

LESSON PLAN FOR
¡SI, SE PUEDE / YES, WE CAN!

Janitors Strike in L.A.

Lesson plan by Marcy Fink Campos

Suggested for grades 3-5

Introduction

In October 2002, I had the good fortune to discover the book *Sí Se Puede: Yes, We Can: Janitor Strike in L.A.* (author Diana Cohn, illustrator Francisco Delgado). As a parent of a 2nd and 4th grader, I am always looking for books that talk about social justice issues in ways that children can understand. This book takes on issues like low-paying jobs, long work hours and organizing for change, and puts a human face on them. Explaining what a union does is abstract; this book demystifies this. That the book is bilingual makes it all the more rich; many janitors in urban areas these days are of Hispanic origin. Some have left their countries seeking a better life for themselves and their children, just as Carlitos' mother did. The book connects concretely with real peoples' lives in their language of origin. And, it honors both a mother's commitment to her family and the work of janitors. All the "pieces" of the book (the story, the inside cover on the history of unions and strikes, and the essay on Dolores Sanchez by writer Luis Rodriguez) pull the educational experience into a whole.

I developed a mini-lesson to accompany the reading of this book and took it to a 4th grade dual language class, where the kids are taught half of the day in Spanish. While I anticipated that some of the new vocabulary and concepts would be stumbling blocks, I was pleased to find how easily the kids connected with Carlitos' story. These 9-year-olds could grasp how the amount of time his mother had to work to help her family survive and the low pay she received were an injustice.

I encourage anyone who uses it to adapt the pieces to suit the age and experience of the children. If you can pursue some of the follow-up activities, that will allow kids to go further in exploring some of the financial and social issues connected to the labor force and bring them to life.

Materials:

1. *¡Si Se Puede: Yes, We Can*
2. Index cards with vocabulary terms in a paper bag
3. U.S. map that shows Mexico on it
4. Copies of handout on Dolores Sanchez (2-page essay at back by Luis Rodriguez)
5. All questions on flipchart or handout; 2 to 4 questions per sheet and one sheet per group.
6. Markers (2 per group)
7. Masking tape

Learning objectives:

By the end of this set of lessons students will be able to:

1. Identify what a "union" does and why a strike takes place.
2. Use vocabulary such as (pick from list or story)
3. Explain how Carlitos' mom became a leader in her union and in the city of *Los Angeles*.
4. Name at *least* three things that can change if workers win a labor strike.
5. Name at *least* three things that can get worse if the strike is not won.
6. Use the words who, what, when, why, how, or where in questions.
7. Write five questions they might ask of a custodian, cafeteria worker, secretary, or other staff in their school.
8. Carry out an interview in small groups with a school staff person.

Introductory Discussion

Show the book to students: What do they think it might be about from seeing cover? Who is the author? Illustrator? What does the title tell you?

In what ways do you help out with the chores in your home? Are your jobs hard? Easy? Why? What jobs need to get done to keep schools and workplaces clean? Why does it make a difference to keep them clean? Who does these jobs? Name the people and list some of roles of the school personnel.

This story is "fiction," but it is based on someone real named Dolores Sanchez and other janitors who the author, Diana Cohn, got to know. Dolores is 37 years old and from Mexico and she works nights cleaning a building in Los Angeles. Show her picture in the Luis Rodriguez essay at the back of the book.

Help them find Mexico on the map and identify the route to Los Angeles from there. Why might a person choose to leave their home and relatives to move to a new country? Ask how a person might travel from one country to the other. (Note: You may need to explain to students that some people come without the papers they need, so they must come in late at night or secretly; the media sometimes calls these people "illegal," but we prefer the term "undocumented.") For homework, they will read the piece at the end by Luis Rodriguez. The year in which all this all happened was 2000.

Possible Vocabulary:

strike – huelga

rally – mitín

farmworkers – trabajadores agrícolas

union - sindicato

manifestaron - marched

trabajadores de limpieza - janitors

janitor - conserje

Pay raises – aumento de sueldo

Expressions and vocabulary in Spanish in the English version of story:

paleta – popsicle

churro – pastry/donut

abuelita – grandma

Sí se puede – Yes, we can or Yes, it can be done

Que sueñes con los angelitos - Sleep with the angels

Spanish language story:

Aceras: sidewalks

Friega los azulejos - scrubs the tiles

Merecer - deserve

Dar brillos a los pisos - polish the floors

Deslizarte - slide

Parada de autobus - bus stop

Vacias – empty

Before you read the story, bring out the bag of vocabulary terms (you pick the ones they need to focus) and have a number of children pull a card from bag and say the word they will be looking for. As the word arises in the story, the students with that term can tell the class what it is and post word on the wall, chalkboard, or flipchart pad. Later they can be used for review, spelling, sentences, etc.

Read the story aloud. Use questions as you go along for clarification if needed. At the end, put closure on the story by asking: What does Carlos' mom do that shows her love for him? What does he do to show his appreciation and love for her?

Summary Discussion:

How many janitors went on strike in all? 8000. How long did it take to win the strike? How long did people stop working before they gained what they wanted? 3 weeks.

Their pay before the strike was \$7.00/hour; pay afterward: about \$9.50 plus benefits.

Can people live on this amount of pay? How might you find out?

Math practice:

If you work an 8-hour day, how much would you earn in one day at \$7.00/hour?

(Students can do the multiplication in pairs): \$56.00

In one week (40 hours)? (56 x 5 or \$7.00 x 40 hours) \$280.00

In 4 weeks? (4 x 280) \$1,120

In one year which is 52 weeks?: \$14,560.00

Compare this yearly salary to that of others. They might use Want Ads to find out what they are or you can tell them a few.

Then move into this small group activity:

Questions about the Story

Students will answer questions about the story in small groups, with questions on flipchart or pieces of paper for each group. Groups write answers in complete sentences on flip chart. Form small groups (Group A, B, C, D) and each gets two questions. (Variations: Adapt this activity according to your group. They could: answer all the questions instead of two, do other questions you develop, or have some do them in English and some in Spanish.)

Group A:

1. When does Carlitos' mother work and when does she sleep? Why?
2. Besides her work as a janitor, what other jobs does she do?

Group B:

3. Why did the janitors decide to go out on strike?
4. What does a strike mean in your own words?

Group C:

5. Why was Carlitos' mom on the television news?
6. How does Carlitos feel about his mother being on strike?

Group D:

7. What did Carlitos' class do to help the strikers? Who else helped them?
8. Did the janitors win their strike? What changed for Carlitos' mother once it was over?

Preguntas en español

Grupo A:

1. ¿Cuándo trabaja la mamá de Carlos y cuándo duerme? ¿Por qué?
2. Además de trabajar como conserje, ¿qué otro trabajo hace la mamá de Carlos?

Grupo B:

3. ¿Por qué decidieron los conserjes irse a una huelga?
4. ¿Qué significa "huelga"?

Grupo C:

5. ¿Por qué salió la mamá de Carlos en las noticias en la televisión?
6. ¿Cómo se siente Carlos que su mamá está en huelga?

Grupo D:

7. ¿Qué hizo la clase de Carlos para apoyar a su mamá? ¿Quién más ayudó a ellos?
8. ¿Ganaron los conserjes su huelga? ¿Qué cambió para la mamá después de la huelga?

Give the groups 10-15 minutes to discuss, answer, and write their responses to the questions on the flipchart paper and post their sheet on the wall. Take turns answering them verbally with one spokesperson per group.

Interviews with Other School Workers

Have students identify the different people who work in a school and list them on the board or flipchart, i.e. school principal, assistant principal, librarian, cafeteria workers, playground aides, teachers, secretaries, counselors. Explain that in order to find out more about these people's jobs, small groups will be carrying out interviews. Each group will develop a set of interview questions. List and review the main question words: what, why, when, where, how.

Form groups of 3-4 students, and ask each group to identify a different person/role they will interview in the school. Then, in groups develop a set of questions they might ask that individual. Working in the group for about 15 minutes, have each group write them up on a piece of flipchart paper. (Put the directions in written form on the board or flipchart as well, telling how much time they have with this assignment)

Have one person from each group read their questions aloud to the others and get feedback about their questions.

Teacher should review, correct questions, and modify if needed.

For the next class, students can do a rewrite of the questions either by hand or on a computer.

Have them practice interview skills with the following exercises.

Have them:

1. Make an appointment with the person (preferably during class time but also potentially during lunch or recess).
2. Take turns with each of these roles
 - Interviewer
 - Note taker
 - Writer of final copy.

Set up a time when each group can make their presentation to others in class.

Teacher synthesizes what they have learned about the various roles.

Other Possible Activities

- Activity with math and money. Do a budgeting activity that helps students understand the cost of living by spending a period of time monitoring their own family's expenses.
- Learn about the contributions of Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers Organization by organizing workers, strikes, and boycotts to get better pay and working conditions for farm workers.
- Listen to labor songs, from the farm workers, and other movements. Possible songs: *De Colores*, *No Nos Moverán/We Shall Not be Moved*, *Joe Hill*. Sing them and learn the context and issues around which they emerged. A parent or teacher who can play guitar can accompany the class if available.
- Use the inside cover of the book to learn about the history of unions and explore how they led to the five day 40-hour work week and the end of child labor (formally).
- Do research on the various websites listed: www.justiceforjanitors.org; www.phoenixfund.org.