



Rebuilding San Francisco
1906-1910
the Workers' Story

*A teacher's companion guide for viewing
Rebuilding San Francisco - includes interactive
lessons and bibliography.*

Rebuilding San Francisco, the Workers' Story

Supplemental Guide to Class Activities

Introduction:

In the documentary, *Rebuilding San Francisco, the Workers' Story*, we learn about the working men and women who rebuilt the city of San Francisco after the great earthquake between the years 1906 and 1910.

We learn from, Dennis Smith's book, *San Francisco Is Burning* (2005)
:

The earthquake and fire "took more than 3,000 lives, burned though 28,188 buildings, flattened 522 blocks, destroyed tens of churches, 9 libraries, 37 national banks, the Pacific Stock Exchange, 3 major newspaper buildings, 2 opera houses...More than 200,00 people were burned out of their homes – men, women and children who found themselves wandering smoke-filled streets with no claim to a future except that they were alive..."

San Francisco was no ordinary town. Six years before the earthquake, San Francisco was the first American city to grant its construction trade workers an eight hour and a guaranteed wage. The eight hour day was a major feat in America's labor history. It was won by the San Francisco Building Trades Council, under the leadership of an Irish Immigrant named P. H. McCarthy.

This City, that would soon be devastated by the Great Quake, depended on working people and their unions. Yet tensions arose between employers and workers before the earthquake, and tensions flared up afterwards. San Francisco supported a working class who participated in local government, formed unions and fought actively for decent conditions for its members. When the earthquake hit on April 18, 1906, tradesmen feared their hard-won influence in the City was about to crumble along with the structures they had built.

After the quake, thousands and thousands of skilled craftsmen and tradesmen migrated to San Francisco to find work. They were absorbed into the workers' clubs, unions and politics in town. *Rebuilding San Francisco, the Workers' Story*, looks broadly at their collective experience.

Objectives:

This booklet is a companion guide for teachers and is designed to explore subjects raised in the documentary. We look at the lives of working people in San Francisco a hundred years ago. With classroom discussions and research assignments, the teacher and students can compare the past with the experiences of working people today. (The Guide usually refers to 'working people' as blue collar, those who are skilled and unskilled wage earners.)

The Guide offers discussion questions and activities for the classroom. It suggests projects that examine topics in more detail. The booklet provides supporting information not always covered in the documentary. The Guide includes a bibliography of books highlighting workers' experiences the 1906 Earthquake.

Curriculum Links:

Rebuilding San Francisco, the Workers' Story, the video and Guide, will be useful in classes on American history, San Francisco history, social studies, labor studies, civics, gender studies, and multicultural studies (including the Chinese). The documentary will also be a useful supplemental resource in apprenticeship training programs.

The video is appropriate for 8th grade students and older.

"Building trades workers, like all skilled workers, had a strong sense that without them there would be no San Francisco. Without them, there would be no California, no United States."

Michael Kazin, historian

Vocabulary:

Workers in the Construction Trades: what they do

- Boilermaker: *a worker who installs repairs and maintains boilers (boilers are steam making machines);*
- Bricklayer: *a worker who builds structures from brick, stone, marble;*
- Carpenter: *a worker who erects structures with wood;*
- Cement Mason: *a worker who lays and smoothes concrete;*
- Electrician: *a worker who installs wire which carry electric power to structures;*
- Glazier: *a worker who fits glass into windows and doors;*
- Hod carrier: *a worker who mixes and carries mortar in containers on construction sites for bricklayers.*
- Ironworker: *a worker who erects steel skeletons (beams) on structures*
- Millwright: *a worker who installs machinery in power plants and factories;*
- Operating engineer: *a worker who handles mechanical equipment on construction sites;*
- Piledriver: *a worker who fastens buildings and bridges to the earth;*
- Plasterer: *a worker who makes interior walls from plaster;*
- Plumber: *a worker who connects and repairs pipes for water and sewage;*
- Roofer: *a worker who builds and repairs roofs on structures;*
- Sheet metal worker: *a worker who installs ducts (pipes) for heating, ventilation and air conditioning;*
- Machinist: *a worker who builds and installs machines;*

** The vocabulary is a partial list of construction workers. Can you name more?

Below are pictures from the documentary, "Rebuilding San Francisco, the Workers' Story". See if you can name the jobs the workers are doing from your vocabulary list.



A) What are these workers doing?
What is the name of their trade?



B) What is this worker doing?
What is the name of his trade?

Questions for discussion after viewing the documentary, Rebuilding San Francisco, the Workers' Story

- 1) Can you name other natural disasters in recent years that compare to the San Francisco Earthquake? Why does the 1906 Earthquake matter to people today?
- 2) What made San Francisco a special place before the Earthquake?
- 3) In the film a historian says, "Skilled workers had a very strong sense without them there would be no San Francisco. Without them, there would be no California." In what ways is this statement true? In what ways is it not true? Who are skilled workers? Who are non-skilled workers?
- 4) Skilled workers buried their tools after the earthquake, why did they do this?
- 5) Mayor Schmitz was tossed out of office. Why? In the film, the narrator says, "politics and payoffs had been the way of doing business since the Gold Rush." What does this mean?
- 6) Why were Chinese Americans not allowed to work with white San Franciscans in 1906? How is it different today? How is it the same?
- 7) What jobs did women performed in San Francisco in 1906?. What jobs did only men perform? How is it different today? How is it the same?
- 8) In the film, Bow-Wow Doyle makes his own false teeth. Why didn't he go to a dentist?
- 9) If a worker in 1906 broke his arm on the job, where would he go to get it fixed? Do you think his boss would save his job until his arm got better? If the worker couldn't use his arm for months, how would he get money to pay for food and rent? How is it different (or the same) today?
- 10) What is a labor union? Why did workers join unions in 1906? Do you know people today who belong to a union? Why do they belong? Why would some people not want to belong?
- 11) If you had to organize a relief effort after the 1906 Earthquake, how would you start. What jobs do you think are most important in restoring the city? How would you get the money to pay people for their work?

Activities:

1) A major earthquake occurred in your town two weeks ago. You and your neighbors are safe in emergency housing but the city is in ruins. Divide the class into groups. Each group is responsible for rebuilding a specific structure. One group is responsible to rebuild a school, one group is responsible to rebuild a hospital, one group is responsible to rebuild a freeway and another group is responsible for a house.

Each group must decide how to tackle the job of rebuilding. Who will be hired to clean up the debris, the bricks and wood? Who will repair the toilets? Is there running water in the building? If not, who will fix the pipes? Who will repair the roof and the walls? Who will repair the floors? Who will replace the broken glass? You need electricity in the building – who will wire your building?

2) Go to the Internet and Google the BUILDING TRADES COUNCIL in your town. In San Francisco, its web page is www.sfbctc.org. On this webpage, find a list of different trades in the Council. Choose one – such as a house painter. Open its link at www.iupat.org. What can you learn about painters from their web page.

3) Look around your classroom – at the ceiling, the floor, the walls, the desks, the blackboards. Name the tradesmen who built the room.

4) What is a union? Interview someone who belongs to a trade union. What are her obligations to the union and what does the union do for her? Why would a worker decide not to join a union? Find out if anyone at your school belongs to a union (teachers, cafeteria workers, janitors, office workers, principal)

5) Interview a tradesman: a bricklayer, a sheet metal worker, a teamster, a longshore worker. Find out what he/she does on the job, what makes his work challenging and what makes him proud. How did he learn his skills. Ask for specific stories and examples. Write a transcription of your interview.. Write your observations and what you learned from the interview. (Teachers can invite a tradesman to the class to talk about his work)

a) Variation of interview#1: Have students explore the vocabulary of tradesmen. Every job has a specific vocabulary. What special words does a plumber or a carpenter use to describe his job and his tools? Write a description of a worker on the job, using the vocabulary of his/her workplace.

b) Interview a woman who works in the trades. (Interview can be conducted in person, or on the phone, or email.) Explore why she decided to become a tradeswoman. Are there special problems for women on the job? Is she treated equally to her male co-workers?

Check out www.tradeswomen.org

(teachers – invite a tradeswoman to speak to the class about her work.)

6) Research a trade. Find out the history of plumbing or piledriving or cement masonry or any other craft? How has the job changed over the years.

7) Before steam engines, many trades worked with animals. Research the use of horses in the construction trades. How were the animals treated? How did they help the workers? What happened to the horses in the rebuilding of the San Francisco earthquake? What other animals were used to help people construct buildings in the past?

8) Go to the video store or library and check out a movie that shows people working. Write a description of the story. What kinds of jobs did you see in the movie? Were there any tradesmen in the plot? (examples: “On the Waterfront”, “Norma Rae”, “Gung Ho”)

For Teachers:

An interesting sidebar to this unit on work is to look at cultural values students bring to the classroom about work and workers. To explore these values, we set up a classroom discussion.

The teacher writes three occupations on the blackboard: lawyer, real estate agent, bricklayer. Tell the class that each job merits the same high wage. Then ask the students for a show of hands. Who would like to be a “lawyer” or a “real estate agent” or a “bricklayer”? Have the students explain the reasons for their choice. Students must decide on one of the three.

Variation #1: Ask the students which one of the above occupations is the most useful to society? Why? (all three merit the same wage for this discussion) What if there was an earthquake or a flood, which occupation would be the most useful?

Variation #2: Why are some occupations, even though they earn a high wage, considered less desirable than others? What makes a good job? What would be important to you in choosing a job?

BOOKS ABOUT WORKERS IN SAN FRANCISCO (1900–1915)

Bean, Walton. *Boss Ruef's San Francisco: The Story of the Union Labor Party, Big Business, and the Graft prosecution*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1968.

Cross, Ira B. *The History of the Labor Movement in California*. (old but good) Berkeley, University of California Press, 1935.

Fracchia, Charles. *Fire and Gold: The San Francisco Story*. Encinitas, CA., Heritage Publishing Company, 1994

Kazin, Michael. *Barons of Labor: The San Francisco Building Trades and Union Power in the Progressive Era*. Urbana: University of Illinois press, 1987.

Pallindo, Grace. *Skilled Hands, Strong Spirits, a Century of Building Trades history*. New York, Cornell University Press, 2005.

Saxton, Alexander. *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California*. Berkeley, the University of California Press, 1971.

Smith, Dennis. *San Francisco Is Burning: the Untold Story of the 1906 Earthquake and Fire*. New York, Viking Press, 2005

MOVIES DEPICTING AMERICAN WORKERS (there are many others)

Modern Times (Charlie Chaplin 1936) The tramp works in an assembly line factory;

The Killing Floor (1984) black meat packers in Chicago stockyards in 1917;

North Country (2005) women start to work in a Minnesota mine, raises issues of sexual harassment;

Norma Rae, (1979) a poor woman becomes active in organizing textile mill;

Roger and Me (1989) examination of repercussions on workers by the closing of automobile factories in Flint MI..

DOCUMENTARIES ABOUT WORK
from WATERFRONT SOUNDINGS PRODUCTIONS

Pilebutts, Working Under the Hammer, the history and culture of piledrivers on the West Coast;

We Are the ILWU, examination of West coast longshore workers and their relationship to their union;

The Men Who Sailed the Liberty Ships, highlights the history of US merchant seamen in World War II, These men, dispatched from union halls, sailed to the front lines of war;

Shipping Out, the Story of America's Seafaring Women, a brief history of women and the sea and an examination of women who work in the US merchant marine as officers and unlicensed sailors.



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Study Guide

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