

Labor Rights/Human Rights: Organizing Food Workers

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guides.library.duke.edu/c.php?g=1088994&p=8457317

BRIEF OVERVIEW

The Rubenstein Library's Human Rights Archive contains extensive primary documents on labor activism and worker's rights in North Carolina, throughout the south, and across the United States. Collections include organizational records and individual activists' papers. This session asks students to consider working conditions, labor policy, and organizing strategies through the analysis of such documents and to discuss the connections between labor, work, and human rights.

This Module is inspired by a class with Professor Genna Miller.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- **Analyze** documents related to labor organizing for better working conditions
- **Interpret** accounts of people involved in labor organizing
- **Identify** key components of labor activism

BEFORE CLASS

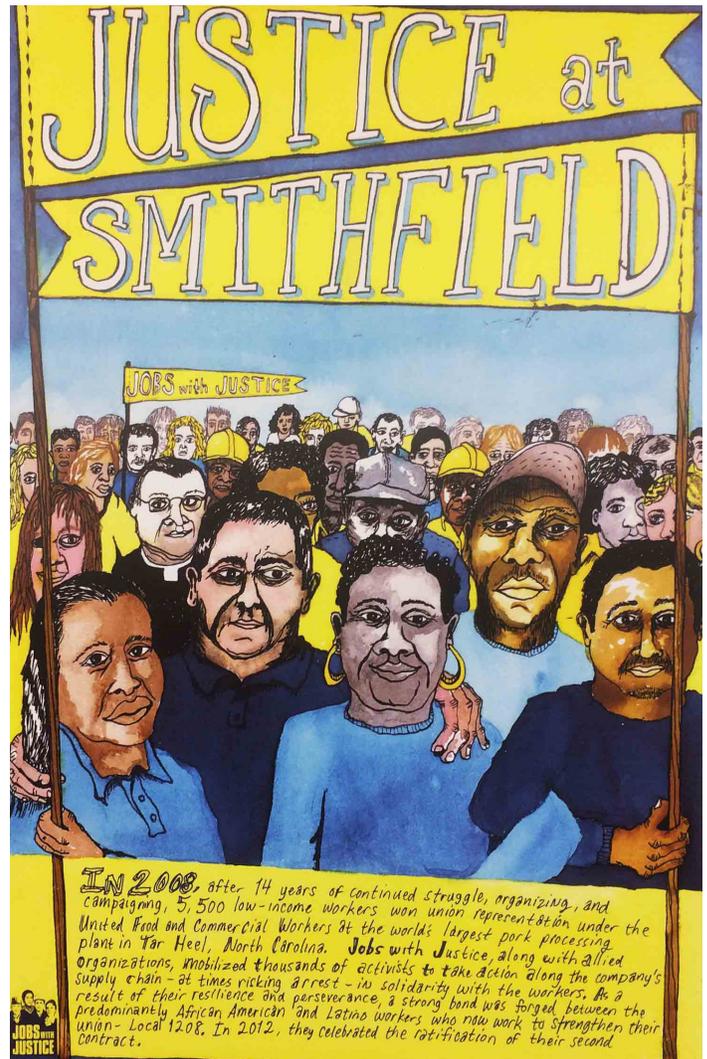
- Ask students to review the [El Pueblo, Inc. Records collection guide](#).
- Ask students to read Human Rights Watch, [“Blood Sweat, and Fear: Workers’ Rights in U.S. Meat and Poultry Plants”](#).
- Ask students to read Steven Greenhouse, [“After 15 Years, North Carolina Plant Unionizes”](#) (*New York Times*, 2008).
- Have your students take a moment to [read the Rubenstein Library’s approach to classes](#). It’s very short, but includes things students will want to keep in mind as they work with primary sources now and in the future.

SESSION OUTLINE

Activity:

BACKGROUND

The Smithfield meat processing plant in Tar Heel, NC, is the largest slaughterhouse in the world. As of 2008, the plant employed more than 5,000 people, a majority of whom are Black and/or Latinx. Workers at Smithfield have been



Justice at Smithfield by Colin Matthes and Justseeds.org

organizing for higher wages and better safety since the early 1990s. In 2000, a National Labor Relations Board judge found that Smithfield had egregiously violated labor law by, among other tactics, firing employees for attempting to organize in the workplace. In 2005, Justice@Smithfield, an initiative of the United Food and Commercial Workers and El Pueblo, Inc., organized to mobilize North Carolinians to put pressure on Smithfield in response to ongoing safety hazards and illegal firings of pro-union employees. In 2006, the U.S. Court of Appeals ordered Smithfield to reinstate four employees illegally fired. Workers at the Tar Heel plant voted to form a union with UFCW in 2008.

Working in groups, have students read the [attached documents](#) and fill out the [primary source document analysis worksheet](#). Then, as a group ask them to discuss the following questions.

Discussion Questions:

- What people and organizations are involved in this campaign?
- What issues did Justice@Smithfield raise?
- What strategies did Justice@Smithfield use to fight for workers' rights?
- What were Smithfield's responses to these issues? What were their responses to these strategies?
- What does this tell us about labor conditions in North Carolina? In the U.S.?
- How do labor conditions and labor rights connect to Human Rights?

Suggested Reading:

- Lynn Waltz, *Hog Wild: The Battle for Workers' Rights at the World's Largest Slaughterhouse* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2018).

Additional Resources:

- [El Pueblo Inc.](#)
- [The United Food and Commercial Workers International Union](#) (UFCW)

QUESTIONS?

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