



## TITLE

# ASIAN AMERICAN LABOR STORIES: AH QUON MCGRATH, LARRY ITLIONG, AND CHINESE RAILROAD WORKERS

GRADE LEVEL: HIGH SCHOOL

**DISCIPLINE:** U.S. History, Sociology

**TOPIC:** Historical overview of Asian American labor stories.

**STANDARDS:** Educating For American Democracy: Theme 5: History - Institutional and Social Transformation, How and why has the United States transformed its basic political, legal, economic, and social arrangements over time? Civics: How do laws and social structures change?

## OBJECTIVES:

### Students will be able to:

- Describe the achievements of Asian Americans, individually and collectively, to advance the cause of workers' rights which also strengthened the American labor movement.
- Describe the backstory for each of the people or groups and explain how they became activists for the cause of workers' rights.
- Assess the outcome of these individuals and groups in transforming how workers are seen in the history of the labor movement.

## ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS:

- What are some of the underlying conditions that prompt labor activists to seek change and reform in how workers are treated in American history?
- Why are some important figures not given their due for their contributions to the labor movement in American history?

## CLASSROOM HOURS NEEDED:

- 2 class periods

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### INTRODUCTION AND TEACHER NOTES:

It is fair to say that labor history in the K-12 curriculum is a theme that is underplayed, particularly when it comes to the role that minorities have played in advancing the working conditions of laborers: hours, pay, safety, health benefits, pensions, and more. In the telling of the stories of American workers, scant attention is paid to the advances brought by Asian Americans. The purpose of this lesson is to introduce three examples that illustrate the determination, courage, and ingenuity all of them brought to their work that made lives better for all Americans.

The basic “backstory” to each case study, given below, should be the takeaways for students from the lesson.

#### AH QUON MCGRATH (1915-2008):

Born to Chinese immigrants in Hawai'i, she lost her father at age four and was raised by her mother. She went to work in a pineapple cannery at 12 to help support her mother and 6 siblings. Overcoming her poverty, she went to the University of Hawaii and later signed up to support and organize the dockworkers in Hawai'i (International Longshore and Warehouse Union). Following a tsunami in 1946 that devastated Hilo on the island of Hawai'i, she became involved in a strike by 26,000 sugar plantation workers, lasting three months and shutting down 33 of 34 sugar plantations. She is to be remembered for much more, but her legacy, according to The Nation article cited in the Resources, is “[to] teach us now the importance of organizing across race, class, and gendered lines; embracing diversity as a strength instead of an impediment; and not being afraid to show our true political colors—no matter how much it makes the bosses or the media squirm.”

#### CHINESE RAILROAD WORKERS:

From 1865 to 1869, up to 20,000 Chinese worked on building the Transcontinental Railroad. While the presence of Chinese is often noted, their astounding achievements in clearing and grading land, building bridges and tunnels, and laying track under extreme conditions are little known. At the time of the completion of the Railroad, greater appreciation for their work was shown than what followed in the years after, to the point that at the commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the event in 1969, The Secretary of Transportation, John Volpe, said, “Who else but Americans could drill ten tunnels in mountains 30 feet deep in snow? Who else but Americans could chisel through miles of solid granite? Who else but Americans could have laid ten miles of track in 12 hours?” In 1882, the U.S. denied Chinese the right to enter the country and to become citizens. So, who was Scty. Volpe speaking about? One of the many overlooked pieces of history about the Railroad was that Chinese workers along a two-mile stretch walked away from their work on June 25th demanding higher wages. They were joined two days later by workers all along the line, marking the strike as the largest labor action in America to that point. The strike lasted one week, broken by dwindling rations, and yielding only modest gains for the workers in their working conditions but not in hours or wages. Today, there is new appreciation for their work and how their efforts transformed America.

**LARRY  
ITLIONG  
(1913-1977):**

Larry Itliong came to the U.S. in 1929 at the age of 15 and soon began working as a farm laborer and in salmon canneries in Alaska. Although his ambition was to become a lawyer, opportunities to further his education were lacking. Settling in Stockton, California, he recruited new members to the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee. In Delano, a few hours from Stockton, Filipino grape workers needed help and Itliong was asked to join them. On Sept. 7, 1965, he led more than 2,000 Filipino workers to go on strike. It has long been a practice to break strikes by pitting one group against another, and initially, farm owners sought to use Mexican workers to break the strike. However, Itliong reached out to Cesar Chavez and asked Mexican farmworkers to join them in the strike. After Chavez and another important labor organizer, Delores Huerta, met with the membership of the National Farm Workers Association, the union voted unanimously to join what became known as the Great Delano Grape Strike. A year later, the two unions merged into the United Farm Workers, marking the integration of two major ethnicities into one labor organization. The strike lasted five years with public and political support growing for the workers along the way. In the settlement in 1970, The United Farm Workers (UFW) gained increased pay, medical benefits, and protections against the use of toxic pesticides.

**ACTIVITY 1:**

**Icebreaker:** Ask the class if they have ever played Monopoly. (You can also hold up some Monopoly money and ask the class, “What is this?”) Explore with them the key goal of the game, what some of their experiences with it are, and what they may have learned from playing the game. Then, ask them what may be missing in this story about economics and making money: What of the workers, the laborers who make things? This may be the way to make the point in the “Introduction” above: that we view our economic history of capitalism mainly through the lens of how society produces wealth, but not enough through the eyes of those who do the actual work.

**ACTIVITY 2:**

Show students a collection of three images. Have students describe what they see in each image and say what they may know or deduce about the story behind them. (Use KWL process: see KWL Chart from Facing History and Ourselves.) Allow them to share ideas. This can be done as a class or in small groups. From the discussions should emerge some generalizations, common ideas, and findings about the history and economy of Hawaii, the building of the Transcontinental Railroad, and the Farmworkers strike in California in the 1960s. At this point, be sure to have students note the common theme of labor. (See the Resources section for information needed to provide sufficient background based on grade level being taught.) Students will complete the chart with what they’ve learned at the end of the lesson.

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**IMAGE 1: FEMALE WORKERS IN PINEAPPLE CANNING FACTORY, 1928**



NARA Pineapple Cannery 1928

**IMAGE 2: U.S. DEPARTMENT OF "HALL OF HONOR" CELEBRATION**



Photo courtesy of Ting-Yi Oei

**IMAGE 3: LARRY ITLIONG AND CESAR CHAVEZ**



*Farm worker movement marks Larry D. Itliong Day - UFW*

### ACTIVITY 3:

Assign groups to research the “backstory” for each of these three topics and link them to the individuals in the lesson: Ah Quon McGrath; the Chinese workers on the Transcontinental Railroad; and the Farm Workers Strike (Delano Grape Workers Strike). The Resources section organizes resources by the individuals. Several other images also shown can help students interpret the work that was involved in each case.



## RESOURCES:

[Ah Quon McElrath and the Power of Multiracial Working-Class Solidarity | The Nation](#)

[Hawai'i Labor History, Ah Quon McGrath](#)

[Lindsay Scnell, USA Today, Aug. 13, 2020 Hawaiian Women of the Century  
U.S. Department of Labor, 1930](#)

[The Employment of Women in the Pineapple Canneries of Hawaii](#)

[Larry Itliong Farm worker movement marks Larry D. Itliong Day - UFW  
Governor Jerry Brown signed the law creating Larry Itliong Day in 2015.](#)

[Folklife Magazine, Smithsonian Institution Why Every Filipino American  
Should Know about Larry Itliong | Folklife Magazine](#)

[Asian American Education Project  
Elementary Lesson 4: Filipino American Farmworkers Fight for Their Rights | Asian Americans  
Advancing Justice - LA National Archives, DocsTeach](#)

[National Archives, DocsTeach Robert F. Kennedy Statement on César Chávez | DocsTeach](#)

[Chinese Railroad Workers Stanford Railroad Project](#)

[Central Pacific Railroad Photographic History Museum  
Central Pacific Railroad Photographic History Museum Dot.Dot.Dot.,  
Golden Spike Ceremony - Transcontinental Railroad](#)

[Transcontinental Railroad - Construction, Competition & Impact - HISTORY  
U.S. Department of Labor, Hall of Honor, 2014, Inductee](#)

[Hall of Honor Inductee: The Chinese Railroad Workers | US Department of Labor](#)



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