Working-Class Studies In The Writing Classroom

Sample assignments and related activities

Introduction: What is work?

Discussion starter activity:
Students select one (from 4 or 5) quotes about writing and write a response to it.

(Example: "The labor of a human being is not a commodity or article of commerce. You can't weigh the soul of a man with a bar of pig iron." Samuel Gompers)

Students form groups based on quotes selected where they introduce themselves, discuss the quote and their responses. Then class regroups and briefly discusses quotes.

Activity: View first 15 minutes of Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*
    How has work changed since this film?
    How is it the same?

What do we mean by "work ethic"?
    What do you think of the Little Tramp's work ethic?

Activity: Read "What Work Is" (poem, Philip Levine, text)
    What's the speaker's attitude about work? His brother's?
    Contrast with Gompers' quote.

Assignment 1: Write an essay about work you've done
(work reflection essay: link this to a reading)

Activity: list all the work you've done, paid or unpaid, (chores when you were a child, babysitting/paper route, jobs for money)
second step: select one
Lab activity: do looping activity ala Peter Elbow

Read: "The Inheritance of Tools" (essay, Scott Russell Sanders, text)
Read: "Working at McDonald's" (argument, Amitai Etzioni, text)
Read: Worker profiles (Center for Working Class Studies website)
Read: "Serving in Florida" (book excerpt, Barbara Ehrenreich, text)

Show them:
"Short Order Cook" (poem, Jim Daniels, *For a Living: The Poetry of Work*, p. 116, overhead)
"Learning to See in the Dark" (instructor's own work essay, overhead)

Assignment 2: Write a researched essay on an issue of the contemporary workplace or on some aspect of the history of work in America
(require students to integrate a key idea from readings)

Select a topic (I would present them with a list and also allow them to argue for an idea of their own)

Use Maag and Ohio Historical Society archives at Steel Museum
(free admission to archives)
Orient students to archival research
Activity: view OHS website; show them research agreement and flyer (overhead)

Input: overview of history of work in America
(view photos by Lewis W. Hine "Child Labor in America 1908-1912"www.historyplace.com/unitedstates/childlabor/)

Read: "Shirt" (poem, Robert Pinsky, text)
(View *Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire* www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire/)
Read: excerpt from *Communist Manifesto* (Karl Marx, text)
Read: "Tip Jars and the New Economy" (Dalton Conley, text)
Read: "Living Wage Fight Goes On" (argument, Molly Ivins, text)
Read: "Social Responsibility of Business and Labor" (Milton Friedman, text)

View (and assign another perspective from) *The Minimum Wage: Information, Opinions, Research* website
[site designed by a retired English professor; site presents "facets of and opposing views about the minimum wage"]. Search on title to locate site.

View movie: *Fast Food Women* (35 mins. Appalshop)

View "Youngstown" (song, Bruce Springsteen, youtube.com)
Read: chapter 1 or 2, "Steel Town" in *SteelTown USA* (on reserve)

Read: "The Incredible Shrinking City" (CNN article, April 14, 2008)
http://money.cnn.com/2008/04/08/real_estate/radical_city_plan/index.htm?cnn=yes

Assignment 3: Write about work you want to do

Students research their career choices and interview both a senior major in their field and an actual worker with their career choice

Revisit first essay and reflect on it in light of our readings:
What do you want from work?
Discussion starter: view: scene from film *The Efficiency Expert*

Read: "A&P" (short story, John Updike, text)
Show them: "Becoming a Nurse" (poem, Jeanne Bryner, *Tenderly Lift Me*, p.91, power point

Read: "Pie in the Sky" (Bill McKibben, text)
Show them: *Material World* (Peter Menzel et al)
(photographs of possessions of people from various countries)

Input: who's getting hired to do what these days? (need career forecast data)
Input: conducting an interview (create a handout)
Resource: YSU's Career Services (resources on website; 941-32515)

Read: "Beyond the Information Revolution" (Peter F. Drucker, text)

Midterm in-class writing

Assign reading "Serve or Fail" (Dave Eggers, text)
Write an essay that agrees or disagrees with Eggers' argument