

Labor's Untold Story

A Textbook Case of Neglect and Distortion



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He who controls the present, controls the past.
He who controls the past, controls the future.¹

BY THE ALBERT SHANKER INSTITUTE

Imagine opening a high school U.S. history textbook and finding no more than a brief mention of Valley Forge, the Missouri Compromise, or the League of Nations. Imagine not finding a word about Benjamin Franklin, Lewis and Clark, Sitting Bull, Andrew Carnegie, or Rosa Parks. That is what has happened to labor's part in the American story, and to most of the men and women who led the labor movement.

The Albert Shanker Institute is committed to four fundamental principles: vibrant democracy, quality public education, a voice for working people in decisions affecting their jobs and their lives, and free and open debate about all of these issues. This article is drawn from American Labor in U.S. History Textbooks: How Labor's Story Is Distorted in High School History Textbooks, which the Institute published in 2011. Several experts in labor history contributed to this report: Paul F. Cole, director of the American Labor Studies Center; Jeff Hilgert, doctoral student in industrial and labor relations at Cornell University; Lori Megivern, Fulbright Fellow and American Councils for International Education Teacher of Excellence; and Jeff Mirel, professor of education and history at the University of Michigan. Christina Bartolomeo, a freelance writer (who has since joined the AFT staff), assisted with researching, writing, and editing.

In the high school history textbooks our children read, too often we find that labor's role in American history—and labor's important accomplishments, which changed American life—are misrepresented, downplayed, or ignored. That is a tragedy because labor played (and continues to play) a key role in the development of American democracy and the American way of life. This article, and the more detailed report* from which it is drawn, examines four high school textbooks developed by some of the leading publishers in the country: *The American Vision*, published by Glencoe/McGraw-Hill in 2010; *American Anthem: Modern American History*, published by Holt, Rinehart, and Winston/Harcourt in 2009; *United States History*, published by Prentice Hall/Pearson in 2010; and *The Americans*, published by McDougal Littell/Houghton Mifflin in 2009.² Together, these books represent a significant percentage of the purchasing market for high school history textbooks.

Spotty, inadequate, and slanted coverage of the labor movement in U.S. history textbooks is a problem that dates back at least to the New Deal era. By the late 1960s, a number of scholars had begun documenting the biased treatment of organized labor in high school curricula. In a 1966 study, *Labor in Learning: Public School Treatment of the World of Work*, University of California researcher and high school history teacher Will Scoggins found that the history and government textbooks used in most high



*To read the full report, go to www.shankerinstitute.org/publications/american-labor-in-textbooks.

schools either ignored or inadequately treated topics such as collective bargaining, unfair labor practices, company unions, strikes, right-to-work laws, and the role of government in labor dispute mediation and conciliation.³

Scoggins and other scholars understood that high school textbooks had come to reflect a negative view about unions that was prevalent in the American business community, as well as in politics—often expressed by various business-oriented and ultra-conservative factions of the Republican Party. In a sense, as Scoggins and others found, American history textbooks have taken sides in the nation’s intense political debate about organized labor—and the result has been that generations of students have had little concept of labor’s role in American history and the labor movement’s contributions to American workers’ rights and quality of life.

One illustration of this trend: in the late 1930s and early 1940s, conservative, business-oriented groups launched a highly successful attack on the supposedly “left-wing” textbook series written by Harold Rugg, a professor at Columbia University’s Teachers College.⁴ Among other complaints, the books’ critics denounced Rugg’s “positive” depiction of the 1936–1937 Flint Sit-Down Strike against the Gen-

A Note on Methods

We selected the four leading textbook companies (Glencoe/McGraw-Hill; Holt, Rinehart, and Winston/Harcourt; Prentice Hall/Pearson; and McDougal Littell/Houghton Mifflin) and reviewed the most detailed high school U.S. history textbook from each publisher. We limited our review to the hard copy student editions. We made this decision because these editions are the actual books to which students are exposed in the classroom. We did not investigate or assess any materials from the teacher editions, nor did we review any supplemental teaching materials. All of the textbooks we examined were written for high school U.S. history classrooms.

Data on the exact market share of these books is not in the public domain, but it appears that these four publishers may have a combined market share of more than 80 percent of the U.S. high school textbook industry. In an effort to get as accurate a picture as possible, we approached representatives of each publisher at a curriculum conference in June 2009 and asked them for their company’s nationwide market share in the U.S. history textbook market. Each of the four textbook publishers’ representatives said their company’s share was greater than 25 percent of the nationwide market in U.S. history.

—ASI

eral Motors Corporation as union propaganda designed to convince students that there was nothing wrong with the sit-down strike. (The Flint Sit-Down Strike led to the unionization of the U.S. auto industry, enabling the fledgling United Automobile Workers to organize 100,000 workers almost at a stroke.⁵) In the early 1940s, these criticisms of Rugg gained traction and his books disappeared from public schools.⁶

After the Second World War, the business community continued to devote significant resources to the development and promotion of a high school social studies curriculum that promoted its vision of society and its perspective on U.S. history. This vision was skeptical of government programs and wary of organized labor.⁷

More recent studies of organized labor’s treatment in U.S. textbooks have found similar biases.⁸ For example, in a 2002 article in *Labor History*, labor historian Robert Shaffer found that U.S. history textbooks totally ignored the

organization of public employee unions, one of the most important union trends in the past half century. Shaffer declared that there is an “absence in virtually all survey textbooks, as well as in textbooks of the recent (post-1945) U.S., of any mention of the upsurge in public employee



Left: Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., in Memphis to support the striking sanitation workers just a few days before he was assassinated, believed labor and civil rights were inextricably linked. Above: Participants in the Flint Sit-Down Strike, which led to the unionization of the auto industry, living in a Fischer plant. Right: The Women’s Trade Union League, which encouraged women to form unions, counted Eleanor Roosevelt (sixth from the left) as a member.



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unionism in the 1960s and 1970s. This silence serves all of our students poorly, and reflects a lack of perspective about what has been one of the more important legacies of the 1960s to contemporary life.”⁹

Public employee unionism has been a focus of intense political conflict and media attention in recent months, with attacks on public employees’ union rights and the public sector labor movement arising in Wisconsin, Michigan, Florida, New Hampshire, Ohio, and other states. Because of the lack of information in history textbooks, most citizens are probably not prepared to fully understand these attacks.

How Today’s Leading Textbooks Shortchange Labor

Today’s major high school history texts do not ignore unions and the labor movement altogether. Each of the books we reviewed presents a modicum of important information, including facts about organizations such as the Knights of Labor, the American Federation of Labor (AFL), and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). We should note that there are several instances in which the textbooks get it right—for example, two of the textbooks include descriptions of the too-often-forgotten Women’s Trade Union League, which encouraged women to form trade unions, fought for laws to protect the rights of women factory workers, and is credited with establishing the nation’s first strike fund.¹⁰ Another example: *The Americans* contains an excellent two-page spread on *NLRB v. Jones and Laughlin Steel Corp.*, the 1937 Supreme Court case that affirmed the authority of the National Labor Relations Board and gave some protection to workers’ right to organize.¹¹

Still, these textbooks provide what we believe to be a narrow and sometimes seriously misleading view of what unions

are and have done in the past; they neglect the labor movement’s role in shaping and defending American democracy, and they pay hardly any attention to organized labor in the past half century.

The textbooks fall short in their coverage of labor in three specific ways. First, they devote little space to the labor movement and the development of unions generally. Second, when they do cover the development of unions, the textbooks’ accounts are often biased against the positive contributions of unions to American history, focusing instead on strikes and “labor unrest.” Third,



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Working for Freedom

For a more balanced discussion of the role of labor during industrialization, see “Working for Freedom,” which is webisode 9 in *Freedom: A History of US*. Created by PBS based on Joy Hakim’s *A History of US* textbooks (see www.joyhakim.com/works.htm), this 16-webisode series makes the struggle for freedom the central topic in American history.

For the series homepage—and links to extensive teaching guides, photos, timelines, and other resources—see www.pbs.org/wnet/historyofus/index.html. To jump to labor during industrialization, see segments 6–8 of “Working for Freedom” at www.pbs.org/wnet/historyofus/web09/segment6.html.

—EDITORS



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Above left: Members of the Transportation Workers Union, who were employees of New York's Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority, picket the office of the New York City construction coordinator in 1950. Left: The president of the American Federation of Labor, William Green, testifies in favor of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Economic Security Bill, which became the Social Security Act of 1935. Above: Child laborers, like these Pennsylvania coal miners in 1911, were quite common before unions helped win passage of child labor laws.

their discussions of other important social, political, and economic movements (such as the civil rights movement or the Progressive movement) and their gains often downplay or ignore the important role unions and their members played in these movements.

The following are some of the most significant examples of these problems, drawn from the four textbooks. The books:

- often implicitly (and, at times, explicitly) represent labor organizing and labor disputes as inherently violent;
- virtually ignore the vital role of organized labor in winning broad social protections, such as child labor laws, Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, and the Environmental Protection Agency;
- ignore the important role that organized labor played in the civil rights movement; and
- pay scant attention to unionism after the 1950s, thus completely ignoring the rise of public sector unionization, which brought generations of Americans into the middle class and gave new rights to public employees.

Giving the union movement its proper place in the teaching of our history is not simply special pleading for the cause of labor, as some critics might assert. Our central argument is that the study of American history itself is incomplete and inaccurate without labor history. Regardless of their personal values, serious scholars of American history do not deny that the labor movement has played a major role in our nation's development.

Whether in light of labor's championship of universal social programs or its formative role in the industrial and postindustrial workplace, labor has changed our nation's history, its economy,

and the development of the American social structure as it exists today. There is little disputing that the labor movement has been a key actor in our country's history, inarguably as important as scores of other figures and movements that cross the stage in history class, from Whigs to prohibitionists, from Daniel Boone to Joe McCarthy.

Here are five specific reasons why not telling labor's story deprives students of the real American story and leaves them ignorant of forces that continue to shape their lives today.

1. Labor played a vital role in the establishment and growth of democracy in America. Few high school history textbooks demonstrate that

the labor movement in America sprang directly from the movement's understanding of Americans' constitutional rights. For example, the Bill of Rights protects "the right of the people peaceably to assemble." From this right to freedom of assembly arises workers' claim to the right of freedom of association—the crucial right to meet together, to organize a union. Along with the right to bargain contracts with employers, freedom of association is a central element of both American and international labor rights and standards.*

Unfortunately, not one of the American history textbooks we reviewed illustrates that the right to freedom of association springs directly from the right to freedom of assembly—i.e., that labor rights spring from constitutional and human rights as envisioned by the Founders.

Labor activists understood this principle from the movement's earliest days. In the 1830s, female textile mill workers in Lowell, Massachusetts (often known as the Lowell Mill Girls), fought for a living wage and a 10-hour day. In an 1834 proclamation urging other mill workers to join them in a walkout to protest a wage cut, the women wrote:¹²

Our present object is to have union and exertion, and we remain in possession of our unquestionable rights. We circulate this paper wishing to obtain the names of all who imbibe the spirit of our Patriotic Ancestors, who preferred privation to bondage, and parted with all that renders life desirable—and even life itself—to procure independence for their children.

All the textbooks we assessed provide extensive coverage of the formulation and adoption of the Constitution and enactment
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*Labor's source of inspiration from the First Amendment right of association is aspirational. The rights contained in the First Amendment provide protection against government action that would limit the exercise of the right of association. The First Amendment does not apply to the actions of private parties. Nonetheless, many of the values imbedded in the First Amendment right of association became the foundation for the National Labor Relations Act, which was adopted by Congress and does apply to the private sector. See *Jacksonville Bulk Terminals, Inc., et al. v. International Longshoremen's Association, et al.*, 457 U.S. 702 (1982).

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of the Bill of Rights, and the importance of rights like free speech as America's democracy developed. Yet, not a single textbook provides an analysis of the relationship of freedom of association to freedom of assembly as articulated in the First Amendment. Nor do the textbooks cover the labor movement's long history of fighting corporate and government attempts to deprive American workers of their constitutional rights to freedom of assembly, freedom of speech, and due process. Without this aspect of labor's history, students lose a key narrative about how our democracy was shaped and tested.



Labor unions were strong supporters of Solidarity, the trade union movement that brought freedom to Poland. Above: In 1980, Lane Kirkland, president of the AFL-CIO, receives a movement T-shirt from Stanislaw Walesa, the stepfather of the movement's head, Lech Walesa. Left: A Solidarity rally in Warsaw in 1982.

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2. *Labor has been a crucial force for social progress in America.* As a result of the glaring deficiencies in how labor is treated in standard high school U.S. history textbooks, students are likely not to understand that unions have played a crucial role—far beyond benefiting their own members—in helping to achieve decent living standards and vital social programs for all Americans. Most textbooks cover significant social legislation but rarely mention the contribution of the labor movement in its advocacy and adoption.

American labor was central to winning child labor protections, unemployment insurance, workers' injury compensation, Social Security benefits, the minimum hourly wage, the eight-hour day and other limits on working hours, the Occupational Safety and Health Act, the Family and Medical Leave Act, Medicare, and Medicaid. Yet the textbooks are largely silent on labor's role in these achievements. For example, no mention is made of continual union advocacy efforts on behalf of the Social Security Act of 1935, a key social reform of the second New Deal establishing old-age pensions, unemployment insurance, and disability relief. In the textbooks, these laws are credited essentially to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, not portrayed as the result of diligent, nationwide, grass-roots mobilization of American workers and their unions. For example, *The Americans* notes: "During the Second New Deal, Roosevelt, with the help of Congress, brought

about important reforms in the areas of labor relations."¹³ The passage goes on to discuss the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) of 1938, in which the 40-hour week was finally achieved for many workers. Labor was the key player in the fight for the 40-hour week, and supported the FLSA, but is given no credit for decades of advocacy and activism.

Through their role in winning progressive social legislation, unions brought generations of American families into the middle class and kept many Americans out of poverty.¹⁴ Yet the central facts about unions' economic and social contributions to American life are given short shrift in high school history textbooks. If, while driving to school, students happen to see the bumper sticker "Unions: The Folks Who Brought You the Weekend," that may be more exposure to American labor's historic role as a force for social progress than they will ever get in the classroom.

3. *Labor has been a leader in the fight for human rights at home and abroad.* U.S. labor has a long-standing history of supporting human rights in our country and globally, but little of that history is acknowledged in high school textbooks. Perhaps the most glaring error in the textbooks we reviewed is their failure to cover the role that American unions and labor activists played as key participants in the civil rights movement. While labor leader and Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters founder and president A. Philip Randolph is mentioned as an inspiration for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in two of the books,¹⁵ nowhere else in the textbooks do we see a description of the remarkable support that labor then poured into the civil rights movement. (For details on how labor supported the civil rights movement, see page 34.)

The textbooks also fail to mention the many other contributions made by American labor to the human rights struggle around the world—from the work of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) with the Jewish Labor Committee and its outspoken opposition to the Nazi terror, to the active role played in the 1930s and 1940s by organized labor in the United States in fighting against totalitarian regimes abroad (both Communist and Fascist), to unions' and the AFL-CIO's active support for the Solidarity trade union movement in Poland in the late 1980s, to the labor movement's efforts to aid anti-apartheid groups in South Africa. In its account of President Ronald Reagan's opposition to the Soviet empire, *American Anthem* describes the success of the Solidarity movement in Poland, for example, but

fails to mention the extensive support American labor unions gave to Solidarity.¹⁶

Today, the American labor movement continues to fight for human rights worldwide: for the rights of oppressed workers, women, children, trade unionists, and journalists, from Iran to China to El Salvador. This story largely fails to make it into the high school history classroom.¹⁷

4. *Labor is one of the major American political and social forces of the 19th and 20th centuries—and continues to be a political and social force today.* High school history textbooks also simply do not convey the scale and significance of labor as a political and social force in American society for two centuries, and as a continuing force in those areas today. Many students will never learn that, as recently as the late 1960s, around 30 percent of nonagricultural workers in America were union members,¹⁸ and an American might identify him- or herself as a Teamster, Ironworker, or ILGWU member just as readily as he or she might self-identify as a Democrat or a Methodist. Many American communities once centered around the union hall as much as they did around the church or the town hall. Yet the textbooks, which cover other social institutions and movements with some detail, from the American film industry to the conservation movement, give short shrift to labor's decades-long centrality and continuing importance in American life.

The textbooks also fail to portray the role of labor as a political force: as a decisive force in electing presidents, in passing legislation, in energizing political parties, in shaping events in our political history. For example, the American labor movement played a key role in supporting the Marshall Plan in the late 1940s. It supported U.S. efforts in two world wars. It helped pass the Civil Rights Act. And, despite a decline in membership, organized labor's political voice is still strong. For example, in the 2008 election, 21 percent of voters were from union households—despite the fact that organized labor represented only 12.4 percent of workers. Yet, in the textbooks, the labor movement virtually disap-

pears in chapters covering the decades since 1950, except (in three of the textbooks) for a brief and in some cases admiring mention of how Reagan fired air traffic controllers in the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization strike of 1981.

5. *Learning about labor is part of students' civic education.* "In every democracy, the people get the government they deserve," wrote Alexis de Tocqueville, a famous early observer of the fledgling American democracy. History class is one place where students learn what it means to be a citizen of our democracy—and teaching labor history is a way to educate students to be questioning, active citizens in that democracy.

Labor unions possess an encompassing vision of an authentically democratic life that is arguably broader and more inclusive than almost any other force or constituency in American society, and they have worked hard to realize that vision for members and nonmembers alike. When we give students a full and accurate account of labor's history, we are illustrating that it is possible to challenge established social and economic systems and structures and act collectively to bring about change—just as when we teach them about the American Revolution, the Progressive and Populist movements, the civil rights struggle, and the fight for women's suffrage. The textbooks cover all these in detail, but too often leave out the accomplishments and struggles of American labor. This is unfortunate because labor is a strand without which the American narrative of principled dissidence and the struggle for social progress by activist citizens is incomplete.

We undertook this review in a spirit of hope that American history textbook publishers will meet the challenge of covering the labor movement more fairly, accurately, and extensively going forward. We have seen the textbook publishing industry make similar changes in other key areas of American history. For example, as a result of demands from leaders of the civil rights movement and others over the last 40 years, textbook publishers today produce books that more accurately reflect the contributions of Americans of all races and origins to the country's narrative, history, and life. We urge them to consider textbooks' coverage of labor in the same critical light, to ask the same questions about labor's contribution to the American story: Are there voices missing? Are there key American events and great American themes being left out? □

Endnotes

1. A paraphrase of George Orwell's famous line in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1949): " 'Who controls the past,' ran the Party slogan, 'controls the future: who controls the present controls the past.' "

2. Joyce Appleby, Alan Brinkley, Albert S. Broussard, James M. McPherson, and Donald A. Ritchie, *The American Vision* (New York: Glencoe/McGraw-Hill, 2010); Edward L. Ayers, Robert D. Schulzinger, Jesús F. de la Teja, and Deborah Gray White, *American Anthem: Modern American History* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston/Harcourt, 2009); Emma J. Lapsansky-Werner, Peter B. Levy, Randy Roberts, and Alan Taylor, *United States History* (Boston: Prentice Hall/Pearson, 2010); and Gerald A. Danzer, J. Jorge Klor de Alva, Larry S. Krieger, Louis E. Wilson, and Nancy Woloch, *The Americans* (New York: McDougal Littell/Houghton Mifflin, 2009). Note: McDougal Littell/Houghton Mifflin and Holt, Rinehart, and Winston/Harcourt are now Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

3. Will Scoggins, *Labor in Learning: Public School Treatment of the World of Work* (Los Angeles: Institute of Industrial Relations, 1966).

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Above: Nelson Mandela in Chicago in 1993, just a year before he was elected president of South Africa, at a union-sponsored rally in support of his tireless efforts for free multiracial elections.

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Evolving Controversy

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- From the proclamation, printed in the *Boston Evening Transcript*, February 18, 1834. See also, Thomas Dublin, "Women, Work, and Protest in the Early Lowell Mills: The Oppressing Hand of Avarice Would Enslave Us," *Labor History* 16 (1975): 99–116, www.invention.smithsonian.org/centerpieces/whole_cloth/u2ei/u2materials/dublin.html. As Dublin notes, "At several points in the proclamation the women drew on their Yankee heritage. Connecting their turn-out with the efforts of their 'Patriotic Ancestors' to secure independence from England, they interpreted the

wage cuts as an effort to 'enslave' them—to deprive them of the independent status as 'daughters of freemen.'" Dublin points out that this proclamation (and, we believe, many of the group's other writings) makes clear that the women saw their right to band together to fight for better pay and working conditions as a natural outgrowth of the rights defended by their ancestors in the American Revolution and enshrined in the Constitution.

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- For examples, see the international labor activism website LabourStart at www.laborstart.org.
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Distorting the Record

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- For more on Bayard Rustin's life and the new award-winning documentary *Brother Outsider: The Life of Bayard Rustin*, see www.rustin.org.
- For an analysis of civil rights unionism and the forces that shaped it, see Michael Honey, "A Dream Deferred," *The Nation*, May 3, 2004. Honey, a professor at the University of Washington, writes: "It is crucial to remember that *Brown* was as much the product as the precipitator of mass movements. Yes, the decision resulted from the incredibly hard-working and astute battle led by Charles Houston, Thurgood Marshall and others in the NAACP. But it also resulted from mass movements and a vast shift in status among poor and working-class African-Americans, millions of whom moved out of rural areas and into cities and mass-production industries in the 1930s and '40s. They created an expanding membership base for the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), the NAACP and an American left that challenged segregation at every level. Domestic workers, sharecroppers, day laborers, factory workers and other poor people, especially the women among them, organized economic boycotts, picket lines, marches, sit-ins, strikes, church and community groups, unions, consumer cooperatives and mass meetings. Their role as workers, soldiers and activists in the fight against white supremacy at home and fascism abroad created vast social changes that set the stage for *Brown*. As one example, in the Deep South city of Memphis, African-Americans, who had been organizing unions since after the Civil War, provided the main support that made the rise of the CIO possible, at a time when supporting a union could cost one's life. The purge of the interracial left from the CIO during the cold war undermined civil rights unionism, yet a number of black industrial unionists continued to challenge white supremacy in the 1950s and '60s. Union wages also made it more possible to send children to college, and some of those students led sit-ins and demonstrations against Jim Crow."
- For a more detailed account of the UAW's history in supporting civil rights, see "UAW History," United Auto Workers, www.uaw.org/page/uaw-history.
- Kevin Boyle, *The UAW and the Heyday of American Liberalism, 1945–1968* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 176.
- For more on the Teamsters' support of civil rights, see "Teamsters and Civil Rights," International Brotherhood of Teamsters, www.teamster.org/history/teamster-history/civil-rights. See also www.teamster.org/content/teamsters-honor-black-history-month.
- See "This Day in History," International Brotherhood of Teamsters, www.teamstermagazine.com/day-history.
- An all-white jury acquitted the men accused in Viola Liuzzo's slaying. For more on Liuzzo, see "Civil Rights Martyr Viola Liuzzo," International Brotherhood of Teamsters, March 11, 2010, www.teamster.org/content/civil-rights-martyr-viola-liuzzo.
- Peter B. Levy, *The New Left and Labor in the 1960s* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 17.
- James M. Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 202–203.
- See "Major Features of the Civil Rights Act of 1964" on the CongressLink website, available at www.congresslink.org/print_basics_histmats_civilrights64text.htm.

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