At Levine Museum of the New South, we look at how Charlotte and the surrounding area has changed since the end of the American Civil War in 1865. These changes range from the types of jobs people have held to the constitutional rights we hold dear today. When we think about the New South, we like to define it as:

- A Time — The New South is the period of time from 1865, following the Civil War, to the present.
- A Place — The New South includes areas of the Southeast U.S. that began to grow and flourish after 1865.
- An Idea — The New South represents new ways of thinking about economic, political and cultural life in the South.

This lesson plan explores the 1929 Loray Mill Strike in Gastonia, NC.

Objective: Students will learn about the causes and important events of the Loray Mill Strike.

Essential Question: Why did the Loray Mill Strike happen?

Standards Addressed:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Standard</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.G.1</td>
<td>Understand how human, environmental and technological factors affect the growth and development of North Carolina.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4.E.1</td>
<td>Understand how a market economy impacts life in North Carolina.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.H.2</td>
<td>Understand the political, economic and/or social significance of historical events, issues, individuals and cultural groups.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.H.1</td>
<td>Use historical thinking to analyze various modern societies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.H.1</td>
<td>Apply historical thinking to understand the creation and development of North Carolina and the United States.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.H.3</td>
<td>Understand the factors that contribute to change and continuity in North Carolina and the United States.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AH1.H.1.2</td>
<td>Use historical comprehension to reconstruct meaning of a passage, differentiate between facts and interpretation, analyze data in maps and analyze visual literary and musical sources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AH1.H.1.4</td>
<td>Use historical research to formulate historical questions obtain data from a variety of sources, support interpretations with evidence and construct analytical essays using evidence to support arguments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AH1.H.4/ AH2.H.4</td>
<td>Analyze how conflict and compromise have shaped politics, economics and culture in the United States.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AH1.H.5/ AH2.H.5</td>
<td>Understand how tensions between freedom, equality and power have shaped the political, economic and social development of the United States.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AH1.H.7/ AH2.H.7</td>
<td>Understand the impact of war on American politics, economics, society and culture.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Bring the Mills to the Cotton: Fighting for Change Part 2
1880s-1930s

Glossary:

- **Communist** - a person who believes in Communism, a system of social organization where all property is held in common by the community or state.
- **Union** - an organization of laborers who work together for protection and stand as a group when dealing with employers.
- **Ballad** - a simple narrative poem of folk origin, composed in short stanzas and adapted for singing.

Loray Mill Strike

In 1929, the most well-known textile labor struggle in North Carolina history occurred in Gastonia, N.C. at the Loray Mill. Loray had the largest single mill workforce in the state, but it had recently reduced its number of workers from 3,500 to 2,200. The mill was practicing “stretch-outs,” where fewer workers were expected to do more work without an increase in pay.

Another factor contributing to the showdown between workers and those opposing them was that the communist-led National Textile Workers Union specifically went to Loray Mill to encourage the workers to stand up for their rights. Within a few weeks of the union organizers arriving, Loray workers walked off the job. The goals of the striking workers were to gain a minimum weekly wage of $20, equal pay for women and children, an ending to the “stretch-out” system, and union recognition.

The union created a tent colony for striking workers who had been removed from their homes by the mill company. On June 7 violence broke out between Gastonia police and guards at the tent colony. Shots were fired by both sides, leaving one worker and four police officers wounded, one of whom, police chief O. F. Aderholt, died of the next day. Many citizens who were against the union wanted the strikers to be found guilty.

At the same time the NTWU leaders were still trying to get support for their union campaign, and they held a large rally for workers on September 14. Police, mill managers and non-striking workers tried to stop the rally by sending people away. While pursuing one truck containing strike leaders, they opened fire when the strikers attempted to escape. One worker, Ella May Wiggins, age 29, was shot and killed. Wiggins, the mother of five surviving children, wrote ballads and was a big inspiration to her fellow strikers. Her death ignited more violence in Gastonia.

By the end of September, the union left its Gastonia headquarters and relocated. Five men went on trial for Wiggins’s murder but went free. The second trial in the Chief Aderholt murder case found eight people guilty. While the Loray Mill Strike ended without getting the workers’ demands met, the strike, as well as Ella May Wiggins, became hugely important symbols in the struggle for workers’ rights in the United States. Ella May Wiggins became known as the Heroine of Loray Mill.
Bring the Mills to the Cotton: Fighting for Change Part 2
1880s-1930s

Activity 2A: Primary Sources from the Loray Mill Strike

Read and examine primary sources 1-5 and answer the questions that follow.

Source 1: Newspaper Article

Fred Beal, southern organizer for the National Textile Workers’ Union and Carl Reeve of the International Labor of Defense, have issued the following statement regarding the Loray strike situation:

“Those who are fighting the battles of the mill owners organized a lawless mob and wrecked our headquarters, then arrested the strikers who were there defending it and charged them first with ‘damaging property’ and ‘disorderly conduct.’

“The deputies and soldiers, if they did not actually participate, stood and looked on without interfering. A pair of handcuffs was found in the ruins, as well as bullet shells such as are used by the deputies and guardsmen. The tools used by the mob were tools which had on them Manville Jenckes (company that owed the mill) label and are used within the mills. This frame up is as obvious as the fake bomb plot perpetrated a few days ago.

“The acts of this lawless mob prove to the population that our opponents will use their hired thugs and gangsters and go to any length to try to prevent relief and try to starve the strikers out. The authorities co-operated by arresting and in at least one case brutally beating unarmed strikers. The workers of the town are greatly indignant and the strike has been materially strengthened by this outrage. We are establishing new headquarters and as a result of the outrage hundreds of new members are flocking into our union from the Gastonia mills.

“There is no split in our union. Our ranks are as strong as ever. There is no division. Proof of this is the splendid spirit of the strikers and the huge mass meetings held. We will carry out our program of organizing the thousands of textile workers in this section—spreading the strike. The strike at the Manville Jenckes mill is in a healthy condition. We will win.”

1. What evidence or clues does Beal provide that those working for the mill owners destroyed the union headquarters?

2. Why does Beal say the union is getting lots of new members from Gastonia mills?

3. What did you learn in the background information you read above that contradicts Beal’s predication in the last sentence of the article?

With an abundance of southern labor waiting to take jobs left by strikers, mill officials of this section have little to fear from strikers, said Richard H. Edmonds, editor of the Manufacturers’ Record of Baltimore, yesterday after making a study of the strike situation at Loray mills and other nearby manufacturing establishments.

Mr. Edmonds visited every department of the Loray mills yesterday, he said, and found that 1,147 people were at work out of a force of 1,150, which is employed when the mill is running full.

“There are plenty of strikers, but their jobs are all taken by people who are glad to work,” he said. Mr. Edmonds quoted the Loray officials as saying that they didn’t intend to hire any of the strikers again.

There doesn’t seem to be any real grievance,” according to Mr. Edmonds. “The strike leaders have just gotten a hold in a mill where labor conditions are worse than anywhere else in this locality, where the labor turnover is the heaviest in the section, and where the worst class of labor to be found anywhere near is located,” he declared.

This is a condition found in many places where the mill houses only a portion of the employees and the transient help rents from commercial landlords, in the opinion of Mr. Edmonds. The Loray management is now building a number of houses to do away with this condition.

Mr. Edmonds found the strikers well fed, he said, although no one knows how long the landlords are going to let them remain in their houses. Most of them are anxious to talk about their troubles and tell great stories of how there are many workers working for wages of from $6 to $9 on full time, but investigation shows that they are all making $10 to $15 and no concrete evidence of lower wages can be obtained, according to Mr. Edmonds.

Condemns Strikers

Mr. Edmonds had little of complimentary nature to say about the strikers. One of them, he declared, “told me he’d just been released from an insane asylum before getting his job at Loray. Another, a woman, must have been vaccinated with a victrola needle—she had such a line of complaints to make.”

He described the crowds of strikers as a “cesspool of humanity” and said that Beal had badly misled them in a number of ways. Mr. Edmonds returned to Baltimore yesterday.

1. What is Edmonds’s attitude toward the Loray strike and the striking workers?

2. Why does Edmonds think the striking workers don’t have any real grievances (complaints)?

3. Who do you think the article portrays more positively – the striking workers or those continuing to work? Why?
Bring the Mills to the Cotton: Fighting for Change Part 2
1880s-1930s

Source 3: Newspaper Article


First Families of Strikers Moved In Friday—Tent Colony Has Met All Sanitary Requirements

In line with their custom of observing Saturday as a day of festival, N.T.W.U., members will celebrate the “official opening of tent colony,” on the Union lot, North Loray street, Saturday afternoon and evening. The celebration will begin at 4 o’clock in the afternoon and continue until midnight, according to handbills distributed this morning when a truck load of strikers rode about the streets singing union songs and strewing notices of the festivities on all sides. The handbill says there will be speeches, dancing, refreshments, etc.

Fourteen tents have been hoisted on the property surrounding the union headquarters, and will be occupied by evicted families of the strikers. The first families moved in Friday. The tents have oak flooring. They are equipped with toilets and all sanitary requirements, it is stated, have been met.

The general strike situation was very quiet today, with the mill continuing to run full time and with eviction operations again temporarily suspended.

1. Why do you think the article stresses the sanitary conditions of the tent colony where striking workers went to live after they were evicted from their mill village homes?

2. How were the handbills (fliers) distributed alerting mill workers about the upcoming weekend festivities?

3. Do you think evicting workers from their mill homes would help the cause of the union or the mill owners? Why?
Bring the Mills to the Cotton: Fighting for Change Part 2  
1880s-1930s

Source 4: Photograph

Loray strikers defy National Guardsmen; courtesy of the Gaston Gazette.

1. What do you think is happening in this photo?

2. What seems to be the reaction of the crowd behind the soldier and women?

3. Do you think the women's actions took courage? Why or why not?
Bring the Mills to the Cotton:
Fighting for Change Part 2
1880s-1930s

Source 5: Protest Ballad

Mill Mother's Lament
Ella May Wiggins

We leave our home in the morning,
We kiss our children goodbye
While we slave for the bosses
Our children scream and cry.

And when we draw our money
Our grocery bills to pay
Not a cent for clothing
Not a cent to lay away.

And on that very evening
Our little son will say:
"I need some shoes, dear mother,
And so does sister May."

How it grieves the heart of a mother,
You everyone must know
But we can't buy for our children,
Our wages are too low.

But understand, all workers,
Our union they do fear,
Let's stand together, workers,
And have a union here.

1. What is the tone or mood of this ballad written by Ella May Wiggins?

2. How does the ballad portray women who work in mills?

3. How do you think this ballad might inspire other mill workers to fight for change?
Activity 2B: Discussion Questions

Answer the questions below and provide details to support your response.

1. If you were to go on a strike in today’s world, what issue would you strike over?

2. Why is this issue important to you and/or society?

3. What do you think would be the most effective way to get your message and demands across to others?