Lesson ideas for geography teachers to share: American Factory on Netflix

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American Factory is a film on Netflix. It has already won an Academy Award, the Sundance Film Festival Directing Award for US Film Documentary and an Oscar for Best Documentary Feature.

Described as ‘Gripping’ by the New York Times and ‘one of the most fascinating US documentaries released this decade’ by Cinema Scope, it has 18 awards and a further 44 nominations for the remainder of 2020, one of which is for the BAFTA for Best Documentary in July. The film is directed by Stephen Bognar and Julia Reichert and was ‘optioned’ and produced by Michelle and Barack Obama under their production company Higher Ground Productions.

It is an excellent, thought provoking watch for any student interested in geopolitics, superpower geography, the ‘rise of China’, globalisation, deindustrialisation, inequality and the role of manufacturing in an economy.
Stream the film and answer the questions below.

1. When the GM plant closed in Dayton, Ohio, how many people lost their jobs?
2. What did the Chinese company, the Fuyao group, do on 7 October 2010?
3. When touring the factory floor (13:20) what is said about American workers?
4. How much was Shawnea earning as a glass inspector?
5. When Dave Burrows, the VP of the Fuyao factory, addresses the new Chinese arrivals (27:40) what does he say about the Chinese investment?
6. What does the chairman say about production in America (38:20)?
7. In the Fuyao headquarters in Fuqing, Fujian Province China, what conflict of interest do you notice in Shimeng when he explains his multiple roles for the company?
8. After the worker displaying the union sign is escorted off site, what is said in the next scene in a meeting about overtime (1:18:25)?
9. What does the Chinese furnace engineer Wong He say about the presumptions he had about Americans before arriving in Ohio (1:20:00)?
10. What do the UAW union achieve for the workers at Fuyao?
11. What does the consultant from Labors Relations Institute (LRI) say (1:28:50)?
12. How much did Fuyao pay LRI to keep workers from organising a union at the factory?
13. What is the old saying that furnace engineer Wong He recites when explaining why you can’t have an employer and a union (1:34:55)?
14. What is being explained when a Chinese manager says ‘automatisation means standardisation’ to chairman Cao regarding the encapsulation line (1:43:30)?
15. Globally how many people will need to find ‘entirely new kinds of jobs by 2050 because of automation’?

Suggested further work
