

## Labor Day Lesson Plan: Unions Today

[http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/lessons\\_plans/negotiation-labormanagement-simulation](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/lessons_plans/negotiation-labormanagement-simulation)

Labor Day is just around the corner and most folks spend it with their families taking it easy. However, the first Labor Day was very different; workers marched in the streets to advocate for things like an eight hour work day, fair wages, and compensation if they were hurt at work. It was also a day to celebrate social and economic achievements of workers. The fight for fair treatment for laborers in the United States over a hundred years ago and continues today in places you may not realize.

When you think of the terms “union” or “labor” you probably think of topics like history or government. Sports and fast food probably don’t come to mind, but they should. Below are three short scenarios where the union played an important role in the fight to support today’s workers.

### MLB Suspends Players in Largest Single-Day Doping Bust



New York Yankees third baseman Alex Rodriguez, better known as A-Rod, was suspended from baseball as punishment for using performance-enhancing drugs. In 2009, Rodriguez admitted to using drugs in the early 2000s, but Major League Baseball says he continued to use after that point and lied about it.

His suspension was just one of many, as Major League Baseball also ejected 12 other players in the biggest single-day doping bust in the league’s history.

However, Rodriguez’s fame and the severity of his punishment make his case stand out. He will be suspended from the league for the rest of this season and all of the next.

Rodriguez has said that he thinks his suspension might be the work of those who would benefit from him “not ever stepping back on the field.” He was alluding to his team, the Yankees, who have reportedly tried to void the \$100 million – plus left on his 10 –year \$275 million contract.

However, as Rodriguez appeals the suspension, he will still be allowed to play and be paid the \$173,000 a game he earns.

**Union Influence:** Rodriguez has received a far harsher penalty than other players, and stands to lose 100 million dollars. What the players union can do is help him to appeal his suspension and negotiate a fair punishment.

## Why It Might Be Hard to Get a Burger Today



Fast-food workers across the U.S. are striking as part of a larger campaign to demand higher wages for hourly jobs.

Employees at popular food chains in 50 cities, including McDonalds, Wendy's and Burger King, are expected to be joined by workers at stores owned by retail giants Macy's, Sears and Dollar Tree.

The strikers are demanding that the federal minimum wage, the number that the government has decided is the lowest hourly wage allowed, be raise from \$7.25 an hour to \$15 an hour. The change would more than double annual earnings to about \$31,000 a year for a full-time employee. Many fast food workers are paid minimum wage, and many more are not employed full-time (40 hours a week).

While the president and some in Congress are calling for a minimum wage hike, their proposals would seek a smaller increase to \$9 an hour.

The strikers are also seeking the right to form unions and negotiate directly with their employers for higher wages.

In a report from the Associated Press, 20-year-old Shaniqua Davis describes what it is like living on minimum wage and trying to raise her 1-year-old daughter. Davis has a job at the nearby McDonalds making \$7.25 an hour. "Her schedule varies, but she never gets close to 40 hours a week. 'Forty? Never. They refuse to let you get to that (many) hours.' [Davis said] Her weekly paycheck is \$150 or much lower."

Minimum wage fails to keep up with inflation

The so-called "living wage" movement seeks to require employers to pay workers enough so that a person with a family can afford decent housing, food and transportation. The minimum wage has failed to keep pace with inflation and higher living costs over the years, meaning that minimum wage workers are now having to do more with less.

"The minimum wage is now about more than 40 percent below the federal poverty line," writes Paul Solman, financial news reporter for the PBS NewsHour. "The numbers remind me of the old line in poker: Read 'em and weep."

Below, you can see a chart from Oregon State University of the history of the federal minimum wage, where the blue dots represent the dollar amount of the day, and the red dots represent what that number means in today's dollars.

In part as a result of demands from the civil rights movement, minimum wage in the late 1960s was the equivalent of about \$10 per hour, but fell dramatically through the eighties. The last hike to federal minimum wage was in 2009, though some states have instituted higher minimum wages on their own. Washington state has the highest, at \$9.19 an hour.

**Union Influence:** If workers are allowed to form a union the employers would legally have to make a contract that both the management and the workers agree upon. This agreement could include things like health care benefits, a wage increase, and fair working hours. Workers would have a better chance at achieving their labor goals with the representation of a union.

## NFL, Ex-Players Reach \$765 Million Settlement On Head Trauma



Click here to watch the story <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OVGt6JPN2zs>

**Union Influence:** Players who suffered brain damage from playing in the NFL were represented by the NFL's Player Association in a law suit suing the owners. The players claimed they were misled about the danger of concussions and as a result many have permanent brain damage. The union helped them to reach a settlement to help pay for players medical bills, and future problems the brain damage might cause them.

### Listed Below are the professional sports and their unions:

- **Major League Baseball Players Association (MLBPA)**  
The MLBPA is the collective bargaining representative for all current Major League Baseball players, and also assists players with grievances and salary arbitration. See the MLBPA Info Tab for the text of the Major Agreement and history of the association.
- **Major League Soccer Players Union**  
The Major League Soccer Players Union serves as the exclusive collective bargaining representative for all current players in Major League Soccer. Formed in April 2003, the Union ensures protection of the rights of all MLS Players, while also promoting their best interests.
- **National Football League Players Association (NFLPA)**  
The National Football League Players Association is the union for professional football players in the National Football League.
- **National Hockey League Players' Association (NHLPA)**  
The National Hockey League Players' Association (NHLPA) is the labour union for the professional hockey players in the National Hockey League. Established in 1967, and with headquarters in Toronto, the NHLPA's principal role is to represent the players of the National Hockey League and to guarantee that their rights as players are upheld under the terms of the Collective Bargaining Agreement.
- **NBA Players Association (NBAPA)**  
The National Basketball Players Association (NBPA) is the union for current professional basketball players in the National Basketball Association (NBA). Established in 1954, the NBPA mission is to ensure that the rights of NBA players are protected and that every conceivable measure is taken to assist players in maximizing their opportunities and achieving their goals, both on and off the court.
- **WNBA Players Association**  
The WNBA is the first and only labor union comprised of professional female athletes.

### Discussion/Essay Questions for Homework

1. What role does the union play in sports? Cite specific examples from the text and video.
2. Why would the workers from fast food service want to form a union and what would they hope to accomplish? Cite specific examples from the text
3. Do unions still have an important role in protecting the rights of workers and players? Cite specific examples and defend your answer.