

LESSON 16



LABOR SONGS

Culture, and music in particular, can play a large role in sustaining a common sense of interests, goals, and expectations. When labor culture has declined, so has people's ability to work together. Labor songs are therefore much more than simply work songs. They help create solidarity and understanding.

Lawrence, 1912, was known as the "singing strike." Students may have already heard the song "Bread and Roses" and discussed the role of singing in that strike. Here they're not only introduced to some further labor classics, but they're given the opportunity to reflect on what they've learned of labor history by creating their own songs and poems.

Goals/Objectives

1. Students will analyze and evaluate songs that have played a role in U.S. labor history.
2. Students will summarize their understanding of, and appreciation for, labor history through poem and song.

Materials Needed

- Several photographs of work or strike scenes.
- **Student Handout #16: Labor Songs.**

Time Required

- Two or three class periods—flexible.



Procedure: Day 1

1. Play or read the songs included on **Student Handout #16: Labor Songs.**
2. The following are some discussion questions based on the songs:

Solidarity Forever

- According to the song, what are unions for?
- What injustices are unions supposed to help people overcome?
- Who is the "we" in "It's we who plowed the prairies . . ."
- What can "the power in our hands" be used for according to the song?

- What do you think the song writer wants the "new world" to be like?

Union Maid

- What makes this union maid so fearless?
- What gave courage to Kate, Sylvia, and Stella—the women in the film *Union Maids*?
- The song anticipates that union organizing will be met by resistance. According to the song, who will oppose efforts to organize?
- Is this borne out in our study of workers' attempts to organize?
- Do you think women might have problems today in trying to "organize the guys"?

- The third verse suggests that perhaps women will have problems even in the union. What might some of these problems be?
- Is the song optimistic about overcoming those problems? If so, do you agree?
- According to the song, how has the role of women changed in the United States?
- The fourth verse states that women want more than just higher pay. What other goals do you think are important and worth fighting for?
- What role could a union play in working on these other issues?

Casey Jones

- Why do you think Casey might have refused to join the strike?
- In the strikes we've studied, how have "scabs" been treated by strikers?
- Is the song consistent or inconsistent with that treatment?
- What is the "moral" of the song?
- Do you agree with that moral? Why or why not?

Hallelujah I'm a Bum

- Why doesn't the character in the song go to work?

- Whom does he blame for being out of work?
- Why do you think the questioner in the first line does not understand the problems of the other person?
- How does the unemployed person survive?
- What might have been going on in the United States when this song was written?
- In the last verse, why will the boss be broke if he pays out all the money his workers earn?
- According to the song, what do bosses do?

The Ballad of Joe Hill

(Note: Joe Hill was arrested in Utah and accused of murdering a grocer and his son. Many people claimed that Hill was framed because he was an IWW member and gave encouragement to organizing drives through his songs. His impending execution was protested by hundreds of thousands of people throughout the world. Joe Hill was executed on November 19, 1915. The last words he spoke were, "Don't mourn for me—organize!")

- What does Joe Hill mean by saying "I never died"?
- In what ways did Joe Hill go on living?
- What did "they" forget to kill?
- Could they have killed that?

Procedure: Day 2

1. Choose several pictures—contemporary and historical—that portray work or strike scenes of some kind. Try to select ones that you feel might spark some creativity in students. Be sure to choose pictures which also include women, as many labor photo anthologies focus almost exclusively on men.
2. Ask students to take out a sheet of paper.
3. As you show each photo to the entire class, have students brainstorm on paper the words and phrases that come to mind.
4. After you have shown all the photographs, tell students that you want them to write a poem or song using some of the words on their lists. Encourage students to relate these writings to the history and concepts they've

explored in recent lessons. You might also review with students some of the themes in the songs they listened to earlier.

Students might:

(1) Choose to write about a particular incident—e.g., the 1934 longshore strike, tenant farmer organizing, etc.

(2) Relate present labor/working problems or problems they have experienced personally to those of the past.

(3) Choose an issue the labor movement *should* be addressing.

(4) Summarize their overall feelings/observations about working people's experiences/labor processes/organization, etc.

Those unfamiliar with writing poetry may

need your help. Obviously, students needn't use words from their lists if these don't inspire them. But we've found that students feel they've already begun their poems if they've put at least some words down on paper.

5. Allow the rest of the period to get started. Students should finish their poems or songs as homework.
6. Ask for student volunteers to read their poems or sing their songs. Discuss with the class the relationship of the writing to the issues raised throughout their study of the history of work and workers.

STUDENT HANDOUT #16



LABOR SONGS

Solidarity Forever

(Written by Ralph Chaplin, January 1915. Sung to the tune of “John Brown’s Body”)

When the Union’s inspiration through the workers’ blood shall run,
There can be no power greater anywhere beneath the sun.
Yet what force on earth is weaker than the feeble strength of one?
But the Union makes us strong.

Solidarity forever!
Solidarity forever!
Solidarity forever!
For the Union makes us strong.

Is there aught we hold in common with the greedy parasite
Who would lash us into serfdom and would crush us with his might?
Is there anything left to us but to organize and fight?
For the Union makes us strong.

[Chorus]

It is we who plowed the prairies; built the cities where they trade;
Dug the mines and built the workshops; endless miles of railroad laid.
Now we stand outcast and starving, ’midst the wonder we have made;
But the Union makes us strong.

[Chorus]

All the world that’s owned by idle drones is ours and ours alone.
We have laid the wide foundations; built it skyward stone by stone.
It is ours, not to slave in, but to master and to own,
While the Union makes us strong.

[Chorus]

They have taken untold millions that they never toiled to earn,
But without our brain and muscle not a single wheel can turn.
We can break their haughty power; gain our freedom when we learn
That the Union makes us strong.

[Chorus]

In our hands is placed a power greater than their hoarded gold;
Greater than the might of armies, magnified a thousand-fold.
We can bring to birth a new world from the ashes of the old.
For the Union makes us strong.

[Chorus]

Union Maid

(Sung to the tune of "Red Wing." Words: Verses 1 & 2: Woody Guthrie; Verse 3: Nancy Katz; Verses 4–8: Jan Mandell, Lori Hanson, Sue Kroll for the Twin Cities Women's Union)

There once was a union maid who never was afraid
Of the goons and ginks and company finks
And the deputy sheriff who made the raid.
She went to the union hall when a meeting it was called
And when the company boys came round
She always stood her ground:

Chorus:

Oh, you can't scare me, I'm sticking to the union,
I'm sticking to the union, I'm sticking to the union.
Oh, you can't scare me, I'm sticking to the union
I'm sticking to the union til the day I die.
(Repeat chorus after each verse)

This union maid was wise to the tricks of company spies
She wouldn't be fooled by company stools,
She'd always organize the guys.
She'd always get her way when she struck for higher pay.
She'd show her card to the National Guard,
And this is what she'd say:

A woman's struggle is hard even with a union card
She's got to stand on her own two feet
And not be a servant of the male elite.
It's time to take a stand, keep working hand in hand,
There's a job that's got to be done
And a fight that's got to be won.
We all were once alone, the U.S. we did roam
Isolated from each other, sister, wife and grandmother.
But now the time has come, for us to become one.
That's why we all are here today, and now it's time to say:

So women did unite and we began to fight.
From office, home and factory, demanding our equality.
Oh yes there was a day we struck for higher pay
Now we say that we want more
So listen to us roar:

We'll build a union strong to help us move along.
We won't stand still together we
Will turn this system all around.
Now women take the lead to meet the people's need
Join hand in hand and take a stand
And we'll control the land.

Casey Jones—The Union Scab

(By Joe Hill; sung to the tune of “Casey Jones”)

The workers on the S.P. line to strike sent out a call;
But Casey Jones, the engineer, he wouldn't strike at all;
His boiler it was leaking, and its drivers on the bum,
And his engine and its bearings, they were all out of plumb.

Casey Jones kept his junk pile running;
Casey Jones was working double time;
Casey Jones got a wooden medal,
For being good and faithful on the S.P. line.

The workers said to Casey; “Won't you help us win this strike?”
But Casey said: “Let me alone, you'd better take a hike.”
Then Casey's wheezy engine ran right off the worn-out track,
And Casey hit the river with an awful crack.

Casey Jones hit the river bottom;
Casey Jones broke his blooming spine;
Casey Jones was an Angeleno,
He took a trip to heaven on the S.P. line.

When Casey Jones got up to heaven to the Pearly Gate,
He said: “I'm Casey Jones, the guy that pulled the S.P. freight.”
“You're just the man,” said Peter, “our musicians went on strike;
You can get a job a-scabbing any time you like.”

Casey Jones got a job in heaven;
Casey Jones was doing mighty fine;
Casey Jones went scabbing on the angels,
Just like he did to workers on the S.P. line.

The angels got together and they said it wasn't fair
For Casey Jones to go around a-scabbing everywhere.
The Angel Union No. 23, they sure were there,
And they promptly fired Casey down the Golden Stair.

Casey Jones went to Hell a-flying;
“Casey Jones,” the Devil said, “Oh fine;
Casey Jones, get busy shoveling sulphur—
That's what you get for scabbing on the S.P. line.”

Hallelujah, I'm a Bum!

(This is a hobo parody of the last century, adapted by Spokane IWW in the winter of 1908 for use on song cards. Sung to the tune of "Revive Us Again.")

O, why don't you work
Like other men do?
How in hell can I work
When there's no work to do?

Chorus:

Hallelujah, I'm a bum!
Hallelujah, bum again!
Hallelujah, give us a handout
To revive us again.

O, why don't you save
All the money you earn?
If I did not eat
I'd have money to burn.

(Chorus)

O, I like my boss—
He's a good friend of mine;
That's why I am starving
Out in the breadline.

(Chorus)

I can't buy a job
For I ain't got the dough,
So I ride in a box-car
For I'm a hobo.

(Chorus)

Whenever I get
All the money I earn
The boss will be broke
And to work he must turn.

(Chorus)