



# LESSON PLAN

WEST VIRGINIA MINE WARS MUSEUM

wvminewars.org

401 Mate Street Matewan, West Virginia 25678

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## Union Poster Activity

4th/5th Grade

### Objectives:

- Introduce students to the challenges of coal camp life, and illustrates why workers and their families wanted to join a union.
- Encourages students to think about how joining together when a community faces difficulties is an effective approach to solving problems and good citizenship.
- Raises awareness about immigrants, and the important roles they have played in American and West Virginia History.

### Materials Needed:

- [Photographs of coal camp life](#)
- Paper for posters
- Art supplies

## Introduction to Coal Camp Life and Background

*(Synchronous):*

Give a brief introduction to coal camp life through story, using photos to help explain major concepts: company town, company house, company store, scrip:

“When your great, great-grandparents were alive, in the late 1800s and early 1900s people first started to mine coal in West Virginia. And towns worked a little differently then than they do now. Not many people lived in West Virginia, so what happened is, a person with a lot of money would come to West Virginia, buy or take a big piece of land and build a whole town. This person worked for a company and owned everything in the town: the church, the school, the houses, the store--everything. And the rich man who owned the town told people that were looking for a job to come work there. And they did--they were some of the first miners in West Virginia. And these miners lived in houses that the company owned and went to the church that the company ran, and they were even paid in special company money called “scrip.”

[Use photos](#) to facilitate a discussion of what students thought life was like in a coal camp with questions about the way the houses look similar, how wealthy they think mining families were...

*(Asynchronous)*

Distribute [this storyboard](#) to the students and have them respond to the four questions at the end.

### **Activity 1: Facilitate a discussion of challenges and why people wanted to join a union**

*(Synchronous)*

The instructor facilitates a list of what challenges families in coal camps faced based on what students just saw in the photographs, and other knowledge students have.

Once the list is created, conduct a short brainstorm of what people could do to solve these problems and make their lives better.

Then the instructor reveals what people actually did: joined a union! Explain what it is and why it was effective, if possible by challenging students to supply the answers (“How would joining together in a union make it possible to get the company to change things?” etc.). Also, it is important to raise the point that it only works if most people join.

*(Asynchronous)*

Distribute this story, “[When Miners United](#),” for the students to read about what people did to make their lives better.

### **Activity 2: Poster Making!** (This activity could be done alone or in groups.)

*(Synchronous)*

Ask students where the miners came from, and raise the issue of them speaking different languages. If you have a world map or globe, show where miners came from (include that many were African Americans from the South, and others immigrated from different countries like Italy, Hungary, Russia, and more!).

Tell students that they are now going to have to make a poster to encourage others to join the union, but they must do it without using words since not all miners spoke English. If you need to, you can have a quick group discussion about what symbols you might use.

*(Asynchronous)*

[Distribute the student handout](#), which gives instructions for making the poster and background.

### **Historical Context/Background Resources on Coal Camp Life:**

1. (Video:) Have students watch a short (2 ½ minutes), introductory video on Coal Towns: [American Experience | Coal Towns, from The Mine Wars | Season 28 | Episode 2](#)
2. (Reading) Have students read [this background \(2 ½ pages\) on coal camp life in West Virginia](#), from the WV Mine Wars Museum's resources.
3. (Poetry) Students may read Carl Sandburg's poem, [Company Town](#), to acquaint themselves with company town life.
4. (Geography/Maps) Students might not know what towns were originally coal camps, and remnants of these camps are still found in WV today. There is a series of maps showing West Virginia camps broken up by region at the Coal Camps USA website: <http://coalcampusa.com/sowv/index.htm>
5. (Song) Life in coal camps inspired many songs and folklore, such as [16 Tons by Tennessee Ernie Ford](#).
6. (Online Exhibit) An online exhibit by the West Virginia Humanities Council: [Coal Miners and Coal Camps](#)

### **WV 4th Grade Curriculum Standards:**

**SS. 4.18:** Compare and contrast West Virginia's population, products, resources, transportation, from the 19th century through the present day

### **WV 5th Grade Curriculum Standards:**

**SS.5.8:** Critique the economic reasons for immigration

**SS. 5.15:** Analyze the significance of large scale immigration

**SS. 5.24:** Analyze the people and factors that led to industrialization in the late 19th century

**SS. 5.25:** Reconstruct the economic, social, and political history of WV through the use of primary source documents

For more resources on Coal Company Towns, please visit our website at [www.wvminewars.org](http://www.wvminewars.org)

## When Miners United

In the early 1900s, coal miners and their families lived in company towns. In a company town, the coal company owned everything including the houses. The coal company also owned the only store in town. People came from near and far to work in the mines. Some local boys gave up farming to work in the mines. Some African Americans came from Alabama and other states looking for jobs in West Virginia. And some people left their homes in Italy, Poland, and Hungary in search of work.

As more and more companies mined coal they competed for the same customers. Companies lowered their prices to sell more coal, but then they had to pay the miners less. As miners made less money, their families sometimes did not have enough food to eat or money to fix their houses.

When one miner asked his boss for a pay raise, the boss always said, "No." Miners knew the only way the bosses would listen is if they all refused to work for low pay, but the miners had many differences among them. What do you think were some of the differences?

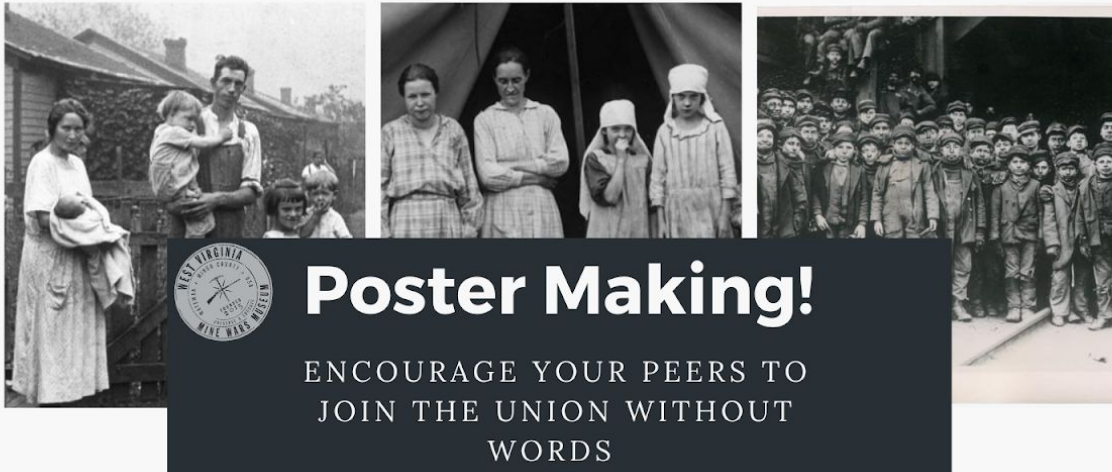
The miners set aside their differences and formed a union known as the United Mine Workers of America. Working together as a union, they all asked for more money or their work, but the mine owners again said no and threw miners and their families out of the company's houses. When the company's guards tried to put miners in jail for forming the union, the miners fought back, and several miners and company guards died in the battles.

The biggest battle took place at Blair Mountain in Logan County, West Virginia. Thousands of miners marched together as an army to fight the mine guards and free other miners from a jail in Mingo County. Even though they came from many places, they worked together.

They had no way to tell who was a miner and who was a guard. The miners decided to tie a red bandanna around their neck, and they became known as the "Red Neck Army." The red handkerchief became a symbol of unity and solidarity.

The miners fought the guards at Blair Mountain for five days until the U.S. Army arrived. They would not fight the U.S. Army and lost this battle. More than ten years later, the laws changed, and they finally formed their union.

Student Handout is on the next page:



### ***Background:***

People came from near and far to work in the mines of West Virginia. Some local boys gave up farming to work in the mines. Some African Americans came from Alabama and other states looking for jobs in West Virginia. And some people left their homes in Italy, Poland, and Hungary in search of work.

### ***Instructions:***

You are now going to have to make a poster to encourage others to join the union, but there's a catch! Not all miners spoke English. In fact, because miners came from all different parts of the world and United States, they spoke all kinds of different languages!

You must make your poster without using words since not all miners spoke English or the same language.

Before you get started, brainstorm some symbols you might use.