

New York City “Newsies” Strike Against the World and Journal, 1899

Sources: www.fortunecity.com/meltingpot/offord/192/articles; *The New York Times, What We Saw, 1851-2001* by Kelly Delia, Jason Sarofsky, Christine Roblin and Jaimee Kahn

The July, 1899 strike of New York City newspaper delivery boys, the “Newsies,” is an excellent vehicle for teaching about the values and techniques of labor unions and social struggles against injustice in the industrial era. Their strike was a response to a decision by *The Evening World* and *The Evening Journal*, parts of the national Pulitzer and Hearst newspaper empires, to raise the wholesale price they charged street vendors. The “Newsies” organized and demanded that the original price be restored. When Pulitzer and Hearst refused, 300 boys went on strike. One boy was quoted as saying, “We’re here fer our rights an’ we will die defendin’em.” Eventually the strike spread to Harlem, Long Island City, Staten Island and Brooklyn in New York City; Newark, Jersey City, Plainfield, Trenton, Elizabeth, Paterson, and Asbury Park, New Jersey; Mount Vernon, Yonkers, Troy, and Rochester in New York State; and New Haven, Connecticut, Fall River, Massachusetts, and Providence, RI.

The strike lasted from July 18, 1899 through August 2, 1899. The publishers ultimately decided to offer the “Newsies” a compromise, which they accepted. The new higher price for the newspapers remained, but the companies agreed to buy back all unsold papers at a 100% refund. During their short strike, the “Newsies” demonstrated that workers, even children, could fight for rights against powerful employers and be successful.

Instructions:

1. Read each of the newspaper excerpts from the “Newsies” strike.
2. Write a brief summary of each article.
3. Make a chronological list of the events in the strike.
4. Write a sympathetic or critical newspaper editorial explaining the issues in the strike to your readers.

Newsies 1. “Newsboys Go On Strike” (*New York Daily Tribune*, July 21, 1899). About 300 newsboys decided not to sell “The Evening World” and “The Evening Journal,” and went on strike yesterday morning against an increase in the price of the papers from 50 cents a hundred copies to 70 cents. The boys say at the old price they were only able to make about 25 cents a day, and that the increase in the price to them would mean a loss of livelihood.

Early in the morning half a dozen small figures were grouped about their leader, “Jack” Sullivan. They comprised the members of the Arbitration Committee who had gone as a last resort to the papers to demand their rights. “Well, my brave men, what news?” The leader’s voice was husky as he put the question. “Its dis a way,” said Boots, the spokesman of the committee. “We went to de bloke wot sells de papers and we tells him dat its got to be two fer a cent or nuthin’. He says, ‘Wot are yer goin’ to do about it if yer don’t get ‘em?’ ‘Strike,’ sez I, and Monix, he puts in his oar and backs me up. The bloke sez ‘Go ahead and strike,’ and here we is. Dat’s all.” The recital brought a scowl to the leader’s face.

“They tink we’re cravens,” he said, “but we’ll show ‘em dat we aint. De time is overripe fer action. De cops won’t have not time fer us. What is de sense of de meetin’? Is it strike?” “Sure, Mike!” piped half a dozen voices. “Well, den, de strike is ordered. Der must be no half measures, my men. If you sees any one sellin’ de ‘Woild’ or ‘Joinal,’ swat ‘em.” “You mean swipe de papes?” “Sure tear ‘em up, trow ‘em in de river any ole ting. If der’s no funder bizness de mettin’s adjoined.”

Newsies 2. “Newsboys’ Strike Goes On” (*New York Daily Tribune*, July 22, 1899). There was a called meeting of the striking newsboys in Frankfort Street yesterday morning for the purpose of repeating their defiance of the boycotted newspapers and to arrange further means for carrying the strike to a successful issue. Grand Master Workman “Kid” Blink, alias “Mug Magee,” called the meeting to order, and, amid cheers spoke in past as follows: “Fr’en’s, Brudders and Feller Citerzens: We is united in a patriotic cause. The time has cum when we mus’ eder make a stan’ or be downtridden by the decypils of acrice and greed’ness. Dey wants it all, and when we cums to ‘em dey sez we must take the papes at der own price or leave ‘em. Dis ain’t no time to temporize. Is ye all still wid us in de cause?”

“Sure! Sure!” came from a chorus of throats. “Well, den,” continued the chairman, “we’ll go ahead wid de warfare, same as we done yistiday. Let no guilty man escape. Lay fer ‘em and give it to ‘em hot.”

As a result of the meeting many of the incidents of the preceding day were repeated yesterday. Whenever a boy appeared with the papers in his hand he was immediately surrounded and his stock was torn to shreds. The boys did not confine themselves to the street sellers, but in a number of cases attacked stands where papers are sold and made havoc with the extras which had been placed there.

Newsies 3. A Newsboys’ Meetin, (*New York Daily Tribune*, July 24, 1899). The striking newsboys will hold a meeting at 8 o’clock to-night in Irving Hall, Nos. 214 and 216 Broome Street, to discuss their grievances. . . . The boys expect to have a great time at the meeting, at which they say they hope “ter do” the newspapers with which they are at war. . . .

Four newsboys were arraigned . . . in the Centre Street police court yesterday morning, charged . . . with parading without the proper license. . . . Saturday afternoon they decided that the proper thing was a parade. They accordingly got about a hundred newsboys together, had some banners made, and started a parade up Park Row, past the offices of the offending papers, and down Frankfort Street. The police of the Oak Street station were informed of the parade, which made up in noise what it lacked in numbers, and told the leaders that it would have to disband. This they promised to do, and while the police were in sight, did so.

The minute they thought the officers back in the station house the line was again formed, the leaders issuing orders that if the police move in sight to “scatter.” Just as they were about to start the three officers ran around the corner and placed the four leaders under arrest.

Newsies 4. “‘Newsies’ Standing Fast” (*New York Daily Tribune*, July 26, 1899). There was no let up . . . in the newsboys’ strike yesterday, although the advice of the leader at the mass meeting, against violence, was generally followed. (T)he boys seem to be gaining confidence in the issue, and they declared yesterday that the opposition to their demands could not continue much longer. “Say, dem fellers ain’t printen’ papes fer der healt’,” said one of the urchins, “an’ I guess dey sees now dat wot we says goes. All t’ings comes to de blokes wot waits, an’ say, we’s good waiters, all right. I guess we’ll get wot we wants.”

“Kid” Blink was in a pacific frame of mind yesterday, and he was busy most of the day impressing is peaceful doctrines on some of the more riotously inclined strikers. “I’m t’inkin’ erbout callin’ a peace confrance,” he said, “same like what de boss what runs Rusher done. Say, how’s dat fer a skeme, hey? We’ll decide just how many uv de little fellers has er right to tackle one uv dem big scabs, an’ we’ll guff a lot erbout de use uv sticks an’ stones in de strike. Dat kind o’ t’ing don’t go no more in dis here strike. Dat’s wot I tol ‘em at de meetin’, an’ it goes!” . . .

Newsies 5. “‘Kid’ Blink Arrested” (*New York Daily Tribune*, July 28, 1899). “Kid” Blink was arrested last night and locked up on a charge of disorderly conduct. A crowd of boys was marching into Williams St., when the officers swooped down on them and took Blink to the Oak St. station. He was bailed out later, and came forth asserting that he would lead the strike with renewed bitterness. There was less sympathy for him than might have been expected, as the idea prevailed yesterday that he had accepted a bribe from one or both papers to put an end to the strike. He appeared in Park Row yesterday morning in a new suit of clothes, something that was not within memory of the oldest living newsboy. He was also said to have displayed a large roll of bills.

Newsies 6. “A Big Parade in Yonkers” (*New York Daily Tribune*, July 31, 1899). The newsboy strike of Westchester County, representing Yonkers, Mount Vernon, New-Rochelle and Mamaroneck, paraded through Yonkers last night. . . . The boys were accompanied by a brass band and a fife and drum corps. There was fully a thousand in line. . . . At Getty Square about two thousand citizens greeted them. Red lights flared and the sky rockets shot high in the air. The boys cheered and yelled themselves hoarse all along the line of march.

Newsies 7. “Newsboys’ Boycott Over” (*New York Daily Tribune*, August 1, 1899). The newsboy’ boycott against The Evening World and the Evening Journal seems to be at an end. Nearly every boy downtown is now handling the newspapers that were boycotted. The reason for the change, the boys say, is that they are permitted to make full returns.

The “Newsies” in Pictures (1899)



1. Describe the people in this picture.
2. Why do you think they are selling newspapers?
3. In your opinion, why would they be willing to go on strike against the newspaper companies?



1. Who are the children in this picture?
2. Where was this picture taken?
3. In your opinion, why was this picture taken there?



1. What is the boy in the picture doing?
2. Look at his face. What do you think he is thinking?
3. In your opinion, why did newspaper companies hire young boys to do this job?



1. How is the boy in this picture dressed?
2. Who do you think the man is? Why?
3. Imagine a “dialogue” between the boy and the man. What do you think they are saying to each other?

“Newsies” Project Ideas (This activity sheet and project ideas were developed by Rhonda Mormon, Carmelita Lopez, Melinda Melbourne, Maria Cruz and Stephanie Mitchell, participants in a Teaching American History Grant summer workshop)

1. Write and perform a play about the “Newsies” or write and illustrate a “big book.”
2. Rewrite the newspaper quotations of the “Newsies” in standard English and then translate them into a contemporary dialect.
3. Write a poem, song or “rap” about the “Newsies” Strike.