

STRUGGLES IN STEEL

Facilitator Guide

- [About the Program](#)
 - [How the Program Came About](#)
 - [African-Americans in the Steel Mills](#)
 - [Discussion Questions](#)
 - [Resources](#)
 - [Acknowledgements](#)
-

ABOUT THE PROGRAM

Struggles In Steel: A Story of African-American Steelworkers is a fascinating and moving one-hour documentary that chronicles the little-known history of African-American steelworkers. Told through interviews with over 70 veteran African-American workers from America's "Steel Belt," **Struggles In Steel** recounts their complex history -- a story of grueling work combined with heart-breaking discrimination and unfulfilled potential.

While jobs at the steel mills were highly sought after since they were often the highest-paying jobs available to African-American workers, these same workers were given the toughest, dirtiest and most dangerous jobs the so-called "man-killing" jobs. The African-American steelworkers, many of whom joined the mill after fighting for their country in World Wars I and II, faced discrimination from both their employers and their union and found that their chances for advancement, despite their education, qualifications or experience, were repeatedly thwarted.

The program is also the story of the end of an era in American industrialism; shortly after African-Americans were granted long-overdue workplace rights, the mills closed down, turning once-thriving middle-class communities into wastelands. **Struggles In Steel** is the story of generations of hard-working men and women who had to fight for the right to work at difficult jobs, facing incredible obstacles to giving their families a decent life.

HOW THE PROGRAM CAME ABOUT

The idea for **Struggles In Steel** began with Raymond Henderson, an ex-steelworker who had toiled for 18 years before his mill, Pittsburgh's Duquesne, shut down. During those years, Ray served as a "grievance man," was active in the civil rights movement and was constantly working for equal rights for his co-workers.

When a local TV station aired a documentary about steelworkers who had lost their jobs and never once made reference to the African-Americans among them, Ray was outraged. For Ray, that

program negated the very important, valuable contributions that African-American men and women had made to the steel industry.

He called his friend, award-winning local filmmaker Tony Buba, to discuss ways in which they might be able to set the record straight. They wrote letters to the TV station and the newspapers but did not get a satisfactory response. Ray then suggested that they make their own program and Tony agreed. Henderson and Buba based much of the factual history on the landmark book *Out of the Crucible: Black Steelworkers in Western Pennsylvania, 1875-1980* by Dennis C. Dickerson, Ph.D., who also served as associate producer, scriptwriter and consultant.

Struggles In Steel has had a national PBS broadcast and has played at major film festivals around the country including Sundance, Philadelphia Festival of World Cinema, ASPENFEST and Human Rights Watch International Film Festival at Lincoln Center in New York City. **Struggles In Steel** has also been shown at film festivals in Africa, France and Italy.

AFRICAN-AMERICANS IN THE STEEL MILLS

Before the Civil War, more than 2,000 slaves worked in the iron mill of the South, creating a skilled work force that the Northern iron companies were quick to exploit after the war. When a labor dispute shut down the industry in Pittsburgh in 1875, African-American workers were brought in to break it, setting a pattern that would continue for decades. Strike breakers were resented by whites for working for lower wages and, at that time, unions were not willing to accept minorities. In 1890, a union local in Pittsburgh ordered 400 of its 500 workers of their jobs to protest African-American employees.

African-American workers were flocking to the North not so much as strike breakers, but in order to escape natural disasters (the boll weevil scourge of 1914, the floods of 1916), racial oppression and the repressive class system of the south. Like the Eastern European immigrants who also were moving into the mills at this time, African-Americans shared one dream — the chance for equal opportunity.

African-American mill workers reached record numbers during World War I, and by the 1930's, white unionists depended on African-American participation in the CIO (Congress of Industrial Organizations) to ensure the success of the Steelworkers Organizing Committee. But union membership did not insure equality for African-American workers. Discriminatory work practices sanctioned by the union, including department seniority rules kept these workers in hazardous, low-paying "Negro Jobs," for decades, continuing uninterrupted through the years of civil rights activism in the 1960s. As one veteran steelworker in the film recounts, "A white man would come in and you had to train him. In two weeks — he was your boss."

Through the years of partial gains and tremendous losses, African-American activists came to trust the government far more than the steel companies. Following a series of lawsuits based on Civil Rights legislation, a consent decree was brokered in 1974 by the Equal Employment Opportunity

Commission (EEOC), the United States Department of Justice, nine steel companies and the United Steelworkers of America.

The decree established goals and timetables for the hiring and promotion of minorities, specifically African-Americans, women and Hispanics, particularly in supervisory, technical and clerical jobs and management training programs. The decree eliminated department seniority and replaced it with plant-wide seniority as the basis for promotions, demotions and recalls in the industry.

This moral victory, however, did not translate into lasting employment gains for African-American steelworkers. By the 1980's, the industry decline had decimated most steel jobs, important gains attained by more than a century of steel employees and a new African-American labor movement fell by the wayside, as both blacks and whites stepped together onto the unemployment line.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How were the experiences of African-American and white steelworkers different and how were they similar?
2. Most of the workers featured in the film came of age during the 1940s and '50s; many of them served in the Armed Forces. How do you think they compare with young people entering the work force today? What values do they share, and on what issues do you think they differ?
3. In the film, Ray Henderson says, "Our kids don't know what kind of progress we have made over time....They don't realize that we had to fight to go work hard." Would you be willing to do one of the steelworking jobs described in the film? What rights would you be willing to fight for?
4. The job reservation system described in the film locked black steelworkers into "Negro jobs" dirty, dangerous, unskilled, and low-paying until 1974, a decade after passage of the Civil Rights Act. How did the steel companies benefit from this job classification system? Why didn't the union challenge it? What could you have done if you were a black steelworker in the 1950s and were prohibited from "bidding" on (applying for) a higher skilled job in the mill?
5. What do you think the situation of black steelworkers would be today if there never were any 1974 Consent Decree mandating affirmative action in 1974? What do you think might happen if affirmative action is abolished? Do you think there are alternative remedies that would not be based on race to address the continuing problem of African-American unemployment? If yes, what might these be?
6. Why did the loss of manufacturing jobs so disproportionately hurt African Americans? What kind of job opportunities are there for young people or other unskilled or semi-skilled people in the inner city today? What are the material and emotional effects of under-employment — where lower skills translate into lower wages and loss of benefits?
7. In the film, workers talk about the psychological problems that affect workers who have lost their jobs. Work provides the fulfillment of material and emotional needs. What is the psychological effect of unemployment? How does the loss of work translate into increase in suicides, alcoholism, hunger, infant mortality, domestic violence?
8. What are the economic and psychological costs when an industry abandons a community?

MEDIA AND RESEARCH TECHNIQUES

1. The making of this film was inspired by a television program on unemployed steelworkers which didn't mention African-American millworkers. How do you think the media handles the issue of labor and workers in general? How has the media shaped people's perceptions of organized labor? African-American men? Affirmative action in the workplace?
2. **Struggles In Steel** uses oral history as a research tool. How valid is oral history as a research tool? What are its advantages and disadvantages?
3. How effective are the documentary techniques (interviews, clippings, archival footage, stills) used in **Struggles In Steel**? How well do the images and music work to make the steelworker's stories concrete to the viewer?
4. How are the documentary techniques used in **Struggles In Steel** different from those used in show such as **60 Minutes**?

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

1. Audio-tape interviews with family and friends about their recollections of the steel industry, about certain aspects of your town or neighborhood. Write the results and look for photos, newspapers.
2. Select several photographs from your family's albums and write explanations of the people and places in the photos. You may want to interview others who remember old stories and "how things used to be."
3. Use the Internet to research labor history and labor organizations.
4. Use your local library to find old newspapers and ads that reflect events and styles from your community. What changes do the ads, headlines, and articles suggest have happened to your town?
5. For a more challenging project, combine the oral interviews and histories with the family photos and library research. By putting the photos, headlines and ads into a slide, video, or computer format, you can prepare a script and match the visuals with the interviews.

RESOURCES

If you're interested in finding out more, check out the following:

Reading Suggestions

Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City by St. Clair Drake & Horace R. Cayton (University of Chicago, 1993)

Black Workers and the New Unions by Horace R. Cayton & George S. Mitchell (Ayer, 1985)

Black Workers in White Unions by William B. Gould (Cornell, 1977)

Faded Dream: The Politics and Economics of Race in America by Martin Carnoy (Cambridge, 1996)

The Negro in the Steel Industry by Richard L. Rowan (University of Pennsylvania, 1970)

Organized Labor and the Black Worker, 1619-1973 by Philip S. Foner (International Publishers, 1974)

Out of the Crucible: Black Steelworkers in Western Pennsylvania, 1875-1980 by Dennis C. Dickerson (State University of New York, 1986)

Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers by Michael K. Honey (University of Illinois, 1993)

The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration by Nicholas Lemann (Knopf, 1991)

The Right to Challenge: People and Power in the Steelworkers Union by John Herling. (Harper and Row, 1972)

Out of This Furnace by Thomas Bell (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press 1976)

Lives Of Their Own: Black, Italians and Poles in Pittsburgh 1900-1960 by John Bodnar, Roger Simon and Michael P. Weber (Urbana, University of Illinois Press 1982)

Steel People—Survival and Resilience in Pittsburgh's Mon Valley Published by River Communities Project, School of Social Work, University of Pittsburgh 1986

Aliquippa Update—A Pittsburgh Milltown Struggles to Comeback, 1984-86 and Trouble in Electric Valley, Local Leaders Assess the Difficult Future of Their Communities Published by River Communities Project, School of Social Work, University of Pittsburgh 1986

Dreams Gone to Rust—The Mon Valley Mourns for Steel by David Corn (Harper's September 1986)

Oral History As A Teaching Approach by John A. Neuenschwander (Washington, D.C. National Education Association, 1976)

Films/Videos

A. Philip Randolph: For Jobs and Freedom, about the crusading human rights activist and founder of the country's first African American trade union. California Newsreel, www.newsreel.org.

At the River I Stand, on the 1968 Memphis sanitation workers' strike culminating in the assassination of Martin Luther King; winner of the Organization of American Historians Barnouw Award. California Newsreel, www.newsreel.org.

Eyes on the Prize, groundbreaking multipart series about the Civil Rights Movement. PBS Home Video, (800) 344-3337 (educational); (800) 531-4727 (home video).

The Braddock Chronicles 1 & 2, a series of short films documenting the people of Braddock, Pennsylvania. Braddock Films Inc., P.O. Box 426, Braddock, PA 15104, (412) 351-4808; www.braddockfilms.com.

Voices From A Steeltown, an open ended documentary dealing with the decline of Braddock, a steeltown in Western Pennsylvania. Braddock Films Inc., P.O. Box 426, Braddock, PA 15104, (412) 351-4808; www.braddockfilms.com.

Organizations

Americans for a Fair Chance

www.fairchance.org (202) 822-9221

Educates the public on the importance of maintaining affirmative action programs and the principles of equal opportunity in employment and education.

Black Workers for Justice

bwfj.org (919) 977-8162

Focused in North Carolina and Georgia, BWFJ works with low-income workers around issues of worker empowerment, workplace fairness, health and organizing issues.

Leadership Conference on Civil Rights

www.civilrights.org (202) 466-3311

A coalition of more than 185 national organizations united in their support for equal justice, equal opportunity and mutual respect.

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

www.naacp.org (410) 633-7400

The NAACP is the oldest and largest civil rights organization in the U.S., with the principal objective of ensuring the political, educational, social and economic equality of minority group citizens of the U.S.

Coalition of Black Trade Unionists PO Box 66268, Washington, DC 20035

An important resource for African-American workers.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study guide was funded by **The Pittsburgh Foundation/Howard Heinz Endowment-Multi-Cultural Arts Initiative**. For more information about Multi-Cultural Arts Initiative, contact them at One PPG Place, 30th Floor, Pittsburgh, PA 15222-5401.

Struggles In Steel was funded for broadcast on public television by the Independent Television Service (ITVS), which was created by Congress to “increase the diversity of programs available to public television, and to serve under served audience, in particular minorities and children. For more information about ITVS contact them at 51 Federal Street, Suite 401, San Francisco CA 94107, www.itvs.org.” Additional funding was provided by **Pennsylvania Humanities Council, The Pittsburgh Foundation/Howard Heinz Endowment - Multi-Cultural Arts Initiative, Falk Medical Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation, American Film Institute, Pennsylvania Council on the Arts**.

To purchase or rent **Struggles In Steel** for educational use, contact **California Newsreel** www.newsreel.org