867.
Lesson Objectives	Students will: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Describe the context and events of the Chinese Labor Strike of 1867.• Research other labor strikes in APIDA history.• Evaluate the historical significance of the Chinese Labor Strike of 1867.
Standards	College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards <ul style="list-style-type: none">• D2.His.1.6-8. Analyze connections among events and developments in broader historical contexts.• D2.His.3.6-8. Use questions generated about individuals and groups to analyze why they, and the developments they shaped, are seen as historically significant.

Chinese Labor Strike of 1867 Essay

On June 25, 1867, Chinese laborers began an eight-day labor **strike** that would become the largest labor action at the time in the United States. The workers were employees of the Central Pacific Railroad, one of two companies charged with building the **Transcontinental Railroad** across the country. The Central Pacific Railroad was in charge of starting west and building eastward. The Union Pacific Railroad was in charge of starting east and building westward. The strike took place in Truckee, a town in California near the Nevada border in the Sierra Mountains.

Chinese railroad workers faced harsh working conditions. They worked longer hours and had more dangerous tasks than White workers, but made less than half the pay. Chinese workers had to cover their own costs of food, lodging, and tools, while White workers had those costs covered by the company. On June 19, 1867, a massive tunnel exploded, killing one White worker and five Chinese workers. Building upon the dissatisfaction the Chinese workers already felt, this event led about 3,000 Chinese workers to organize a strike. They stopped working and demanded equal pay and better working conditions. Specifically, they wanted the following: (1) shorter shifts in the tunnels; (2) work days to be limited to ten hours (from eleven); and (3) a wage of \$40 a month, which was what their White counterparts earned.

The strike was **nonviolent**. Historians have indicated that the strikers took a peaceful approach, drawing on the teachings of **Confucianism**, a philosophy and belief system from ancient China. Charles Crocker (1822-1888), the Central Pacific director, later described the strike, stating, “If there had been that number of White laborers... it would have been impossible to control them... But this strike of the Chinese was just

like Sunday all along the work. These men stayed in their camps. That is, they would come out and walk around, but not a word was said. No violence was perpetrated along the whole line.”

The strike ended when Crocker cut off food, supplies, and transportation to the Chinese workers. The laborers lived in camps by the work site, so Crocker stopped agents from delivering food and supplies to them. Crocker offered no changes in pay or work conditions. He simply told the workers that if they did not return to work they would not be paid for the month of June. Ultimately, the hungry workers agreed to return to work. Many of the workers were responsible for sending money back home to their families in China. They could not afford to lose their wages.

While the strike did not result in any of their demands being met immediately, it was not a complete failure. The strike showed that the Chinese workers could not be taken for granted, and that Chinese workers were not **docile** laborers who would passively accept mistreatment. Over the next several months, the company quietly raised wages for more experienced workers and reduced extreme working hours.

The strike also left an enduring legacy. In the months following the strike, Chinese workers employed with other railroad projects at the time staged smaller acts of **resistance** over not being paid, presumably inspired by the 1867 strike. Asian Americans continue to be active in labor movements and have a history of organizing for workers’ rights in the face of inequality and discrimination.

Bibliography:

- “Chinese Labor and the Iron Road.” *National Park Service*,
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- Fuchs, Chris. “150 Years Ago, Chinese Railroad Workers Staged the Era's Largest Labor Strike.” *NBC News*, 21 June 2017.
<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/150-years-ago-chinese-railroad-workers-staged-era-s-largest-n-774901>. Accessed 18 August 2023.
- “Railroad – Chinese Labor Strike, June 24th, 1867.” *Museum of Chinese in America*,
<https://www.mocanyc.org/collections/stories/railroad-chinese-labor-strike-june-24th-1867>. Accessed 18 August 2023.
- Shashkevich, Alex. “Stanford Project Gives Voice to Chinese Workers Who Helped Build the Transcontinental Railroad.” *Stanford Report*, 9 April 2019.
<https://news.stanford.edu/2019/04/09/giving-voice-to-chinese-railroad-workers>. Accessed 18 August 2023.
- “The Chinese Workers’ Strike.” *PBS American Experience*,
<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/tcrr-chinese-workers-strike/>. Accessed 18 August 2023.

Vocabulary:¹

- **Confucianism:** Western term used to describe the philosophy and belief system related to the Chinese philosopher Confucius (551–479 b.c.) and his teachings; principles include good moral character, inner virtue, respect for the community, the importance of education
- **Docile:** easily taught, managed, or led
- **Nonviolent:** free from violence; a political strategy in which people intentionally do not use violence
- **Resistance:** the act of opposing something
- **Strike:** a work stoppage by a group of workers, usually with demands made for the employer
- **Transcontinental Railroad:** railroad line built between 1863-1869 that connected the eastern U.S. rail network at Council Bluffs, Iowa with the Pacific coast in the San Francisco Bay

¹ Definition adapted from Merriam Webster

Discussion Questions:

1. What were working conditions like for Chinese workers of the Central Pacific Railroad company? How did this compare to those of their White counterparts?
2. Why did Chinese laborers organize a strike? What were their demands?
3. Why did the Chinese laborers choose to strike nonviolently? What are the impacts of this choice?
4. How did the strike end?
5. How would you characterize the end of the strike? In what ways was the strike a failure? In what ways was the strike a success?
6. What is the legacy of the Chinese Labor Strike of 1867?

Activity 1: Identifying the Significance of the Transcontinental Railroad

- A. Show students the photos from the article entitled "[Stanford project gives voice to Chinese workers who helped build the Transcontinental Railroad.](#)"
 1. Use a See-Think-Wonder strategy and have students share their observations and wonderings about the images. Ask students the following prompts:
 - a. What do you see?
 - b. What do you think about that?
 - c. What does it make you wonder?
 2. Tell students the following: "These photos are of workers working on the Transcontinental Railroad. Chinese men made up about 80% of the workforce of the Central Pacific Railroad company, one of two companies in charge of building the railroad."
- B. Have students watch this video entitled, "[Transcontinental Railroad Workers.](#)"
- C. Facilitate a discussion by asking students the following questions:
 1. What is the Transcontinental Railroad? Why is it significant?
 2. In what ways was the Transcontinental Railroad an opportunity for Chinese immigrants?
 3. In what ways did the Transcontinental Railroad disadvantage Chinese immigrants?
 4. What were the work conditions for the laborers?
 5. In what ways were the Chinese laborers indispensable to the building of the Transcontinental Railroad?

Activity 2: Defining a Workers' Strike

- A. Assess students' prior knowledge by asking them to define a strike. Build off their ideas. Tell them the following: "A strike is an organized action in which a group of workers stop working and usually have a list of demands for their employers."
- B. Have students work in small groups to search the internet for two examples of worker strikes.
- C. Have students complete the worksheet entitled, "[Worker Strike Research.](#)"
 1. Have students write the name and dates of the strike on the top row.
 2. Have students identify who was involved in the second row.
 3. Have students identify why they were striking in the third row.
 4. Have students identify the ongoing and final result(s) of the strike in the fourth row.
- C. Facilitate a discussion by asking the following questions:
 1. Why might workers strike?
 2. Do you think striking is an effective strategy? Why or why not?

Activity 3: Examining the Chinese Labor Strike of 1867

- A. Have students read the essay. Consider the following options:
 - 1. OPTION 1: Have students read the essay independently either for homework or during class time.
 - 2. OPTION 2: Read aloud the essay and model annotating.
 - 3. OPTION 3: Have students read aloud in pairs or small groups.
- B. Facilitate a class discussion by asking students the Discussion Questions.
- C. Distribute the worksheet entitled, “[Chinese Labor Strike of 1867: Successes and Failures.](#)”
 - 1. Have students record ways in which the strike was a success in the left column.
 - 2. Have students record ways in which the strike was a failure in the right column.
 - 3. Encourage students to consider both short term and long term impacts.
- D. Tell students the following: “The Chinese workers did not leave behind written records. What we know about the strike is obtained from newspaper articles, reports from railroad bosses, and testimonies from descendants.”
- E. Show the video entitled, “[Historians Still Uncovering Details of 150-Year-Old Chinese Strike.](#)”
- F. Facilitate a discussion by asking the following questions:
 - 1. What additional information did you learn from the video?
 - 2. Why is it important to collect testimonies from descendants?
 - 3. Why is the work of historians important? What are their limitations? How do we, as critical consumers of information, account for these limitations?
- F. Revisit the photos from Activity 1. Facilitate a discussion by asking the following questions:
 - 1. Does the information you learned about the Chinese Labor Strike change how you interpret these photos?
 - 2. Do you have any new wonderings?

Activity 4: Learning about the History of APIDA Labor Movements

- A. Tell students the following: “The Chinese Labor Strike of 1867 is an early example in a long history of APIDA communities’ activism in the labor movement.”
- B. Assign students to work in small groups in order to research other labor strikes in APIDA history:
 - 1. Group 1: 1841 Native Hawaiian sugar plantation strike at Kōloa
 - 2. Group 2: 1920 Filipino and Japanese sugar plantation strike in Hawai‘i
 - 3. Group 3: 1938 National Dollar Store Strike in San Francisco
 - 4. Group 4: 1946 Great Hawai‘i sugar strike in Hawai‘i
 - 5. Group 5: 1965 Delano Grape Strike in California
 - 6. Group 6: 1974 Jung Sai Garment Workers Strike in San Francisco
 - 7. Group 7: 1982 Chinatown Garment Workers Strike in New York City
 - 8. Group 8: 2021 New York Taxi Workers Alliance Strike
- C. Distribute the worksheet entitled, “[Chinese Labor Strike of 1867: APIDA Labor Strike Research.](#)” Have students complete the worksheet by researching the following questions:
 - 1. What was the context of the strike?
 - 2. When did the strike take place?
 - 3. Who was involved?
 - 4. What were their demands?
 - 5. What were the results of the strike?
 - 6. What were the short and long term impacts of the strike?

- D. Have students form new groups with one student representing each of the labor strikes researched as the “expert.” Have each “expert” present their research to the group. Have other students in the group ask questions about each labor strike.
- E. Reconvene as a whole class. Facilitate a discussion by asking the following questions:
 1. What are some similarities among the labor strikes? What accounts for the similarities?
 2. What are some differences between the labor strikes? What accounts for the differences?
 3. What were some characteristics of successful strikes?
 4. What are some characteristics of unsuccessful strikes?
 5. Why are strikes necessary?
- F. Have students research some of the posters and/or propaganda used to recruit support for labor causes. Have students create a recruitment poster for the strike they researched.
- G. Host a Gallery Walk by having students hang their posters around the classroom to have students learn about the other labor strikes.
 1. Use a See-Think-Wonder strategy and have students answer the following prompts for each poster:
 - a. What do you see?
 - b. What do you think about that?
 - c. What does it make you wonder?
- H. Reconvene as a whole class. Facilitate a discussion by asking the following questions:
 1. Which posters were most appealing to you? What was appealing about them?
 2. What are effective recruitment strategies for labor movements?

Activity 5: Analyzing the Historical Significance of the Chinese Labor Strike of 1867

- A. Tell students the following: “Historians use the term ‘historical significance’ to describe the relative importance of events that have occurred in history. Significant events result in great change, have an enduring impact, and affect large numbers of people. Determining historical significance is not objective. Historians can argue that certain events are significant, and others may or may not agree.”
- B. Distribute the worksheet entitled, “[Chinese Labor Strike of 1867: Historical Significance](#).” Explain the five major criteria for determining historical significance:
 1. Importance: Was the event important to the people living at the time of the event?
 2. Profundity: How deeply were people impacted?
 3. Quantity: How many people were impacted?
 4. Durability: How long-lasting was the impact of the event? Did it lead to other events?
 5. Relevance: Is the event relevant today?
- C. Have students work in pairs to complete the worksheet.
 1. Have students read the criteria in the left column.
 2. Have students write evidence for each criteria as it relates to the Chinese Labor Strike of 1867 in the middle column.
 3. Have students evaluate the significance based on each criteria by writing “yes” or “no” in the right column.
 4. Have students review the evidence and determine overall historical significance in the bottom row. Have students write a paragraph explaining their evaluation using the evidence they recorded in the worksheet.
- D. Reconvene as a whole class and have students share their overall evaluation of the historical significance of the Chinese Labor Strike of 1867.

E. Facilitate a discussion by asking the following questions:

1. Why is it important to learn about the Chinese Labor Strike of 1867?
2. How can learning about the strike help you better understand or contextualize more significant labor strikes?
3. How can learning about the strike help you better understand or contextualize the experiences of Chinese laborers in the 1800s?
4. How can learning about the strike help you better understand or contextualize the experiences of Chinese laborers today?

Extension Activities

A. Have students research and select a contemporary problem for laborers. Have them analyze whether or not a strike would be effective in solving the problem. Have students consider the following questions:

1. How would you implement what you learned about strikes from this lesson?
2. Who will you mobilize? How will you reach out to them and convince them to join you?
3. What are your demands? How will you share them with “management”?
4. How will you respond if “management” is unwilling to change?
5. What compromises are you willing to make? What would make you return to work?

B. Have students review the significance of the Transcontinental Railroad by reading this article entitled, “[How the Transcontinental Railroad forever changed the US.](#)” Have students write an opinion essay given this prompt: “What would happen if the Transcontinental Railroad was never built?”

C. Have students write a report addressing the following prompts:

1. What is your ideal career/job?
2. What are the ideal working conditions for this job?
3. How did labor organizing efforts impact these working conditions?

Further Information

“Chinese Railroad Workers Project.” *Stanford University Libraries*. <https://exhibits.stanford.edu/crrw>. Accessed 18 August 2023.

The Asian American Education Project lesson entitled “The Contributions of the Chinese Transcontinental Railroad Workers”: <https://asianamericanedu.org/1.2-Transcontinental-Railroad-lesson-plan.html>

The Asian American Education Project lesson entitled “Fighting for Labor Rights”: <https://asianamericanedu.org/fighting-labor-rights.html>

The Asian American Education Project lesson entitled “Filipino American Farmworkers Fight for Their Rights”: <https://asianamericanedu.org/larry-itliong-cesar-chavez-grape-strike.html>

The Asian American Education Project lesson entitled “Larry Itliong: Unity of Filipino and Mexican Farmworkers”: <https://asianamericanedu.org/filipino-american-farmworkers.html>