

They Didn't Shut Up: Women Labor Organizers

Read the following interview. In this interview, Al Sisti, a retired steelworker, reminisces about Anne Burlak, a union activist. The interview was included in *Working Lives: an Oral History of Rhode Island Labor*, a publication of the Rhode Island Historical Society published in 1986 and edited by Dr. Paul Buhle.

During the 1930s, I remember Anne Burlak speaking on Manton Avenue; people would go out for an hour at lunch and listen to her instead of going back to the job. Cops from the patrol wagons, 'Black Marias,' were handling her rough, practically dragging her away from the platform where she was talking. She wasn't shutting up for nobody, though. She inspired people in that mill, to a hell of a great extent.

I also remember the sit-down strikes, not in the Atlantic Mills but right down by the Woonasquatucket. Mostly women. I was really impressed by their militancy, and I have to think the inspiration went back to Burlak. It was unbelievable to see a woman say things like that, and whatever she was called, a Communist, it didn't mean much to us.

1. Define the following terms:

'Black Marias'
sit-down strike
militancy
Communist

2. What was the crowd's reaction to Anne Burlak?
3. Why do you think she inspired the workers?
4. How was she treated by the police?
5. Did she back down?
6. What was the result of Burlack's leadership?

Anne Burlak speaks to a crowd of workers, circa 1931-32.



Photo courtesy of the Scott Molloy collection.

Extension Activity I

Write a news article (1-2 paragraphs) on Anne Burlak that could be used with the picture in a newspaper or blog. You will need to do a little more research but be sure to include information from the interview and from the photo analysis worksheet.

Analyzing Photographs Student Worksheet

From the National Archives and Records Administration, <http://www.nara.gov/>

Step 1. Observation

A. Study the photograph for 2 minutes. Form an overall impression of the photograph and then examine individual items. Next, divide the photo into quadrants and study each section to see what new details become visible.

B. Use the chart below to list people, objects, and activities in the photograph.

<u>People</u>	<u>Objects</u>	<u>Activities</u>

Step 2. Inference

Based on what you have observed above, list three things you might infer from this photograph.

Step 3. Questions

A. What questions does this photograph raise in your mind?

B. Where could you find answers to them?

Extension Activity II

This is a list of women who were active in the labor movement. They represent different time periods through American labor history. Some of the women may also be known for other achievements. Research one of the women and write a tribute (1-2 paragraphs) that would be read at a banquet honoring their work as labor activists.

Jane Addams
Mary Anderson
Leonora Bagley
Sarah Bagley
Leonora Marie Barry
Mary McLeod Bethune
Jennie Curtis
Dorothy Day
Jessie De La Cruz
Emma Goldman
Elizabeth Gurley Flynn
Margaret Haley
Dolores Huerta
Mary Harris Jones (Mother Jones)
Mary Morton Kehew
Florence Kelly
Mary McDowell
Lucy Randolph Mason
Kate Mullaney
Agnes Nester
Pauline Newman
Mary Kenney O'Sullivan
Lucy Parsons
Francis Perkins
Rose Pesotta
Margaret Dreier Robins
Rose Schneiderman
Fannie Sellins
Alzina Stevens
Lizzie Swank
Lillian Wald
Victoria Woodhull
Levenia Wright

For more information take a look at the following websites.

US Labor History: Women in Labor History

<http://doe.sd.gov/octa/ddn4learning/themeunits/USLabor/women.htm>

The Library of Congress American Memory

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/index.html>

Women's Labor History Timeline: 1765 - Present Day

http://www.nysut.org/newyorkteacher_12304.htm

Women's Labor History Links

<http://www.afscme.org/publications/10404.cfm>

Labor History on the Web

<http://www.aflcio.org/aboutus/history/history/links.cfm>