



GUIDE TO TEACHING LABOR'S STORY

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

Source Selection and Teaching Guide by Adam Mertz, History Department, University of Illinois at Chicago

Historical Era THE GREAT DEPRESSION AND WORLD WAR II (1929-1945) Document 8.2	Document Title: BLANK PAY DAYS Document Type: Magazine article BRIEF DESCRIPTION: This document is excerpted from an article written by a Chicago school teacher about how the Great Depression was affecting her work and personal life; published 1933 in <i>The Saturday Evening Post</i> .
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SOURCING THE SOURCE

An anonymous Chicago high school teacher—listed simply as “A Chicago High-School Teacher”—wrote this article for *The Saturday Evening Post*, a weekly magazine that many people across the country regularly read, featuring fiction and non-fiction, cartoons and illustrations. In fact, many of Norman Rockwell’s famous illustrations—ones depicting aspects of American society—appeared in *The Saturday Evening Post*. So although this is only the perspective of one anonymous Chicago public school teacher, her thoughts **reached a national audience**, as she explained the challenges that she, her family, her co-workers, and her students faced in Depression-era Chicago.

UNDERSTANDING THE SOURCE

□ **Historical Context:**

As the Great Depression continued, unemployment rose and income fell for many people across the country. Because of this reduced income, most Americans could not afford to pay their taxes, which meant municipalities and states lacked enough funds to run government programs. Since public schools often represented the largest expense for municipalities, politicians across the country—often urged by business organizations—cut school budgets in attempts to save other government programs or just avoid full bankruptcy. “The cuts in the Chicago public school system,” explains historian John F. Lyons, “were particularly severe.” “The Board of Education, under the control of Chicago politicians,” Lyons continues, “had long overspent as it practiced widespread patronage in the granting of contracts for school construction and equipment. Approximately 90% of the funding for the Chicago public schools came from an unequally distributed property tax. Due to declining revenue brought on by the Depression, an investigation of the tax

system that delayed tax collection, and pressure from sections of the business community to cut taxes, the Chicago Board of Education curtailed public education expenditures in the early 1930s.”¹ As part of the budget cuts, Chicago’s Board of Education laid off teachers, shortened the school year, cut teacher pay or paid teachers late, and reduced or cancelled education-related services. These measures obviously hurt teachers, but they also harmed students and whole communities.

The practice of paying teachers in “tax-anticipation warrants” offers one example of how policies toward teachers connected with their communities—and the whole city. Because the Board of Education had little actual money, it sometimes paid teachers in scrip—basically a voucher or an “IOU”—called “tax-anticipation warrants” (or simply “warrants”), since they represented the money the Board of Education anticipated it would receive after Chicago citizens could once again afford to pay their taxes. As the author of this document states, the Board of Education paid Chicago teachers in tax-anticipation warrants eight times in the past two years. In other words, 40 percent of their payment in two years was scrip—not to mention all the other times the teachers received reduced payments or late payments within those two years. Teachers had to pay rent with the scrip or sell it to banks, businesses, or individuals; upon selling the scrip, teachers often received less than the scrip’s worth. The author of the document explains some of this process. Many other Chicago institutions also paid their workers in their own scrip. When the individuals, businesses, banks, and landlords used the scrip to pay for their own taxes, the Chicago city government became flooded with these worthless warrants, completing the cycle and worsening the problem. In short, while those who gave scrip as payment intended this practice as a helpful measure when they were short on cash, it often had negative consequences.

“The sufferings of the Great Depression,” Lyons explains, “changed the political views of many public schoolteachers.”² As a result, many teachers began to believe that engaging in protests and strikes would be the only way to improve their pay and working conditions, which would also improve their students’ learning environment. In fact, thousands of teachers and students in Chicago public schools went on strike on April 5, 1933 to demonstrate their anger at teachers not receiving pay for several months. But many teachers felt that teachers should not engage in protests and strikes because it was improper behavior. Indeed, since the vast majority of public school teachers were women, these teachers—and women in general—were expected to stay out of politics and selflessly serve the public. So when teachers began to engage in protests and other union activity, many opponents criticized these teachers for acting in an inappropriate, “manly” way. The expectations about teachers, therefore, represented significant obstacles.

□ **Meaning and Significance of the Document**

While this document was not nearly as influential or famous as, say, Abraham Lincoln’s “Gettysburg Address,” this anonymous Chicago public school teacher’s thoughts and feelings reached a national audience through publication in the widely read *Saturday Evening Post*. The article was designed to inform readers across the country about the challenges that she, her family, her co-workers, and her students faced in Chicago as a result of the Depression and the budget cuts.

This document also shows how economic troubles, discontent, and worker organizing also occurred *outside* factories. While industrial conflict represents a key part of the Great Depression and the New Deal, all Americans had to deal with changes and frustrations in their various workplaces.

¹ John F. Lyons, “Regional Variations in Union Activism of American Public Schoolteachers” in *Education and the Great Depression: Lessons from a Global History*, E. Thomas Ewing and David Hicks, eds. (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), 23.

² Lyons, “Regional Variations in Union Activism of American Public Schoolteachers,” 24.

Decisions about how to address these frustrations involved serious individual and group considerations. Indeed, Chicago’s public school teachers wrestled with the idea of what it meant to be a “professional.” Should teachers come together to participate in protests and strikes to secure greater pay and control over their working conditions? Or should they avoid these behaviors because “professionals” don’t behave in that manner? The author of this document chose not to engage in protests or strikes. But compare her attitudes to the decisions of a different teacher contained in “Spasmodic Diary of a Chicago School-Teacher,” written by another anonymous Chicago public school teacher.

More broadly, in the article you can see various people—whether they are part of a government institution, a family, or acting as individuals—attempting solutions to the problems brought on by the Great Depression.

GLOSSARY

The dole: government money paid to people in need, often to unemployed people and/or people with disabilities.

Tax-anticipation warrants: basically a voucher or an “IOU,” also known as scrip. Because the Board of Education had little actual money, it sometimes paid teachers in these “tax-anticipation warrants” (or simply “warrants”), since they represented the money the Board of Education anticipated it would receive after Chicago citizens could once again afford to pay their taxes.

Incorrigible: can’t be corrected or changed

Patronage: a system in which politicians distribute money and/or jobs to loyal political supporters.

QUESTIONS -- DISCUSSION POINTS

Document-Specific

- On page 68, the author states “Here the thing begins to resemble a circle vicious enough to be muzzled.” What does she mean? How do her observation and her examples demonstrate the interconnections between taxes, rent, and unemployment in the city during the Great Depression?
- Why did the Board of Education—along with hundreds of other institutions around Chicago—issue tax-anticipation warrants? Was this practice effective? How did various people cope with this practice?
- Why does the author decide not to march in protest?

Historical Era

- How did the hardships of the Great Depression affect family and school life for both students and teachers?
- How did some teachers and students help support one another during these difficult times?
- How did the role of government change during the national crises of the Great Depression?

Labor and Working-Class History

- Why did working people form or join labor unions?
- What role(s) have women played in the labor movement?

CITATION

An anonymous Chicago high school teacher, "Blank Pay Days," *The Saturday Evening Post*, July 1, 1933, 16-17 and 68-70. [excerpt]

ADDITIONAL SOURCES

Lyons, John F. "Chicago Teachers Unite," *Chicago History* (Spring 2004): 32-47.

Lyons, John F. *Teachers and Reform: Chicago Public Education, 1929-1970*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008.

Lyons, John F. "Regional Variations in Union Activism of American Public Schoolteachers" in *Education and the Great Depression: Lessons from a Global History*, E. Thomas Ewing and David Hicks, eds. New York: Peter Lang, 2006.

Next Page: Curricular Connections and Standards

CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS and STANDARDS

Curricular Connections:

NCHS US Era 8 [Standard 1](#): The causes of the **Great Depression and how it affected America society**, especially Standard 1B: **The student understands how American life changed during the 1930s.**

This document provides a window to view what everyday life was like for urban residents during the Great Depression, especially public school teachers and their students. It also provides some insight into how the Depression affected city politics and how various groups coped with problems brought about by the Depression.

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.11-12.5](#) 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.11-12.6](#) Evaluate authors' differing points of view on the same historical event or issue by assessing the authors' claims, reasoning, and evidence.

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