



# Post-Visit Activity: Help Create a Labor Union

**Grade Level:** 5 – 10

**This program helps fulfill Wisconsin Model Academic Standards in Social Studies, including:**

E.8.3, E.8.4, E.8.5, E.8.7  
B.8.4, B.8.7, B.8.10  
B.12.13, B.12.18  
C.12.9, C.12.15, C.12.16

**Subject:** United States History, Civil and Labor Rights

**Time Required:** One to two sessions

## **Procedures:**

1. View the exhibit, *Pullman Porters: From Service to Civil Rights*
2. After returning to the classroom, ask the class to brainstorm a list of things that they remember about the working conditions on a Pullman Car as well as about who the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters were. Ask one student to record the list on a sheet of butcher paper.
3. Ask each student to read the following passage about the porters fight to become unionized.
4. Break the class into smaller groups of students and have them answer the five questions together. They may write a report, create a short play or write a poem answering the questions.
5. Once the questions are answered, each group is given time to present their work to the class.
6. Follow up with the optional assessment activity.



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## Background:

For porters enduring continuous work and low pay on a train, unions were the only way to change the Pullman system. Porters saw white unions representing other trades fight the railroad for better working conditions and win, but African Americans were not allowed to join white organizations. A union representing the more than 10,000 porters was the answer. Between 1909 and 1918, five of these unions were formed and then disbanded. The Pullman Company responded by creating the *Employee Representation Plan*, a union-like organization to pacify the porters while also ensuring that the porters stayed within their control. Many porters did not like the *Employee Representation Plan*, so they hired A. Philip Randolph to lead a new union, the *Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters*, in 1925. Despite the Pullman Company's threats, firings, and other tactics meant to discourage the porters, Randolph strengthened the union and its political ties. By 1937, Pullman Company reluctantly signed a contract with the Brotherhood recognizing their organization as well as reducing hours and increasing pay.

After the union was recognized by the Pullman Company, A. Philip Randolph and Pullman porters worked towards helping other African Americans gain equal labor rights by assisting these men and women in forming their own unions. They also encouraged the Federal government to hire African Americans during World WWII, leading President Harry Truman to sign two Executive Orders in 1948 that created fair employment guidelines for the Federal government and to desegregate the army. To ensure that these orders were enforced, Truman set-up the President's Committee on Equality of Treatment and Opportunity in the Armed Services. By the 1960s, the military was one of the most integrated parts of American life.

Once equal rights in the military and Federal government were achieved, the porters went on to help with the Civil Rights Movement. They ran the famous bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama after Rosa Parks refused to move from her seat on a public bus. This, as well as other protests, speeches, boycotts run by A. Philip Randolph and the porters ultimately contributed to the equal rights enjoyed in the United States today.

The *Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters* demanded several things from the Pullman Company to make working conditions better for the porters. These demands were as follows:

1. Work fewer hours. Before 1937, porters worked more 400 hours a month, and had little time to sleep. They wanted to work between 200 and 300 hours a month with more time off.



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2. Better pay. Porters were paid less than half what conductors made, and when they did a conductor's job, they were not given the same pay as a conductor. They wanted to be paid the same amount that a white person would make doing the same job.
3. Be addressed by their name. Porters were often called "George" or unkind names. They wanted to be called by their real name when they were working.
4. Fired, only when merited. The Pullman Company often fired good employees if they were found to be part of a union. The porters wanted to be fired only when it was deserved, such as when they were not doing their job properly.

### Assignment:

You are a porter who feels the working conditions on a Pullman train are wrong. If you want to make working conditions better, you need to organize a union so that all porters will have a good place to work. But joining a union scares you. As you see it, participation in a union called the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car porters could cause you to lose your job and you could be bullied on the train by Pullman Company employees. You want to do something to help

The task of organizing a union is immense. In the upcoming weeks you and your fellow porters must handle organizational responsibilities such as selecting a spokesperson for the organization, dealing with the day-to-day tasks of creating an organization, ways to communicate with other porters about the union without the Pullman Company knowing about this communication, and confronting other porters and Pullman Company employees who are hostile to you and your cause. In addition to your organizational duties, you must motivate individuals through speeches for the long struggle ahead.

While the immediate demands of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters include encouraging more porters to join the union, force the Pullman Company officials to accept your union and give porters better working hours, wages, and working conditions, your overall goal is to change how African Americans are treated in our country. You want them to have equal labor and civil rights.

Directions: Please answer the following questions.

1. Write in your own words what you think your job as a Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porter organizer is.
2. Who or what group or individual could provide the leadership for such a union?



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3. How would you respond to people who challenged the union? What if they fired or threatened your job or well-being as a tactic to discourage you from continuing?
4. If you had to work like the porters did, how would it change your life? How often do you think you could spend time with friends? How easy or difficult would it be to buy food or a house with your salary?
5. How would you feel if people did not call you by the correct name or called you uncaring names when they wanted you to do something for them? How would you react?

### **Extension/Assessment:**

Divide the class into groups of two or three students. Ask each group to write a two to three minute speech meant to persuade porters to join the *Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters*. The speech should include facts about working conditions on the train, how the union can help the porters, and other things that the students might feel is relevant to their argument such as information that they have learned about the union, labor and civil rights. Once the speeches are written, ask each group to give their speech in front of the class.