# The Singing Strike and the Rebel Students

## Learning from the Industrial Workers of the World

*By Bill Bigelow*

One morning in the spring of 1989, Jefferson High School English teacher Ruthann Hartley burst into my classroom waving a copy of *Willamette Week*, Portland's entertainment and aimless-muckraking newspaper. "Have you seen this? I can't believe it," she announced to my co-teacher, Linda Christensen, and me. The damage was done. Our Literature and U.S. History class had been discussing Tess Slesinger's short story "The Mousetrap," a tale of strikebreaking and sexual harassment, but the interruption broke the mood. Kids were dying to know the big deal about *Willamette Week*. "The Mousetrap" would have to wait.

In big, gold letters the paper's headline read, "Are We Losing Jefferson?" Ruthann handed me the paper, and I began reading to students. A line on the first page compared the halls of our school to the streets of "Miami Vice." The writer had interviewed both Linda and me for the story but never set foot in Jefferson. Nonetheless, in a manner worthy of the *National Enquirer*, this fellow painted a convincing portrait of fear and loathing: young gangsters stalking the halls, student dancers dodging bullets as they returned from field trips, teachers cowering in their classrooms. Pretty grim stuff. Indeed Jefferson had weathered a couple of hard years, with declining enrollments and increased gang violence in the neighborhood, though not in the school itself. But "Miami Vice"?

The article angered Linda and me. The writer had trimmed our quotes and inserted them in ways that seemed to support his dire conclusions—one more media slam, offered with mock sympathy. We were angry, but the kids were outraged. To them the article was a personal attack, racist and mean-spirited, another unwarranted assault on the most multiracial high school in the state.

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*Joe Hill, poet and songwriter of the Industrial Workers of the World.*

Without prompting from Linda and me, the students convened a meeting. They "canceled" class for several days, instead turning our two-period block into organizing sessions of strategy and tactics. They invited students from other classes to join them and came and went as they needed. Not once did they ask our permission; nor did we try to stop them. Their action plan called for a series of schoolwide demonstrations culminating in a march on *Willamette Week* and a rally on the riverfront that would, in the vitality of its racial diversity, offer a visible contradiction to the paper's smears. They even successfully pressured the principal to provide buses for carrying students to and from the march downtown.

Linda and I watched. From start to finish it was the students' show. The kids did make some mistakes and failed to think through some of their objectives. For instance, they weren't clear on precisely what they demanded of *Willamette Week,* or even whether *Willamette Week* was their target. Although students acknowledged the worsening violence in the neighborhood, and called on the media to quit scapegoating Jefferson, who or what *did* they hold responsible, and what did they want done? Still, their efforts represented an extraordinary explosion of creativity, collective defiance, and courage.

## Not-So-Sudden Outburst

This sudden outburst of student activism was, in fact, not so sudden. Over the year, Linda's and my class focused on issues of social justice and resistance—ours was a "talk back" curriculum. We wanted students to feel themselves part of an American, even international, tradition of struggle against oppression. From Taíno Indian resistance against Columbus and Spanish colonialism, to Shays' Rebellion of poor farmers after the American Revolution, to the Abolition movement, to our most recent unit on the U.S. labor movement, we hoped students would draw inspiration and wisdom from the past. Linda and I thought they ought to know that if they act against injustice, they're in good company. "History is not just stories about dead people," we told them the first day of class. "History should be of use." Through role plays, simulations, improvisations, class discussions, and assignments of imaginative and personal writing, we tried to encourage critical thought and student initiative.

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In brief, this was the pedagogical context that may have provoked students' response to *Willamette Week's* attack—not to mention that this was an extraordinarily talented, big-hearted group of young people. But a role play students had just completed on the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and the 1912 Lawrence, Massachusetts, textile strike—"the singing strike"—shaped the specific form of student actions.

## Lawrence, 1912

The role play, described in detail in *The Power in Our Hands: A Curriculum on the History of Work and Workers in the United States* by Norm Diamond and me [and included at the www.zinnedproject.org website], prompts students to imagine themselves as IWW organizers during the Lawrence strike and poses a series of problems faced by the actual strikers. The immediate issue was a pay cut forced on workers and a speed-up—"murder on the installment plan," according to one IWW leaflet. The average life expectancy for a spinner in the mills was 36 years; for an average lawyer or clergyman, 65 years: a difference of 29 years of life. To inhibit solidarity, owners had intentionally recruited workers from as many different language groups as they could find—and *over*-recruited to insure plentiful, and hence cheap, workers. By 1912, the citywide mill workforce of 30,000 or more consisted mostly of young women drawn from some 25 different ethnic groups.

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*The Lawrence strikers faced many kinds of resistance, including a barricade of armed militia surrounding the textile mills.*

In the role play, students must not only devise winning—and unifying—tactics, but also wage their struggle in a way that contributes to the broader democratic social objectives of the IWW. Their written role reminds them that "the goal of the IWW is not only for higher wages or shorter hours, but to change the whole society. Workplaces and all of society should be run by the people who produce, the people who do the work." Writes one historian, Meredith Tax, the IWW, or "Wobblies" as they were nicknamed, "knew that a strike is like a school for workers, a space of time where they can develop their understanding and abilities in practice." Once students understand the aims of the IWW, the class becomes a committee of the whole and confronts a series of problems on its own. The teacher doesn't leave the classroom, but neither does s/he help out if people run into difficulties or get upset with each other. This independence often startles students, but also invigorates them as they realize that they control the activity. Just like in the real strike, participants are on their own.

That year, Linda and I introduced a new twist. We'd found a Joe Glazer album, *Songs of Joe Hill*—Joe Hill being the most prolific and well-known Wobbly troubadour. I hadn't had the greatest luck using folk music in the classroom—"Do you actually like this stuff, Bigelow? You don't listen to it at home, do you?"—so I didn't know how students would react. But Joe Hill's lyrics are clever, many of the songs sharp and funny, and Glazer delivers them with gusto; Linda and I hoped the music would help get kids in a feisty IWW spirit. The point wasn't to "assign" the music but to let students punctuate their deliberations with song whenever the mood struck or when they needed the tonic of a sing-along. We'd copied words of several songs and distributed them. Before removing ourselves from the activity, we played "Casey Jones—The Union Scab." In the song, engineer Casey refuses to honor Southern Pacific workers' strike call, crashes his train into a bunch of rail ties piled across the track, and hits "the river with an awful crack." In the end, the Angels Union #23 expels Casey from heaven when he scabs on the musicians:

*They said it wasn't fair,*
*For Casey Jones to go around a-scabbing*
*everywhere.*

To my surprise, students loved the song's pointed playfulness and seemed eager to hear more. I told them it was up to them: whenever they felt they needed the inspiration of song, or merely a break from discussion, they could put on the music. As with the entire strike deliberations, the power was in their hands.

## The Singing Strike

We didn't want to tell students how to conduct the strike before they had a chance to confront the issues themselves, but we did hope to underscore the potential use of song in their meetings. So before turning the class over to them, we read an excerpt from an article called "The Revolutionary Strike," which was published in the *American Magazine* in 1912 by the journalist Ray Stannard Baker:

> *This movement in Lawrence was strongly a singing movement. It is the first strike I ever saw which sang. I shall not soon forget the curious lift, the strange sudden fire of the mingled nationalities at the strike meetings when they broke into the universal language of song. And not only at the meetings did they sing, but at the soup houses and in the streets. I saw one group of women strikers, who were peeling potatoes at a relief station, suddenly break into the swing of "The Internationale":*

*Arise, ye prisoners of starvation!*
*Arise, ye wretched of the earth,*
*For justice thunders condemnation,*
*A better world's in birth*
*No more tradition's chains shall bind us,*
*Arise, ye slaves! no more in thrall!*
*The earth shall rise on new foundations,*
*We have been naught, we shall be all ...*
*'Tis the final conflict,*
*Let each stand in his place,*
*The Industrial Union*
*Shall be the human race.*

OK, so students might not have understood every nuance, but they got the general idea.

In the role play, participants face a dual chore: figure out how to conduct their discussion democratically, with a minimum of rancor, *and* make some difficult choices about how to run the strike. In the first of two rounds of decision-making, students-as-strikers discuss the kind of organizational structure to build (large meetings? elected representatives? rotating leadership?); how meetings should be run, and by whom; how to keep strikers unified; whether to allow women to engage in potentially dangerous strike duties; and whether to allow "illegal immigrants" to participate. Some of these are tough issues, and frustrated students often begin to bicker.

As they struggled to devise a process to make decisions and then as they began to zig and zag through the questions, the tension level crept upward. Linda and I, true to our word, watched and took notes, but refused to intervene. But this year students had songs, and a couple of people suggested they take a break and play one or two. Their favorite became an easy sing-along called "Scissor Bill," about workers who refuse to organize and claim they're satisfied with the hope of heaven and whatever crumbs the boss offers. The chorus:

*Scissor Bill, he is a little dippy,*
*Scissor Bill, he has a funny face.*
*Scissor Bill should drown in Mississippi,*
*He is the missing link that Darwin tried to*
*trace.*

Whereas the Lawrence 1912 role play could offer only classroom doses of the pain and fear, solidarity and jubilation of the actual strike, students' singing played much the same function it must have during the original struggle. The joined voices melted differences, if only momentarily. The melodies massaged knots of tension out of the group. And the words reminded students-as-workers of their broader goals of industrial democracy and their shared contempt for the notion that, as Joe Hill wrote in "The Preacher and the Slave," "You'll get pie in the sky when you die."

Students returned to their deliberations after the songs, apparently refreshed and ready to continue.

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The first day of their classroom coup, following the *Willamette Week* reading, saw a blizzard of student activity. Teams fanned out to other classrooms to announce a noon rally, others wrote speeches and made posters. Two people with access to cars drove around Portland hijacking over a thousand copies of *Willamette Week*—a free paper—so every student in school could have a personal edition to read over and over and get madder and madder. The rally was a great success, at least in terms of fanning the flames of discontent by reminding students of the pattern of media racial bias and scapegoating of Jefferson. Several hundred students and teachers crowded around Thomas Jefferson's statue in back of the school, and listened to the impassioned speeches our students had written just hours before. Later, students said they didn't want to ask our permission for any of this, because they feared if we were involved we might "get in trouble."

For us, it was a calculated gamble. Could our students be trusted not to create an incident that might tarnish Jefferson's reputation further? Was there a possibility that someone could be hurt? Certainly we could have intervened, and stopped or redirected their efforts. Perhaps we should have urged them to consider some of the questions we felt they'd neglected. At one of their noon rallies, a teacher in another department angrily confronted Linda and me, saying these demonstrations could "get out of hand," and we should "rein in" our students. Why didn't we? It's likely that, as with our students, we too had our consciousness raised through the Lawrence role play. Their imaginative experiments in self-management were inspiring, and had convinced us that the kids could make good choices. And when they didn't, hopefully they'd learn from their mistakes. What lesson would have been imparted had we decided to "rein in" their organizing? Reminiscing recently with Keely, one of our ex-students, she said, "After everything you'd tried to teach us in that class, you couldn't have stopped us; it would have been hypocritical. And after what we'd learned, it would have been hypocritical for us to have asked permission."

*"History is not just stories about dead people," we told the students. "History should be of use."*

## Real-world Situation

The second day was a little rougher. The euphoria had waned a bit and students began to puzzle and then argue over what to do next. Remembering Lawrence, someone suggested it might be time for a song. They didn't know any rousing "let's stick together" kinds of songs, so they dug up *Songs of Joe Hill* and sang "Scissor Bill." For me, it was a golden moment in which students directly translated "school" knowledge to a real-world situation. Definitely one of the highlights of my teaching career. It was as if the Lawrence role play left them with the sense that, "Hey, we united 30,000 workers from 25 different ethnic groups and defeated the mill owners; surely we can organize a few demonstrations around town."

Another memorable time that week came as the buses lined up on North Kerby Avenue, in front of the school, waiting to take students downtown for their march and rally. The kids had devised a clever system of color-coded tickets to insure that buses would not be overcrowded and could be loaded as efficiently as possible. Angie, one of the two young women placed in charge of this operation, was someone who had spoken very little in class during the year. In papers, she had written about not feeling that she was very "smart." Now, there stood Angie in front of the buses with a battery-powered bull horn (where'd *that* come from?) strapped over her shoulder. Sunglasses propped on her head, pointing to people and calling out directions, she was the picture of self-assurance. Teachers and administrators milled about, present but superfluous.

Later, as their march snaked through downtown Portland, students halted in front of the *Willamette Week* building. A number of them went inside and demanded that the writer of the offending article, as well as the paper's editor, come outside to answer students' questions. The journalists refused, and instead offered to meet with three or four students inside the office. Kids' reply to the proposal echoed the IWW response to Lawrence mill owners some 80 years earlier. As someone from our class later told me, "We said to them, 'We know that divide and conquer trick. You can meet with all of us or none of us.'"

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Keely remembers that after those events, "We felt we could accomplish anything." Perhaps not wanting to diminish the significance of their triumph, Linda and I didn't push as hard as we should have for a rigorous evaluation. Students had proven themselves able tacticians and dazzling orators, but the larger political questions eluded them. What were their demands? What was wrong (with the school, the media, the city, the country?) and what did they want changed? The demonstration at Waterfront Park featured raps against gang violence, speeches urging that people not be judged by the color of their skin, and songs pleading that "All we are saying is give Jeff a chance." At times the gathering felt more like a Jefferson Democrats pep assembly ("Here we go, Demos, here we go!") than a demonstration. It was a joyful celebration of school pride and racial unity, but an observer would have puzzled over just what the kids were asking for.

True, students lacked clarity; and sensing their exhaustion, Linda and I failed to insist on a needed debriefing of the week's successes and limitations. (Although in a follow-up session the principal did show up to congratulate students and, as Keely put it, "to make sure we were done.") Nonetheless, from this experience at least some people came to feel that they "could accomplish anything"—and that's a big deal.

What happened that year reaffirmed my belief that those old Wobbly traditions hold some important lessons for teachers—that good teaching is not so different from good organizing. In an activity leading up to the Lawrence role play, we ask students to reflect on a quote by Eugene Debs, one of the founders of the IWW:

> *Too long have the workers of the world waited for some Moses to lead them out of bondage. He has not come; he never will come. I would not lead you out if I could; for if you could be led out, you could be led back again. I would have you make up your minds that there is nothing that you cannot do for yourselves.*

That year we began to get it right. We didn't just announce, "Henceforth the class will be a democracy." But through reading, discussion, role play, and song in the context of an academically rigorous year-long social justice curriculum, we started to let go. And students began to learn from their own experience "that there is nothing that you cannot do for yourselves." ■

**Bill Bigelow** (bill@rethinkingschools.org) is the curriculum editor of *Rethinking Schools* magazine.

This article was previously published in *Rethinking Schools* magazine. To order back issues of the magazine or to subscribe, visit www.rethinkingschools.org or call 800-669-4192.

# The IWW's Ambiguous Legacy

The songs of Joe Hill and the IWW provide inspiration but also offer a window into some of the contradictions in IWW thought. A few years ago, one of my former students, Holly Allen, sent me a paper she wrote which describes the ironic and ambiguous legacy of the relationship between women and the Industrial Workers of the World. Allen points out that Wobblies in Washington state, for example, criticized Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, the most prominent woman IWW organizer, for speaking in public while pregnant. They claimed such behavior was indecent. IWW members simultaneously disapproved of Flynn's efforts to crack traditional gender roles and, in song, romanticized her as a working-class heroine. In "The Rebel Girl," also included on Glazer's album, Joe Hill pays tribute to Elizabeth Gurley Flynn:

*That's the Rebel Girl!*
*To the working class she's a precious pearl.*
*She brings courage, pride and joy*
*To the fighting rebel boy ...*
*For it's great to fight for freedom,*
*With a Rebel Girl.*

and closes with:

*Yes, her hands may be hardened from labor,*
*And her dress may not be very fine,*
*But her heart in her bosom is beating,*
*That is true to her class and her kind ...*
*For the only and thoroughbred lady*
*Is the Rebel Girl.*

(The Rebel Girl may be a thoroughbred lady, but she better keep her pregnant self out of sight.)

In many respects, it's a wonderful song that fundamentally challenges upper-class definitions of femininity. But the lyrics still affirm a distinct "ladyhood," albeit a more defiant working-class version. Students didn't play the song in class, but it was probably a mistake on my part not to direct their attention to it after the role play. I wanted them to draw inspiration from the songs, but not uncritically. The Lawrence strikers were predominantly young women and their tactical ingenuity contributed powerfully to the strike's success. This fact makes it especially important to examine the role of women in the IWW. The movement's songs might be as good a place to start as any.