

ROSA PARKS

Women as union activists, leaders in social change.



LESSON 5

HUMANITIES AND ENGLISH 8–12

COMMUNICATIONS 11 OR 12

PRESCRIBED LEARNING OUTCOMES

Students will:

- read a biographical anecdote and nonfiction.
- appreciate biographies and nonfiction as literary forms.
- become aware of and use research materials including web sites, encyclopedias, and books with Canadian, British Columbian, or international focus.

LESSON TITLE

Rosa Parks—women as union activists, leaders in social change.

OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- appreciate women as activists, and union activists as a theme.
- appreciate that unions and union activists often lead social change.
- represent what they have learned about women as activists.
- write a nonfiction or biographical account of activism in their lives.

INTRODUCTION TO TEACHER

Rosa Parks by Eloise Greenfield from *Larger Than Life* is a relatively short, simple biographical anecdote to read. It is easy to use in the junior grades and in Communications 11 and 12. Other anthologies that include short works of nonfiction, such as *In Context III*, often include Ms. Parks story. Many web sites contain much biographical and other material on Ms. Parks and her many years of work as an activist, and on other women activists.

Many credit Ms. Parks' peaceful action in Alabama in 1955, refusing to sit on the bus where she was told, as the action that initiated the black civil rights campaign led by Dr. Martin Luther King. Rosa Parks had been a union activist for twenty-five years when she undertook her action. She was eventually fired from her job as a seamstress.

Many other women, including unionists, have also been involved in actions leading to social change.

ACTIVITIES

1. The teacher outlines for students the objectives listed above.
2. The teacher provides or has students provide explanations of the following terms: unions, activists, social change, biography, anecdote, nonfiction.
3. The teacher assigns students the task of reading *Rosa Parks* from *Larger than Life*.
4. The students attempt to answer the following questions:
 - a) What order did Rosa refuse to obey?
 - b) What were the immediate consequences of her refusal to obey?
 - c) Who was Edgar Daniel Nixon? What did he do? How did he learn of Rosa's situation?
 - d) Why was Rosa released?
 - e) How was Rosa treated when she went to work?
 - f) Who did Rosa meet with that night? Who was Dr. Martin Luther King? What decisions did they make? What did they do? What effect did their actions have on the busing?
 - g) What happened at Rosa's trial?
 - h) How many showed up at the church meeting that night? What did they decide to do? When would they quit their walking campaign?(Time: About 30 minutes.)

4. The teacher may wish to encourage students to learn more about Rosa Parks and other women who have been involved in social activism. Students could explore one or more topics individually or in groups:

a) Rosa Parks; <http://www.grandtimes.com/rosa.html>, <http://www.e-portals.org/Parks/>, and Encyclopedia Britannica.

b) Dolores Huerta, a leader of the farm labourers in the U.S.A. <http://www.ufw.org/dh.htm>. <http://www.teacherlink.usu.edu/TLresources/longterm/LessonPlans/famous/huerta.html#Background>.

c) Canadian women have also distinguished themselves, some in the union movement, including Grace Hartman—first woman president of the Canadian Labour Congress, Judy Darcy—President, Canadian Union of Public Employees, Canada, Shirley Carr—President, CLC, and Madeline Parent—Quebec textile workers union and social activist.

The National Library of Canada web site: <http://www.nlc-bnc.ca/digiproj/women/women99/women99-e.htm>, has a wealth of biographies of Canadian women activists. Canadian Women Activists are useful key words in any web search. See also the attached accounts of Sarah Inglis, Madeline Parent, and Kate Braid.

d) Rosemary Brown— from Vancouver, became the first Black woman to be elected to a provincial legislature in Canada. She later became the first woman candidate for the leadership of a major Canadian political party. The Encyclopedia of British Columbia and <http://www.coolwomen.org/coolwomen/cwsite.nsf/vwWeek/7D2F3F31CA37DA08852568F2006A1D79?OpenDocument>.

e) Some students might also be encouraged to explore literature and web sites for specific women's social issues, including workplace issues, such as sexual harassment: http://www.bchrc.gov.bc.ca/text_only/BCHRC.asp, or

- f) pay equity: <http://www.bcfed.com/ABOUT/stand/Payeqpol.html>, or
- g) child care: <http://www.clc-ctc.ca/woman/child.html>, or
- h) violence against women: <http://www.clc-ctc.ca/woman/women.html>.

5. The teacher directs the students assigned to each of the above to collect answers and specific examples for support for each of the following questions:
- a) Have women been involved in political efforts to improve conditions for themselves and others?
 - b) Were they involved in unions or other organizations?
 - c) Did their efforts take a lot of work, energy, sacrifice, and planning?
 - d) Have they met with some successes?
 - e) Identify 3 issues that are important to many women today? Why is each important? Identify a union or organization that is supportive of each issue? Students may wish to check the women's sights at the Canadian Labour Congress <http://www.clc-ctc.ca/woman/index.html>, the British Columbia Federation of Labour <http://www.bcfed.com/NEWS/sis/index.htm>, and the British Columbia Teachers' Federation <http://www.bctf.bc.ca/social/sw/>. Each student or group shares the information they have found. Individuals can use notepaper, groups might post chart paper around the room. The highlights and answers to questions can be presented orally.
- (Time for 5 and 6: about 60 minutes.)

7. The teacher may wish to have each student represent what they have learned in a form acceptable to the teacher. Some may write journal entries, diary entries, or monologues for an activist studied. Others may write essays on women as activists. Groups may make multimedia presentations of pictures and print on the theme of women activists, and perform scenes, short dramas, music, or poetry related to issues, the development of an activist, or critical events in the history of an issue.
- (Time: 30 to 60 minutes.)

8. The teacher may wish to have each student write a nonfiction or biographical account of themselves or someone they know who has taken a stand on a social issue. Perhaps it involved a boycott, demonstration, petition, or letter protesting an undesirable practice or action. Sometimes it is taking a stand against an instance of bullying, discrimination, or harassment at school. What organizations and actions might they consider for future social action?
- (Time: 30 to 60 minutes.)

EVALUATION

Of 4 above: Out of 24. Each reasonable answer receives 2 points. Detailed, thorough answers receive 3 points. An inadequate answer receives 1 point.

Of 5 & 6 above: Out of 10. 10–9 meets all of the following criteria very well, 8 meets most of the criteria well, 7–6 meets most of the criteria at a satisfactory level for the grade, 5 meets most of the criteria, but has serious difficulties, 4–1 most of the criteria not attempted. Answers to each question will vary in depth and detail. Each group or student, however, should have an answer to each question and an abundance of information for at least one answer. Logic, reason, and examples should support any opinions. The notes should be clear, orderly, legible, and provide sources of information. Speaking should be clear, audible, and concise. Answers to questions should be brief, to the point, and accurate.

Of 7 above: Students are to be graded individually for their efforts. Out of 10. 10–9 meets all of the following criteria very well, 8 meets most of the criteria well, 7–6 meets most of the criteria at a satisfactory level for the grade, 5 meets most of the criteria, but has serious difficulties, 4–1 most of the criteria not attempted. At least one woman activist is identified and represented in either words, pictures, or performance. An issue is identified and explained. An organization or union that supported the action is identified. An action that was taken and was supported by large numbers of people is identified. Some students may explore one activist and issue in depth and detail. Some might explore several activists and issues on the theme of women's activism. Clarity, accuracy, depth, detail, and skill are important. Students in group efforts will also receive a grade out of 5 based on the unity and effectiveness of the group effort as a whole.

Of 8 above: Out of 10. 10–9 meets all of the following criteria very well, 8 meets most of the criteria well, 7–6 meets most of the criteria at a satisfactory level for the grade, 5 meets most of the criteria, but has serious difficulties, 4–1 most of the criteria not attempted. The student identifies the injustice, the action taken, the person(s) who took the action, the source(s) of support, and future considerations. Attention to specific facts, details, and depth are important. Dialogue, at the least, quotation is used. Clear spelling, language, and writing or print are important.

KATE BRAID

I graduated from Mount Alison University with a BA and a secretarial certificate, but I was a terrible secretary.

I went through a series of jobs that seemed to be appropriate for a woman: child-care worker, teacher's aid, youth-related things funded by LIP (Local Initiatives Programs) grants. But I kept having trouble with the structures. For instance, in the schools they didn't want me to wear long skirts. This was in the early 1970s when short skirts were fashionable. But I didn't like short skirts, so I left. I began to feel very lost.

Since I didn't know what to do, I decided to go back to school to get my MA, which meant I needed to earn money fast to pay my tuition. In those days, lots of guys were going north to make money, so I thought I'd give it a try. By a wonderful coincidence I met a woman who also wanted to work in the north. She had taught up there and she knew the culture. We looked for jobs in pulp mills, plywood mills, anything.

We started hitchhiking and got a ride with a woman who said she was going to Fort St. James, where there was lots of work and they hired women. So we went to Fort St. James and started in the sawmill that day.

I worked there for the summer and fell absolutely in love with physical labour. It wasn't until years later that I realized my boss at the sawmill was way ahead of his time. In those days, nobody was hiring women to work in the mills. But this guy had clued in—his work force was half female. He told us he loved hiring women, and if he had his way, he'd only hire women because they worked harder, were never drunk or late, and if the machinery broke down, they grabbed a broom and started cleaning up. The other absolutely hilarious thing was that the women did all the heavy physical work. The men had the machine jobs and pushed the buttons.

On the first day, we started work at 10:00 and finished at 5:00. By 4:50, I was so tired I thought I was going to throw up. I wouldn't have made 30 seconds past the hour. That night I was in agony, my calves were so sore. This went on for about a week, then I started to feel incredibly good. My body began to tighten and I became trim and strong.

It was a great experience. The whole crew was terrific. The lumber piler was a phenomenal worker who laced her tea with rye. She introduced me to a whole subculture of Northern women who are very outspoken, as tough as nails and very aware of their lack of privilege as women. The experience was a revelation to a protected city kid.

I went back to Simon Fraser and did another semester before I realized that I didn't want to be an academic. So I dropped out and went to the Gulf Islands. By this time I was really getting worried because I was 30 years old and still didn't know what I was going to do when I grew up.

I started to apply for all the jobs I could think of: barmaid, waitress, clerical worker and so on. But there were no “women’s” jobs. One night, I was telling someone that I’d have to leave the island because I couldn’t find any work. He had just quit work as a carpenter, building the community centre, and he suggested I apply for his job.

A couple of other guys said they’d lend me some tools. They also told me to lie about my experience. That was very useful information. So a couple of days later I showed up with all this borrowed gear and told the foreman that I had built houses up North. When he hired me, my life changed. I adored construction.

I was obviously not used to a construction site. I couldn’t walk in the big boots without tripping, but I was hired as a labourer, which was perfect. As a labourer you get to watch what’s going on, to learn how to handle and carry materials, to understand tools and vocabulary. When the job was over, one of the guys hired me as a helper and I worked with him for a year. He showed me all his books and stuff and talked me into doing an apprenticeship to become a qualified trades person.

About this time, I moved back to Vancouver to finish my MA. I had never heard of another women doing the kind of work I was doing, and I was beginning to feel split. I decided to finish my degree and do my thesis on non-traditional work. Simon Fraser agreed and I travelled around the province talking to other women who were doing traditionally made jobs. That experience helped me to feel sane again.

*Kate Braid’s Poetry is featured in this guide’s bibliography.
Adapted from...Against the Current by Judith Finlayson, copyright 1995*

MADELEINE PARENT

While I was at McGill, I became involved in the Canadian Students' Assembly. We were fighting for government scholarships for students whose families couldn't afford to send them to university. At that time, higher education was a privilege that children from poor families were denied. We also had a battle to ensure that our platform included women, because it was often said that women shouldn't be educated since they would only get married.

Once the war started, there was a backlash against our work because it was thought we were taking money away from the war effort. Such strong opposition to students who were trying to help poor people made me think more than education was involved. My desire to get to the essence of this reaction led me in the direction of labour organizing.

I wanted to organize in factories where women were employed. One of my friends had a sister, Lea Roback, who was working for the International Ladies' Garment Workers union. She took on male bureaucrats in the union who discriminated against the women members. In the garment industries, male employees were in the minority and companies could afford to pay them a little more at no great cost. They made their profit on the poorly paid work of the women who compromised about 76 per cent of their employees. Some unions struck deals with management and male workers at the expense of women.

On May 1, 1942, I started working at the War Labour Organizing Committee in Montreal, helping to recruit workers in the munitions industry. Some months after the campaign began, Kent Rowley, a young organizer, argued that we should seize the moment to organize the domestic industries where many women worked and their exploitation was well established. Some of the men were reluctant. They feared women might become a force in the unions and they didn't want their power threatened.

I got involved in the debate and joined Kent, working in the cotton mills, where generations of women had struggled against injustice. In those days children, sometimes as young as 10, worked in the mills. They supported women's efforts to organize because the women had always protected them from abuse by employers.

The first successful women's strike in Quebec occurred in 1937, when a few thousand ladies' garment workers struck the dressmaking shops in Montreal and won, in the face of virulent opposition by the Catholic church. When we were organizing in the 1940s, parish priests delivered sermons on women's place being in the home. Apparently, it was okay for women to work in factories, so long as they didn't stand up for their rights.

Equal pay for equal work was a priority and we won that in the 1946 strike of 6,000 cotton-mill workers. Seniority was another issue. Women understand that with seniority, they would not be fired or otherwise punished by a boss when they refused his sexual advances.

Starting with the first workers meeting I attended in 1942, I learned that sexual harassment was a serious problem. When a woman left work to have a child, she lost all rights to her job if she hadn't given in to sexual harassment, her request to return to work was more likely to be rejected.

As a unionist, I was also challenged because of my sex. In the mid-1940s I was the first woman elected to the executive of the Montreal Trades and Labour Council. Some men argued that I shouldn't be on the executive because a couple of the officers were drunk at the meetings and used bad language. I replied that that was their problem, not mine.

Very early on, I realized that if I was going to commit myself to a fight for social justice, I'd have to cut myself off from my background—not from my parents, but from my former convent friends and the milieu in which I'd been raised. So I chose to live a working-class life.

By 1945–46, Quebec Premier Duplessis and his friends were determined that gains made by organized working people during the war—particularly women—would not be taken away. There were layoffs when the war ended and, in most cases, women had to go. Returning veterans were given the jobs that men had done before the war. And certain practices that had helped women working in war plants, such as day-care centres, were abandoned.

The government attack on unions was ferocious. Duplessis used strike-breakers, police, the courts and jail as weapons to break the will of the working people. Kent Rowley, whom I married in 1953, served a couple of jail sentences, and for nine years, beginning in 1946, I was under charges.

During the 1947 strike of Ayer's Woollen Mill workers in Lachute, Quebec, I was charged with "seditious conspiracy" and detained many times in jail. I was sentenced to two years, but was finally acquitted in another trial in 1955, as was Kent.

The dangers involved in union organizing in those times and the ongoing nature of the struggle for decent working conditions in the textile mills are two of the reasons why I didn't have children. Being in and out of court and jail for over nine years was not conducive to bringing a baby into the world. When that ordeal ended, I was almost 38 and had anaemia, which took over a year to cure. Also, if I had borne a child while faced with jail under Duplessis, he would have used the situation to torture my parents. They didn't agree with my ideas, but they stood up to a lot of pressure from the premier on my behalf. If a baby had been involved, it would have been too much for them to take.

In 1983, when I was 65, I retired from my union position. I've become actively involved as a volunteer in the women's movement in support of aboriginal women and women of other minority groups. I also work with unions and with the community-based organizations continuing the struggle for social justice.

*Adapted from: Against The Current
By Judith Finlayson, copyright 1995*

FAST-FOOD WORKER, AGE 20-CANADA

Sarah's Story

Sarah Inglis started out as a typical fast-food worker. She applied for a job at the local McDonald's in her town of Orangeville, Ontario, when, she was just fourteen. She was interviewed on the spot. When asked if she was punctual, Sarah said "Yeah, sure." She laughs now, admitting that she didn't know what the word meant. She got the job.

Sarah says she wanted to work so "I would have some independence from my parents" and so she could "buy clothes and go to movies and stuff like that." Like most new employees, she was nervous at first. For the first time in her life she had to get a social insurance number and give out personal information about herself. She had to learn new skills—now to take orders and use the cash register. "Nobody ever really taught me how to do the fries, so the manager gave me hell one day," she says. At the beginning she felt a little removed from the "day staff," the adult workers who did full-day shifts. But she made friends with the other teenagers and after a while got used to the ten or twelve hours a week she was working on Saturdays and Sundays.

She was named "Employee of the Month" when she was fifteen. (For this she got a Ronald McDonald watch and her picture on the restaurant wall.)

Then, "little things started happening." The management started cutting people's shifts so they would not have to give them paid breaks. The adult workers who had been putting in regular eight-hour days were suddenly working three-and-a-half hour shifts. One of the managers admitted that the reason was "you're more efficient on a three-hour shift, 'case you start to drag at the end of an eight-hour shift." Workers no longer knew long in advance when their shifts would be. Another manager often humiliated workers by yelling at them in front of the customers. One busy lunch hour, Sarah took a quick breather, leaned against the counter and sighed. The manager saw her and dressed her down for this lapse, and "just made me feel horrible." Another day, a number of teens were planning a trip to Toronto to go to a prom. They were having difficulty making arrangements for a hotel. The manager said to Sarah, "Why don't you just stand on the street corner and make a few extra bucks?"

Sarah says, "I know it's sexual harassment now, but I didn't know it then. They know that young people don't know their rights." She was humiliated and outraged.

The final straw came when a woman day-shift worker Sarah had become close to was fired for asking a manager to be more sensitive with the workers. Sarah says she was becoming more politically aware at that point in her life. She's begun paying attention to the newspapers and what was happening in the world. She decided to organize a union in her workplace. She was sixteen.

"Wages weren't such a bid deal for me," says Sarah. What she was after was "job security, respect and dignity." Some people responded to her unionizing attempt by saying, "You gotta expect to be treated like shit. It's your first job!" But she didn't buy it. "Besides," she says, "they treated the adults who worked the day shift as if they were kids too." Sarah thinks that schools must teach kids about their human rights, including their rights as workers. As she says, "How important is Greek history when kids don't know their rights on the job?"

After attempts with several unions who were unwilling to work with anyone so young, she contacted the Service Employees International Union (SEIU)—and didn't tell them her age. Within a month, she and her friends had signed up 67 of the 102 workers at the restaurant. The union's certification should have been automatic, since they had a majority of workers on their side. But McDonald's heard about the plans to unionize and managed to convince some of those who had signed up to change their minds. McDonald's charged that the organizers had used Unfair Labour practices and the case was taken to the Labour board. "Someone said I held a knife to them!" Sarah exclaims. "And another person said I'd locked her in my car! But the locks on my car didn't even work!"

At the Labour Board hearing, McDonald's lawyers implied she was an alcoholic and a "dopehead". After four months of deliberation, the company and the union agreed to a vote because there was no end in sight. Sarah explains. "The union never got a chance to call witnesses due to the lengthy trial."

McDonald's gave out "No Union" T-shirts and buttons saying "Just Vote No" and even held a party for the workers. Sarah and her friends were waging a struggle against the multinational that has been unionized in only a few of its thousands of restaurants worldwide. It was uphill all the way. They lost the vote 77–19.

Sarah is now 20 and enrolled in Labour Studies at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario. She works part-time at a designer clothing shop to finance her studies. Sometimes she has had to keep her experience quiet in order to get a job. But she continues to speak to high schools, unions, and youth groups. And in December, 1995 she traveled to London, England, to testify in favour of David Morris and Helen Steel, who were being sued by McDonald's for distributing a leaflet criticizing McDonald's food and its treatment of its workers. During her day-and-a-half-long testimony, a McDonald's Vice-President stared at her for hours on end, sometimes winking, sometimes glaring. McDonald's lawyers insisted she reveal the names of people who had signed union cards in her organizing attempt. She refused and was threatened with contempt of court. They backed off and she was not charged. But it is clear that Sarah Ingles was a big threat to McDonald's four years ago—and she still is.

*Adapted from: Listen to us: The World's Children
by Jane Springer, Copyright, 1997*

