

# To Strike or Not to Strike

## A Worker's Choice During World War II

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### INTRODUCTION:

You can learn a lot about a time period from newspapers published at that time – anxieties, sources of entertainment, local and national events and more. A variety of publishers produced newspapers, each with their own point of view. This activity focuses on articles from newspapers published by labor unions during World War II in the 1940s.

### GRADES:

9 - 12

### DURATION:

45 minutes

### STANDARDS:

- High School American History 21.
- High School American Government 14.
- High School Economics and Financial Literacy 7.
- Social and Emotional Learning Standards C1. 2.d, C4. 3.d, D3. 1.d.

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

- Students will learn to analyze newspaper articles to understand the past, evaluate different perspectives and make decisions.
- Students will work together with their peers to make decisions.

### VOCABULARY:

- **Strike:** a refusal to work organized by a body of employees as a form of protest, typically in an attempt to gain a concession or concessions from their employer.
- **Industry:** economic activity concerned with the processing of raw materials and manufacture of goods in factories.
- **Labor union:** an organized association of workers, often in a trade or profession, formed to protect and further their rights and interests.
- **Resolution:** a firm decision to do or not to do something.

### BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Ohio has a long history of industrial production, including the manufacture of steel, pottery and other goods. Workers in these industries, who often worked long days in dangerous conditions, had long used



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strikes organized by their labor unions to advocate for themselves. Their demands during these strikes could include higher pay, fewer hours or more safety measures in their workplace. In the years leading up to World War II, major strikes in Ohio included the [Akron Rubber Strike of 1936](#) and the [Little Steel Strike of 1937](#). When World War II broke out, labor unions had to make a choice: should they delay strikes and other cooperative measures to rally behind the war effort, or did anti-labor laws passed by Congress mean it was more important than ever to agitate for their rights?

### ACTIVITY OUTLINE:

1. Break your students into small groups – your class represents a labor union and each group represents a smaller workers' meeting. They must decide, based on the provided primary sources, to pass a resolution either agreeing to suspend all strikes or to protect their right to strike.
2. Have your students read primary source newspaper articles and discuss what they're about – **15 minutes**.
3. Using the primary sources, have your students debate what their resolution should say. Have one student take notes and write out the resolution, then have everyone sign it – **15 minutes**.
4. Bring the class back together and have each group share their resolution as well as a summary of how they made their decision. Have the class vote on which resolution seems like the right course of action for the union to take – **15 minutes**.

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### SOURCES:

#### ARTICLE

"Anti-Labor Legislation Condemned As "Dire Threat" to U.S. Unity" *The potters herald*. [volume] (East Liverpool, Ohio), 08 Jan. 1942. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn78000533/1942-01-08/ed-1/seq-1/>

### Anti-Labor Legislation Condemned As "Dire Threat" To U. S. Unity

Washington, D. C. (ILNS).—Declaring that "defeat of Japan and her Axis partners will require that complete unity of our people which today is a reality," 352 prominent Americans have signed an open letter to the President and the Congress of the United States opposing pending anti-labor legislation as "a dire threat to this essential unity," it was announced by the National Federation for Constitutional Liberties.

**Unity Held Menaced**

The signers endorsed the calling by the President of the labor-industry conference which reached an agreement banning strikes and lockouts for the duration of the war and submitting all labor disputes to settlement by peaceful means.

In releasing the list of signers, George Marshall, vice chairman of the federation, pointed out that despite the labor-industry agreement a bloc of anti-labor Senators have renewed their campaign for enactment of re-

pressive legislation.

"The agreement reached by the conference is an important contribution to national unity," Marshall said. "The continued insistence upon passage of repressive legislation imperils that unity."

**Workers' Rights Endangered**

The open letter states in part:

"... America needs as never before the quick, willing, wholehearted cooperation of its workers. . . .

"We cannot forget that one of the first steps in the coming of German and Italian Fascism was the passage of anti-labor legislation similar to that now being considered in the Congress of the United States.

"All of these proposals remove, in varying degree, labor's freedom to arrive voluntarily at agreements covering employer-employee relations. There is not one of these anti-labor bills which does not take away some of the hard earned rights of American working men and women."

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### ARTICLE

"Strike At The Enemy" *Dayton union news*. [volume] ([Dayton, Ohio]), 10 June 1943. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress.

<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84025694/1943-06-10/ed-1/seq-7>

### Strike At The Enemy

Ruth Tucker, Local 801

John L. Lewis, floundering in the sea of defeatism, stretches his beckoning finger at American labor, urging us to jump into the "wage" strike. "Come on in," splutters Mr. Lewis, "the water's fine." Having failed utterly in his efforts to disrupt the CIO by pirating, and failing even more miserably to negotiate badly needed wage lifts for the miners, and now realizing that his isolationist and defeatist policies cannot buck the force of an America united for victory, Lewis hopes to split the labor movement and steer it toward a Hitler (and Lewis) victory by disruption and strikes.

#### Support Strikers of Europe

Whoever pretends today that strikes against employers will help labor is only kidding himself. It is true that strikes in Poland, in France, in Fascist Italy and Spain help labor, for these strikes are directed at the enemy of all labor . . . the Nazi-Fascist slave order. We feel good in America when we read that the workers of Fascist-enslaved Europe are revolting against their employers . . . the supporters and instigators of German Nazism. We say of those striking workers that they have got plenty of what it takes to lay themselves open to the possibility of mass butchery by the Fascist firing squads. They are helping our common cause by striking, holding up production of machines and ammunition which the Axis powers need desperately. But what in God's name can those brave strikers of Europe think of Americans who go on strike . . . not against the enemy. Not holding up Axis production, but holding up production of the planes, tanks and guns that we must have to carry the war to the European continent.

Yes, we have plenty of grievances, but we have methods of settling these grievances without allowing some two-bit employer or misleader of labor to provoke us into striking against our own best interests. If we try to use the strike weapon to get our grievances settled now, we are going to blindly stab ourselves in the back, because, for the duration of the war the one MAIN interest of both labor and employer is to win victory over the Axis. Differences between ourselves must and can be settled in other ways. Labor has in its grasp the greatest weapon of democracy . . . voting power. We must learn how to use this weapon to its fullest power, to throw out of the halls of Congress the many would-be Fascists who want America to lose the war, or failing that, to lose the peace. Yes, it is time for American labor to strike, time for us to strike against the Axis with our armies and production, and time to strike with our votes against the home-grown Fascists in Congress who are holding up our progress toward victory. But it is always a good idea, when you're in a fight, to take a good look at the guy you want to hit before you start swinging, otherwise you may possibly find you have swatted your brother, while the enemy has taken it on the run. John L. Lewis' kind of strike helps only Hitler. Strike at the ENEMY!



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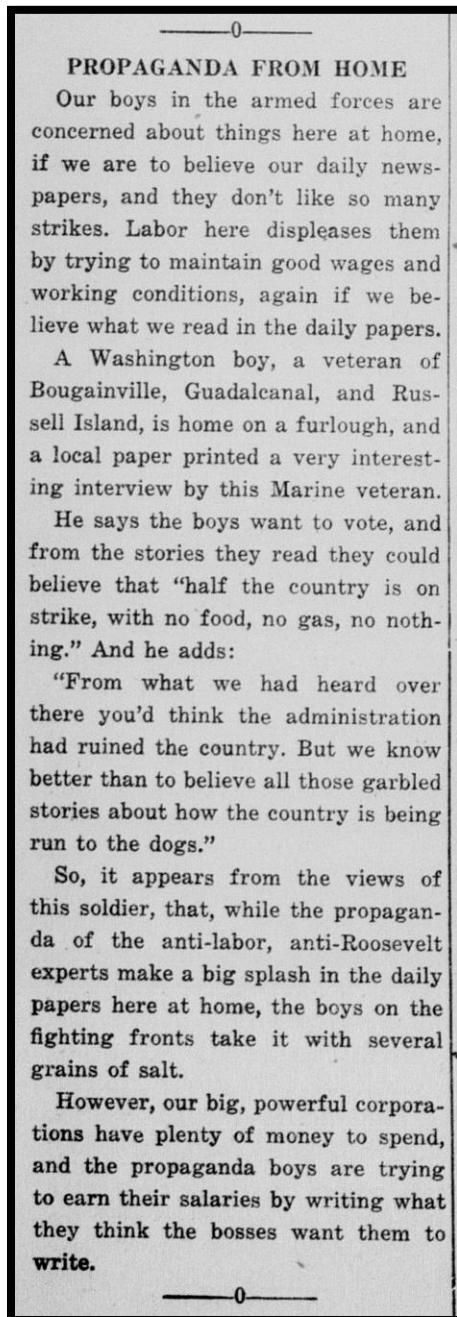
## To Strike or Not to Strike: A Worker's Choice During World War II

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### ARTICLE

"Propaganda From Home" *The Butler County press*. [volume] (Hamilton, Ohio), 17 March 1944. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress.

<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045012/1944-03-17/ed-1/seq-2/>



## To Strike or Not to Strike: A Worker's Choice During World War II

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### TRANSCRIPT

#### PROPAGANDA FROM HOME

Our boys in the armed forces are concerned about things here at home, if we are to believe our daily newspapers, and they don't like so many strikes. Labor here displeases them by trying to maintain good wages and working conditions, again if we believe what we read in the daily papers.

A Washington boy, a veteran of Bougainville, Guadalcanal, and Russell Island, is home on a furlough, and a local paper printed a very interesting interview by this Marine veteran. He says the boys want to vote, and from the stories they read they could believe that "half the country is on strike, with no food, no gas, no nothing." And he adds:

"From what we had heard over there you'd think the administration had ruined the country. But we know better than to believe all those garbled stories about how the country is being run to the dogs."

So, it appears from the views of this soldier, that, while the propaganda of the anti-labor, anti-Roosevelt experts make a big splash in the daily papers here at home, the boys on the fighting fronts take it with several grains of salt.

However, our big, powerful corporations have plenty of money to spend, and the propaganda boys are trying to earn their salaries by writing what they think the bosses want them to write.



## To Strike or Not to Strike: A Worker's Choice During World War II

### ARTICLE

"AFL Council Rallies Labor to Back Invasion to Limit" *The Butler County press*. [volume] (Hamilton, Ohio), 12 May 1944. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress.

<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045012/1944-05-12/ed-1/seq-1/>



# AFL Council Rallies Labor To Back Invasion To Limit

## Union Chiefs Issue New Appeal To Ban All Strikes Until Victory; In Vital War Jobs Or Other Essential Work: We Must Now All Pull Together

Philadelphia. — Declaring that the impending invasion of Nazi-occupied Europe "is now America's first order of business," the Executive Council of the American Federation of Labor opened its Spring session here with a patriotic appeal for all-out participation by labor in the victory drive.

"Above all, we emphasize that this is no time to strike," the Executive Council declared. "When the invasion starts and the fighting hits its highest pitch, the workers of America must carry out their assignments as a stern and solemn duty with the same spirit and the same high morale as our armed forces. Only in this way can labor do its part fully in bringing about victory in the shortest possible time and in saving the lives of our sons and brothers serving on the fighting fronts."

The Council congratulated the members of the American Federation for their wonderful production record this year, which helped to prepare the way "for final crushing blows against Hitler's domain." It added:

"The record-breaking performance of the nation's soldiers of production has given our armed forces the overwhelming superiority in planes, ships, tanks, and ammunition upon which the outcome of the invasion will largely depend."

In its statement, the Executive Council recalled that at its last meeting in January high officials of the government had informed the AFL leaders that the military plans of the United Nations would require vast increases in war production, especially such items as aircraft, radio equipment and landing craft.

Because of these imperative needs, the Executive Council at that time issued a forceful appeal to all affiliated unions urging extraordinary efforts to boost production and abstention from strikes for any cause and under any circumstances.

Reporting on the events which have taken place on the production front in the ensuing three months, the Council said:

"During that period, no strikes have been called by any affiliated union engaged in war production. During that period tremendous progress has been achieved in labor's productivity in key industries. During that period labor has more than fulfilled the government's most optimistic expectations."

Although these results have been most gratifying, the Council warned that labor has not yet completed its work in the war effort, adding:

"We must be prepared for setbacks and heavy losses in military operations of such magnitude as those now under way. Immediate replacement of equipment and munitions will be vitally important."

"The Executive Council therefore cautions the members of the American Federation of Labor against any let-down due to overconfidence. We urge all our people to keep up their good work, to strive for new records and to back up to the limit the boys in uniform who will be risking their lives in direct combat against the enemy."

After making public this statement at a press conference following the Council's opening session, AFL President William Green also announced that the Federation will give energetic support to the forthcoming Fifth War Loan Drive. He revealed that AFL unions will seek to have their war bond purchases earmarked for a new Liberty ship named after Samuel Gompers, founder of the AFL. A ship named after Gompers when it was launched over a year ago was sunk on its maiden voyage, he reported.

Mr. Green told newspapermen that during the current session the Executive Council will draft recommendations which will be submitted to the coming national conventions of both major political parties for inclusion in the party platforms.

He emphasized that special efforts will be made to prevail upon both parties to endorse the Federation's demands for immediate enactment of a broad Social Security program. Particularly urgent, he said, is the adoption of a uniform, federalized unemployment compensation system to tide over displaced workers and returning ex-servicemen until such time as private industry is able to reconvert and provide jobs in peace-time production.

Many of the AFL leaders meeting here are also serving as advisors in the current deliberation of the International Labor Organization's conference in this city. Labor hopes to obtain international agreements at this conference on economic and social codes designed to lift the standards of common people throughout the world after the war ends.

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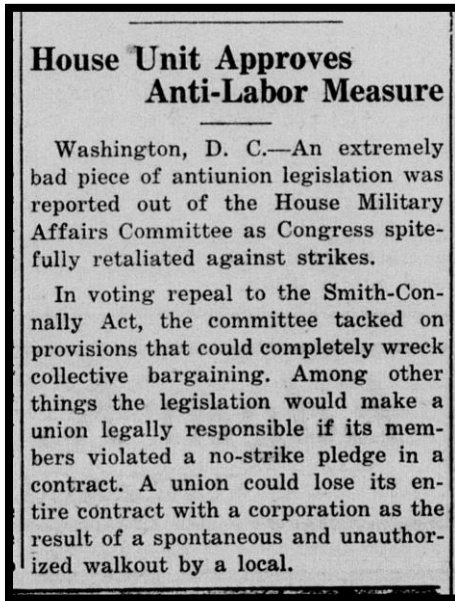
## To Strike or Not to Strike: A Worker's Choice During World War II

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### ARTICLE

"House Unit Approves Anti-Labor Measure" *The Butler County press*. [volume] (Hamilton, Ohio), 23 Nov. 1945. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress.

<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045012/1945-11-23/ed-1/seq-1/>



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### TRANSCRIPT

#### House Unit Approves Anti-Labor Measure

Washington, D.C. – An extremely bad piece of antiunion legislation was reported out of the House Military Affairs Committee as Congress spitefully retaliated against strikes.

In voting repeal to the Smith-Connally Act, the committee tacked on provisions that could completely wreck collective bargaining. Among other things the legislation would make a union legally responsible if its members violated a no-strike pledge in a contract. A union could lose its entire contract with a corporation as the result of a spontaneous and unauthorized walkout by a local.