

CA Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum

Thai Garment Workers Speak Out

Lesson Plan: Thai Garment Workers Speak Out

Themes:

Systems of Power

Asian Americans Course Content:

Unit 6: New Asian American Communities after 1965

Disciplinary Area: Asian American and Pacific Islander Studies

Ethnic Studies Values and Principles Alignment: 4, 5, 6, 7

Standards Alignment

CA HSS Analysis Skills (9–12): Historical Research Evidence and Point of View 1–3

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.1, 2, 3, 7, 8; W.1, 4, 5, 8; SL.1, 2, 4. L.1.

CA CCSS for ELA/Literacy: RH.9–10.1, 2, 4, 9; RI.9–10.6, 7; W.9–10.2, 2.a,b,4, 5; SL.9–10.1a,,d, 2, 4; L.9–10.1; RH.11–12.1, 2,4, 9; RI.11–12.6, 7; W.11–12.2, 2.a,b, 4, 5; SL.11–12.1, 1.a,c,d, 2, 4; L.11–12.1. 9–12.IV.C.4.1; 9–12 V.C.2; 9–12 V.E.2.2,.3, 3.4, 5.

U.S. History Grades 5–12 9.1B.6; 5–12 10.2D.2

Lesson Overview

Eighty Thai women and men were enslaved for years in a former apartment building in El Monte, California. Even after the discovery of the slave complex in 1995, they and their supporters had to fight for their freedom, immigration status and damages from those responsible for their plight and exploitation in this horrific garment sweatshop. The bravery of the workers and creative legal and legislative advocacy led to a major victory for the workers and new laws to protect workers against sweatshops.

Lesson Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Understand how and why some immigrants are vulnerable to exploitation.
- Understand and can identify the push and pull factors of immigration.
- Analyze and understand the pyramid structure set up by the garment industry to shield companies from legal responsibilities as they and their contractors exploited workers.
- Identify the importance and role of solidarity in the garment workers' case in being successfully won.

Essential Questions

1. What conditions, systems, and structures made the labor exploitation faced by the garment workers possible?
2. What are the various challenges that these garment workers faced, first in challenging the exploitation they faced and then in finding new jobs?
3. How did each of the various groups, organizations, and communities involved in the garment worker case contribute to the success of the lawsuit?

Thai Garment Workers Speak Out Essay:

The garment industry is structured like a pyramid, existing to shield companies at the top from direct responsibility for wages and working conditions. At the very bottom of the pyramid are garment workers, with an estimated 60,000 to 80,000 in California. On August 2, 1995, federal and state law enforcement officials raided an apartment complex in El Monte, a suburb of Los Angeles, and found seventy-two garment workers, mostly women, from Thailand, held against their will, sleeping on mats on the floor and crowded eight to ten in a bedroom. The workers worked 18-hour shifts and paid less than a dollar an hour. The workers' captors—a family led by an elderly Thai woman and her sons—were also captured and taken into federal custody.

After nine days in custody by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (now U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement), community activists—including non-profit organizations such as the Asian Americans Advancing Justice – Los Angeles (then Asian Pacific American Legal Center) and Thai Community Development Center and—with help from the garment workers' union UNITE, succeeded in securing the workers' freedom and temporary work permits. Under the S-visa—meant to protect witnesses who provide critical testimony in a criminal proceeding and are at risk for retaliation if returned to their home countries—the garment workers avoided deportation after testifying against their captors.

The enslaved workers came from impoverished areas of Thailand, did not speak English, and had minimal formal education. Three of these workers were Jang, Jim and Kaew, each the eldest daughter in their families which carried the extra responsibility of caring for the rest of the family.

JANG: As a young girl in Nakhornsawan, Thailand, she lived with her parents and two brothers. Her family was poor and worked in the fields growing rice. When she was nine, Jang left school to take care of her younger brother so that her parents could both work to feed their family. In 1992 when Jang was 28, a man approached her with promises of a good job and decent wages in the United States.

JIM: By leaving Thailand for the United States in 1993, she knew that she would be able to make more money for her parents, siblings and their families. Jim was certain that this opportunity would turn her fortunes around because, as she says, “I thought everything about America was good.” The sheer size of the country made her believe that anything was possible.

KAEW: In Chaiyaphum, Thailand, her parents and three younger brothers, and dog shared a one room house with her grandmother. When she was 16, Kaew worked outside of the home mixing cement at construction sites, in addition to helping her parents with farm work. Seeking higher paying jobs, Kaew went to Bangkok to wash dishes, ran errands, and sewing garments in a factory. In 1994, at age 23, Kaew arrived to the United States.

Latinx workers were also victims of the garment industry pyramid—toiling long hours, seven days a week, for below minimum wages in unsanitary conditions. The Los Angeles factories they worked in served as the “front shop” for the El Monte slave sweatshop. In October 1995, Thai and Latinx (hesitant to join at first) garment workers in solidarity filed the first federal lawsuit of its kind, challenging whether those at the top of the garment industry pyramid could claim ignorance of the substandard conditions under which their garments are made, and should be held responsible for the sweatshop conditions they perpetuated and profited from.

Six months after Latinx workers joined the lawsuit, several of the companies agreed to settle. In 1998, the final defendant, Tomato Inc., agreed to pay \$1.2 million, and acknowledged “the serious injustices and harms caused to garment workers by manufacturers who use sweatshop contractors. The violations of state and federal safety, minimum wage and overtime laws in garment sweatshops result in exploitation of low wage workers.” With the case lasting nearly four years, the total final settlement exceeded \$4 million.

In 1999, the California State Legislature passed Assembly Bill 633, making manufacturers and retailers responsible for garment workers' wages when their contractors fail to pay.

Work cited:

Su, Julie. "Freeing Ourselves From Prison Sweatshops: Thai Garment Workers Speak Out." Asian Americans Advancing Justice - Los Angeles. <https://advancingjustice-la.org/what-we-do/leadership-development/untold-civil-rights-stories/freeing-ourselves-prison-sweatshops>. Accessed 18 Jan. 2021.

Vocabulary:¹

- **Exploitation:** a situation in which someone or entity treats another in an unfair way, especially in order profit from their work
- **Migrant:** a person who moves from one place to another in order to find work or better living conditions
- **Solidarity:** joining or working together as one based on common interests or goals
- **Sweatshop:** a workplace, shop or factory in which employees work for long hours at low wages and under unhealthy conditions²
- **Work Permit:** an official government document required for someone to work in a foreign country

¹All definitions are adopted from the Oxford English Dictionary unless stated otherwise

²Definitation is adopted from Merriam-Webster Dictionary

Assessment, Application, Action, and Reflection:

Lesson Steps/Activities

Activity 1:

Factors of Immigration:

A. *Ask students to answer each of the following questions with their shoulder partner.*

1. Why might someone move from their home country to go live somewhere new, where they may not have ever been before or know anyone else there?
2. Do you think you would ever move to a new country to start a new life there? What do you think would motivate you to do that (or not do that)?
3. If you were going to move to another country, what are some issues you would need to consider before doing so?

Select a couple students to share out their answer for each question. For question #3, please be sure to highlight learning a new language, documentation to live and work in the country, finding a job/school, finding housing, cost of moving, and leaving behind family/friends/possessions as things to consider if they are not mentioned by students in their answers.

B. *Pass out a printout of the "Migration – Push & Pull Factors" webpage (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/z3p4b82/revision/1>). Instruct students to read the handout, underlining anything that stands out to them.*

C. *With the whole class, discuss the following questions.*

1. What is the difference between a push factor and a pull factor?
2. Based on the reasons given for why someone might migrate to another country, when do you think migration is forced and when is it voluntary? Explain your answer.
3. Looking at the push and pull factors listed in the handout, what do you think some particular reasons for migrating that are more acceptable than others? Explain your answer.
4. Migrating to a new country is difficult for many reasons, including restrictions that different countries have for accepting new immigrants. Do you think it's fair for foreign countries to make it hard for people to migrate? Why or why not?

D. *Ask students to think back to question #3 of the pair-share activity in section A about the issues a migrant would need to consider when moving to a new country. Give students 5 minutes to do a quick-write reflecting on what they have learned and the difficulties that immigrants may face, not only in migrating but also in starting an entire new life in a new home country.*

Activity 2:

El Monte Sweatshop:

A. *Divide students into groups of three. Have them read the Thai Garment Workers Speak Out essay, article, and blog post (each student can read one source.) Next, have the students collectively discuss and answer the questions in the “El Monte Sweatshop” worksheet (provided at the back of lesson plan).*

1. Describe the workers who were held captive and working at the El Monte sweatshop.
2. Describe the living and working conditions of the garment workers at El Monte.
3. How did the raid on El Monte and the subsequent lawsuit impact immigration laws?
4. What was the impact of the El Monte raid and lawsuit on the Thai and Latinx garment workers?
5. What were the consequences for the operators of the sweatshop and companies that contracted with El Monte?

El Monte Sweatshop Article: <https://americanhistory.si.edu/sweatshops/el-monte>

Blog Post: <https://americanhistory.si.edu/blog/el-monte-sweatshop-raid>

B. *To demonstrate learning, summarize the El Monte case through one of the following activities:*

1. Create a flyer celebrating the win in the El Monte case. Be sure to include details about the case's outcome and impact on the workers.
2. Write an op-ed about the El Monte case, highlighting the role of the various groups involved and the impact of the case. (500-700 words)

Activity 3:

Modern-Day Labor Exploitation:

A. *Have students read and analyze the Garment Industry Pyramid Structure (provided at the back of lesson plan).*

- Ask students to summarize how the pyramid structure is set up to exploit those at the bottom, and shield those at the top from legal responsibilities.

B. *Have students research and write an essay about a current or recent case of labor exploitation. Student essays must cover the following:*

1. What happened or is happening in the modern-day example you have selected?
2. Impact: Who are the workers involved? What makes them vulnerable to exploitative working conditions?
3. Responsibility: In the case of El Monte, the companies, in addition to the contractors, were found to be responsible for the sweatshop. In your modern-day example, who is responsible? Consider the power they have. How and/or why is labor exploitation possible in this situation? (Use the Garment Industry Pyramid Structure for reference.)
4. Solution & Accountability: How can this exploitation be stopped and prevented from happening again? How can those responsible for the exploitation be held accountable? How do your proposed solution and accountability method address and take the workers' needs and experiences into account?

Materials and Resources

- Asian Americans Advancing Justice Los Angeles – Thai Garment Workers: <https://advancingjustice-la.org/what-we-do/curriculum-lesson-plans/asian-americans-k-12-education-curriculum/Thai-Garment-Workers>. Accessed 20 Jan. 2021.
- El Monte, National Museum of American History. <https://americanhistory.si.edu/sweatshops/el-monte>. Accessed 19 Jan. 2021.
- Liebold, Peter. 25 Years Later: The Legacy of the El Monte Sweatshop Raid, National Museum of American History. 31 July 2020. <https://americanhistory.si.edu/blog/el-monte-sweatshop-raid>. Accessed 19 Jan. 2021.
- Push and Pull Factors – Migration, BBC Bitesize. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/z3p4b82/revision/1>. Accessed 19 Jan. 2021.

Thai Workers Speak Out

El Monte Sweatshop Worksheet

Using information from the background essay, article, and blog post, answer the following questions.

1. Describe the workers who were held captive and working at the El Monte sweatshop.
2. Describe the living and working conditions of the garment workers at El Monte.
3. How did the raid on El Monte and the subsequent lawsuit impact immigration laws?
4. What was the impact of the El Monte raid and lawsuit on the Thai and Latinx garment workers?
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Garment Industry Pyramid Structure



Retailers — Top of the Pyramid

The garment industry is structured like a pyramid. At the top of the pyramid are the retailers that sell brand name clothing directly to the public. Approximately \$30 billion of California-made clothing is sold each year. This pyramid exists to shield the companies at the top from direct responsibility for wages and working conditions. Garments made by the Thai workers ended up on the racks of department stores nationwide.

Manufacturers — Second Level of the Pyramid

At the second level are manufacturers that design garments, select material, and create detailed specifications as to how those garments should be produced. These companies are more popularly known by the labels on clothing, such as Liz Claiborne, DKNY, XOXO. In El Monte, Clio, High Sierra, B. U. M., Anchor Blue, and Airtime were among those labels for which the Thai workers sewed.

Contractors — Third Level of the Pyramid

Contractors occupy the third level of the industry. Competition among contractors is fierce, and many open up and go out of business within a year. Contractors are at the mercy of manufacturers and retailers, which dictate the quantity, quality, type of work, turnaround times and even the prices they will pay to have that work done. Contractors serve only one purpose — to keep the workers in line and thereby ensure that garments are completed on time and to specification. In the case of the Thai workers, their captors were contractors doing work for private labels sold at major department stores, including Mervyn's, Montgomery Ward and Miller's Outpost.

Garment Workers — Bottom of the Pyramid

At the very bottom of the pyramid are garment workers, who are greatest in number and lowest in economic and political power. California has an estimated 60,000 to 80,000 garment workers. Abuse of workers, including overtime pay violations, failure to pay minimum wage, and health and safety violations, is rampant.

Source: [https://advancingjustice-la.org/sites/default/files/UCRS%203 Thai Garment Workers story%20r2.pdf](https://advancingjustice-la.org/sites/default/files/UCRS%203%20Thai%20Garment%20Workers%20story%20r2.pdf)