

5.4.1.1 - Human Trafficking: Enslaved Thai Garment Workers of El Monte

Note: This lesson has been revised from the original version which was completed in collaboration with the UCLA Asian American Studies Center. All lesson plan content is owned by The Asian American Education Project (AAEdu) and the UCLA Asian American Studies Center. Users agree to attribute this version to The Asian American Education Project.

Subject	U.S. History, Social Studies, Asian American and Pacific Islander Studies, English Language Arts
Grade Level(s)	6-12
Overview	Eighty Thai women and men were enslaved for years in a former apartment building in El Monte, California. Even after the discovery of the complex in 1995, they and their supporters had to fight for their freedom, immigration status, and damages from those responsible for their plight and exploitation in this horrific garment sweatshop. The bravery of the workers and creative legal and legislative advocacy led to a major victory for the workers and new laws to protect workers against sweatshops.
Standards Assessed	<p>College and Career-Readiness Anchor Standards: R: Reading, W: Writing, SL: Speaking & Listening, L: Language</p> <p>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.</p> <p>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.2: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.</p> <p>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.4: Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.</p> <p>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.6: Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.</p> <p>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.7: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.</p> <p>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.9: Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.</p> <p>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.</p> <p>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.</p> <p>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.</p> <p>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.5: Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.</p> <p>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.</p> <p>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.</p> <p>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.</p>

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CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.L.1: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.

National Standards for History:

Grades 9-12: 9.1A: Analyze the continued gap between poverty and the rising affluence of the middle class.

Grades 7-12: 10.2A: Examine the consequences of the shift of the labor force from manufacturing to service industries.

CALIFORNIA STATE STANDARDS:

ELA/Literacy:

Grades 6: RH.1, 2, 4; RI.6, 7; W.2, 2A-B, 4, 5; SL.1A, 1D, 2, 4; L.1

Grades 7-8: RH.1, 2, 4; RI.6; W.2, 2A-B, 4, 5; SL.1A, 1D, 2, 4; L.1

Grades 9-10: RH.1, 2, 4, 9; RI.6, 7; W.2, 2A-B, 4, 5; SL.1A, 1D, 2, 4; L.1

Grades 11-12: RH.1, 2, 4, 9; RI.6, 7; W.2, 2A-B, 4, 5; SL.1, 1A, 1C-D, 2, 4; L.1

Grades 9-12: IVC.4.1, V.C.2, V.E.2.2, V.E.2.3, V.E.3.4, V.E.5

Historical and Social Sciences Analysis Skills:

Historical Research, Evidence, and Point of View

1. Students distinguish valid arguments from fallacious arguments in historical interpretations.
2. Students identify bias and prejudice in historical interpretations.
3. Students evaluate major debates among historians concerning alternative interpretations of the past, including an analysis of authors' use of evidence and the distinctions between sound generalizations and misleading oversimplifications.

Ethnic Studies Values and Principles Alignment:

Ethnic Studies courses, teaching, and learning will:

4. Critique empire and its relationship to white supremacy, racism, patriarchy, and cisheteropatriarchy.
5. Challenge imperialist/colonial hegemonic beliefs and practices on the ideological, institutional, interpersonal, and internalized levels.
6. Connect ourselves to past and contemporary resistance movements that struggle for social justice on the global and local levels.
7. Conceptualize, imagine, and build new possibilities for post-imperial life that promotes collective narratives of transformative resistance, critical hope, and radical healing.

Learning Objectives

Students will:

1. Analyze how and why some immigrants are vulnerable to exploitation.
2. Identify and describe the push and pull factors of immigration.
3. Analyze and understand the pyramid structure set up by the garment industry to shield companies from legal responsibilities as they and their contractors exploited workers.
4. Identify the importance and role of solidarity in the garment workers' case in being successfully won.

Materials

1. [“Freeing Ourselves From Prison Sweatshops: Thai Garment Workers Speak Out” Essay](#)
2. [El Monte Sweatshop Article](#)
3. [El Monte Sweatshop Legacy Blog](#)
4. [El Monte Sweatshop Readings Worksheet](#)
5. [Garment Industry Pyramid Structure Worksheet](#)
6. [“Migration – Push & Pull Factors”](#)

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Discussion Questions:

1. What conditions, systems, and structures made the labor exploitation faced by the garment workers possible?
2. What are the various challenges that these garment workers faced, first in challenging the exploitation they faced and then in finding new jobs?
3. How did each of the various groups, organizations, and communities involved in the garment worker case contribute to the success of the lawsuit?

Vocabulary:¹

- **Exploitation:** a situation in which someone or entity treats another in an unfair way, especially in order to profit from their work
- **Migrant:** a person who moves from one place to another in order to find work or better living conditions
- **Solidarity:** joining or working together as one based on common interests or goals
- **Sweatshop:** a workplace, shop or factory in which employees work for long hours at low wages and under unhealthy conditions²
- **Work Permit:** an official government document required for someone to work in a foreign country

¹All definitions are adapted from the Oxford English Dictionary unless stated otherwise.

²Definition is adapted from Merriam-Webster Dictionary

Activity 1: Examining the Factors of Immigration

- A. Have students engage in a pair-share by discussing their responses to the following questions:
 1. Why might someone move from their home country to live somewhere new?
 2. What are the challenges of moving to a new place?
 3. Would you move to a new country to start a new life? What do you think would motivate you to do that (or not do that)?
 4. If you were going to move to another country, what are some issues you would need to consider before doing so?
- B. Select a couple students to share their answers for each question with the class. Highlight the challenges of learning a new language, obtaining documentation to live and work in the country, finding a job/school, finding housing, covering the cost of moving, leaving behind family, friends, possessions, etc.
- C. Have students read the text entitled, "[Migration – Push & Pull Factors](https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/articles/z2hptrd#zwsfn9q)" (or access at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/articles/z2hptrd#zwsfn9q>)
 1. Encourage students to underline anything that stands out to them and to write questions in the margins.
 2. Have students summarize the three things that resonated with them the most and share with a partner.
- D. Facilitate a discussion by asking the following questions:
 1. What is the difference between a push factor and a pull factor?
 2. Based on the reasons given for why someone might migrate to another country, when is migration forced and when is it voluntary? Explain your answer.
 3. Looking at the push and pull factors listed in the handout, do you think some reasons for migrating are more acceptable than others? Explain your answer.
 4. Migrating to a new country is difficult for many reasons, including restrictions that different countries have for accepting new immigrants. Why are such restrictions in place? Is it fair for foreign countries to make it hard for people to migrate? Why or why not?

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- E. Have students complete a quick-write reflecting on what they have learned and the difficulties immigrants may face, not only in migrating but in starting a new life in a new country.

Activity 2: Learning about the El Monte Sweatshop

- A. Divide students into groups of three. Distribute the worksheet entitled, "[El Monte Sweatshop Readings Worksheet](#)." Assign each student in the group to read one of the sources:
1. Student 1: "[Freeing Ourselves From Prison Sweatshops: Thai Garment Workers Speak Out](#)" [Essay](#)
 2. Student 2: [The El Monte Sweatshop Article](#)
 3. Student 3: [El Monte Sweatshop Legacy Blog Post](#)
- B. Have students discuss their assigned article with their partners. Have students discuss the following questions in their groups:
1. What were the push factors that led the Thai garment workers to migrate?
 2. What were the pull factors that led the Thai garment workers to migrate?
- C. Have students complete the worksheet entitled, "[El Monte Sweatshop Readings Worksheet](#)" by responding to the following questions:
1. Describe the workers who were held captive and working at the El Monte sweatshop.
 2. Describe the living and working conditions of the garment workers at El Monte
 3. How did the raid on El Monte and the subsequent lawsuit impact immigration laws?
 4. What was the impact of the El Monte raid and lawsuit on the Thai and Latinx garment workers?
 5. What were the consequences for the operators of the sweatshop and companies that contracted with El Monte?
- D. Facilitate a discussion by asking the [Discussion Questions](#).
- E. Have students watch the video entitled, "Threads of Freedom: The Case that Changed Labor Law in America." (*Video link coming soon.*)
- F. Facilitate a discussion about the video by asking the following questions:
1. What was life like for the Thai garment workers while they were held captive?
 2. What motivated Thai garment workers like Nantha Jaknang to speak out?
 3. How did the workers and their attorneys use the court system to change the laws protecting workers?
 4. What were the impacts of this case for labor justice?
 5. The video was created in 2025. What new information, changes, progress, etc. is reflected in the video? What has changed, what has stayed the same?
- G. Have students add additional information to the worksheet to address the following questions:
1. What new information did you learn from the video?
 2. How does the video corroborate the articles?
 3. How does the video contradict the articles (if at all)?
 4. How does the video add additional dimension to the text of the articles?
- H. Have students demonstrate their learning by completing one or both of the following activities:
1. Create a flyer celebrating the win in the El Monte case. Have students summarize the case and highlight its outcome and impact on workers.
 2. Write an op-ed about the El Monte case, highlighting the roles of the various groups involved and the case's impact.

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Activity 3: Examining Modern-Day Labor Exploitation

- A. Have students read and complete the worksheet entitled, "[Garment Industry Pyramid Structure.](#)"
- B. Facilitate a class discussion on the garment industry pyramid structure by asking the following questions:
1. Why are retailers the most publicly visible part of the pyramid structure? What is the impact of this visibility?
 2. What role do retailers play in the garment industry?
 3. What role did manufacturers play in the garment industry?
 4. What role do contractors play in the garment industry?
 5. What role do garment workers play in the garment industry?
 6. Why are garment workers the least publicly visible part of the pyramid structure? What is the impact of this invisibility? How does this make them vulnerable to exploitation?
- C. Have students write an essay about a current or recent case of labor exploitation. Have them conduct research and include the following components in their essays:
1. **Summary:** What happened or is happening in the example you selected?
 2. **Impact:**
 - Who are the workers involved? What makes them vulnerable to exploitative working conditions?
 - Was anyone else impacted? If yes, who and how?
 3. **Responsibility:**
 - In your modern-day example, who is responsible? Consider the power they have. (*In the El Monte case, the companies and contractors were found responsible.*)
 - How and/or why is labor exploitation possible in this situation? (*Revisit and think about the garment industry pyramid structure reading for reference.*)
 4. **Solution & Accountability:**
 - How can labor exploitation be stopped and prevented from happening again?
 - How can those responsible for the exploitation be held accountable?
 - How does your proposed solution and accountability method address and take the workers' needs and experiences into account?
- D. Have students share their essays in small groups. Have students compare and contrast their researched examples with the El Monte case. Facilitate a discussion by asking the following questions:
1. How is the case you researched similar to the El Monte case?
 2. How is the case you researched different from the El Monte case?
 3. In what ways (if at all) did the El Monte case impact workers in the case you researched?

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Resources:

Primary Sources from this case are available from the Smithsonian National Museum of American History:

- El Monte Sweatshop: Operation, Raid, and Legacy
<https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/object-groups/el-monte-sweatshop>
- Between a Rock and a Hard Place: A History of American Sweatshops, 1820–Present
<https://americanhistory.si.edu/explore/exhibitions/sweatshops>

Liebold, Peter. 25 Years Later: The Legacy of the El Monte Sweatshop Raid, National Museum of American History. 31 July 2020.

<https://americanhistory.si.edu/explore/stories/25-years-later-legacy-el-monte-sweatshop-raid> . Web.

Accessed 23 July 2025.

“Migration – Push and Pull Factors”, BBC Bitesize.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/articles/z2hptrd#zwsfn9q> . Web. Accessed 23 July 2025.

Su, Julie. *Freeing Ourselves From Prison Sweatshops: Thai Garment Workers Speak Out*. The Asian American Education Project.

<https://asianamericanedu.org/freeing-ourselves-from-prison-sweatshops-thai-garment-workers-speak-out.pdf>.

Web.