

Name _____



Unfair Wages

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, John Steinbeck shows how big businesses and capitalism affected poor workers during the Great Depression. The Joad family, like many others, lost their farm because they couldn't pay their debts. Large banks took their land and forced them to leave. With nowhere else to go, the Joads set off for California, hoping to find work.

When they arrived in California, they saw how big business controlled the farms. Wealthy landowners hired too many workers, making it difficult for any one person to earn a fair wage. Because so many families were desperate for work, the farm owners paid workers very little—sometimes just a few cents a day. If one worker refused to work for such low pay, there were hundreds of others willing to take the job. This allowed the landowners to keep wages unfairly low.

To make things worse, the farm owners used a system called "scrip" to control the workers. Instead of paying them in money, they gave them scrip—special coupons that could only be used at farm stores. The store owners raised prices, knowing that the workers had no choice but to buy food and supplies from them. This trapped the workers in a cycle of poverty.

Jim Casy, a former preacher and a friend of Tom Joad, understood this problem. He believed that workers needed to join together and demand fair wages. He tried to organize the workers so they could fight for better conditions. However, the farm owners and the police did not want workers to stand up for themselves. When Casy tried to help, he was killed.

Steinbeck's novel shows how capitalism, while allowing businesses to grow, can also lead to the unfair treatment of workers. The landowners only cared about making money, while poor workers like the Joads suffered. The book asks important questions about fairness: Should businesses be able to pay workers as little as they want? How can workers fight for better treatment? *The Grapes of Wrath* makes readers think about what happens when big businesses have too much power and how that affects people who just want to survive.