Activity: Relief or Control? Red Cross Policy and Labor in the 1927 Flood

Length: 100–120 minutes
High School

Present these definitions:

Voluntary labor: A person freely chooses to work and can refuse or leave.

Coerced labor: Pressure, threats, deprivation, confinement, or lack of meaningful choice are used to obtain labor.

Peonage: A system in which a person is compelled to work to satisfy a debt or obligation and cannot freely leave.

Then tell them:

Your job today is not to decide whether every flood camp operated the same way. Your job is to examine evidence about how relief, labor, and freedom became entangled during the 1927 flood.

That keeps the activity historically responsible and avoids making the entire flood experience into a single horrifying narrative.

Central question:
When does disaster relief become a system of control rather than assistance?

The activity would examine refugee-camp rules, labor expectations, mobility restrictions, plantation interests, and Red Cross relief policies through short primary-source excerpts. The emphasis is on institutional decisions and ethical tradeoffs, not on traumatic detail.

Learning goals

Students will be able to:

- distinguish relief policy from labor control
- identify how race, class, and plantation economics shaped disaster response
- evaluate Red Cross and local authority decisions using evidence
- recognize the difference between voluntary labor, coerced labor, and peonage
- compare official relief narratives with Black press and NAACP accounts
- discuss how disaster policy can reproduce pre-existing inequality

Suggested 120-minute structure

1. Opening scenario — 10 minutes

Give students this situation:

It is May 1927. Thousands of people have been displaced by flooding. Refugee camps need food distribution, sanitation, levee repair, cooking, transport, and cleanup. Local plantation owners argue that workers must remain nearby so agriculture can resume after the flood. Relief officials need labor to keep camps functioning. Many refugees want the freedom to leave.

Ask students individually: Decide on their role in the context of the flood. Consultant, Will Percy, banker, mayor, camp leader/organizer.

What three principles should guide camp policy? (use current values so that we don't perpetuate racism in the classroom). Then using the evidence from the archives point out racism.

Examples: safety, freedom of movement, equal treatment, efficient relief, compensation for labor, control of labor, local economic recovery|rebuild economy, economic efficiency, organize transportation, labor workshops, Location of camps, clean water sanitation; self-sufficiency, blind relief, classified workers, pay – equal, bonuses, share of the crop. One person to highlight is LeRoy Percy's and his focus on painting the south in good light and as not backwards; wanting to appease the white population especially the planters, wanting to control Black people, maintain connections, and turn a profit to improve the wealth and living conditions.

If the students are interested ,you can bring in "segmented labor market theory." Here is a bit of information on that subject: Segmented labor market theory argues that workers do not all compete in one open labor market. Instead, labor is divided into different segments with unequal wages, security, mobility, and power. A "primary" segment typically offers more stable work, better pay, and greater opportunity, while a "secondary" segment consists of lower-paid, less secure, and more easily controlled labor. The 1927 Mississippi River flood exposed this structure clearly in the Delta, where many Black sharecroppers, tenant farmers, and plantation laborers occupied a highly constrained labor segment shaped by Jim Crow laws, debt, racial discrimination, and dependence on white landowners. During and after the flood, these inequalities affected who could evacuate, who was expected to perform levee or camp labor, and who was free to leave the region. The disaster therefore revealed that vulnerability was not only environmental but also economic and institutional. For some Black workers, migration after the flood represented not simply an escape from flood damage, but an opportunity to leave a labor system that limited mobility and economic independence, helping connect the flood to broader patterns of the Great Migration.

The flood therefore did more than reveal racial inequality; it exposed how the labor system itself structured disaster vulnerability. For many Black workers, migration after the flood was not simply flight from water—it was also an attempt to leave a segmented labor market that offered little economic freedom or mobility. This helps connect the flood to the broader Great Migration.

Then have pairs compare priorities or do this socratically in front of class writing on board. This gets them thinking before they encounter the historical documents.

Discussion: 10 minutes – what were the three principles you chose? How did your discussion with your partner change your view of the principles you chose?

2. Four-source document rotation — 40 minutes

Give groups of four or five one of four short excerpts, ideally one page each.

If the students are working at a high level, have them pull this themselves from the archives. www.Loc.gov; https://about.proquest.com/en/products-services/histnews-bn/

Source A: Red Cross or official relief policy
Focus on camp organization, food, sanitation, labor expectations, or administration.

Source B: Black newspaper coverage (https://www.npr.org/transcripts/841997647, https://64parishes.org/louisiana-and-the-defender, https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/great-mississippi-river-flood-1927,) For example, reporting on refugees being prevented from leaving, labor gangs, or unequal relief.

Source C: NAACP/Walter White material
Focus on peonage, mobility restrictions, and complaints about camp treatment. (The crisis) https://blackpast.org/african-american-history/mississippi-river-great-flood-1927/ Blackpast.org – not a primary source but can be used to find primary source materials and keywords.

Source D: Planter/local official perspective
Focus on the argument that agricultural labor had to remain in the Delta for economic recovery. https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/neworleans-james-butler-and-flood-1927/

Other info: Daisy Green – Education during the flood; Coolidge's speech to red cross (Coolidgescholars.org); Washington Tribune Dec 1927.

For each document, students complete only four questions and the class will have a collection of answers to these questions via four sources. (This activity keeps the reading analytical rather than emotionally overwhelming).

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1. What problem does this source think needs to be solved?
2. Who has decision-making power?
3. What does the source assume about Black laborers/refugees?
4. What policy would this source probably support?

3. Policy Board Challenge — 20 minutes

Continue with groups of 4-5 students and give each group a hypothetical 1927 Refugee Camp Policy Board. Give them six proposed rules:

1. Refugees may leave camp whenever transportation is available.
2. All able-bodied adults must perform camp work in exchange for relief.
3. Essential camp labor must be paid.
4. Plantation owners may request the return of their workers.
5. No refugee may be returned to an employer without consent.
6. Food and relief are provided regardless of willingness to work.

Have each group classify each rule: Adopt / Modify / Reject. For every choice they must cite one historical source. Then add one constraint: The camp has insufficient paid staff, thousands of displaced residents, damaged infrastructure, and intense pressure from local landowners to preserve the agricultural labor force. Ask them to revise one decision. This forces them to confront the tension between emergency efficiency and civil rights.

4. Whole-class discussion — 15 minutes

Put three questions on the board:

1. Was the central problem unequal relief, forced labor, restricted mobility, or all three?

2. At what point does requiring work during an emergency become coercion?

3. Could the Red Cross provide “neutral” disaster relief inside a society structured by racial and economic inequality?

5. Exit ticket — 5 minutes

Ask: Write one sentence completing each statement:

The Red Cross faced a legitimate problem when…
The policy became ethically problematic when…
One lesson for modern disaster response is…

That tends to produce nuanced answers rather than a simple “good people/bad people” interpretation.