

# Using Songs to Teach Labor History

High school students become historians as they use labor songs to uncover the story of American working-class life, work, culture, ideology, and organizations. The words to labor songs illustrate changes in working-class values and consciousness as workers built trade unions and communities and assimilated into—or resisted—American industrial life. They recount costly lessons learned in the course of bitter defeats and triumphant struggles. They celebrate labor heroes like Joe Hill, Mother Jones, the Union Maid, and the Rebel Girl, and roast labor villains like Casey Jones (who scabbed on the S.P. railroad line), J.H. Blair from Harlan County, and Old Man Sargent of the Winnsboro Cotton Mill. Tracing the histories of these songs highlights the diversity of the American working class and ways that working people transmitted their ideas from one generation, and one ethnic group, to the next.

Broadly defined, the category of labor songs includes songs about work—“Drill Ye Tarriers Drill,” “Erie Canal,” “Take This Hammer,” and “Haul Away, Joe”; songs about the impact of industrialization and automation on working people—“Peg and Awl,” “John Henry,” “Dark as a Dungeon,” and “Allentown”; songs that raise broader political and class issues—“Preacher and the Slave,” “Bread and Roses,” and “I Don’t Want Your Millions, Mister”; and songs about the importance of unions—“Talking Union,” “Miner’s Lifeguard,” “Get Behind Me Satan,” “Solidarity Forever,” and “Which Side Are You On?”

## Why did workers organize unions?

John Henry is probably the most famous worker in United States history. The song, “John Henry,” describes a larger-than-life African-American man who used a twelve-pound hammer to drive steel rods into mountainsides. Dynamite, placed in the holes left by the rods, was blasted to build tunnels for railroads.

Examining the lyrics of this song helps students understand ideas that were important in the development of the labor movement. For example, in an era of Jim Crow segregation following the Civil War, John Henry, though black, emerged as a hero to all workers. The

celebration of John Henry in song is a statement about the importance of class solidarity for working people, regardless of race or national background.

The story of John Henry is the story of a man who died while defeating a steam drill in a race; the battle pitted human strength, skill, and dignity against the impersonal forces of mechanization. But, as the story demonstrates, even the greatest worker could not stem the tide of industrialization through individual effort. To resist the power of capitalist bosses, workers must struggle collectively and build labor unions.

The song has been recorded by numerous musicians, including Leadbelly (“Shout On”) and Pete Seeger (“Carry It On”). Every artist includes his or her own favorite verses.

### *John Henry*

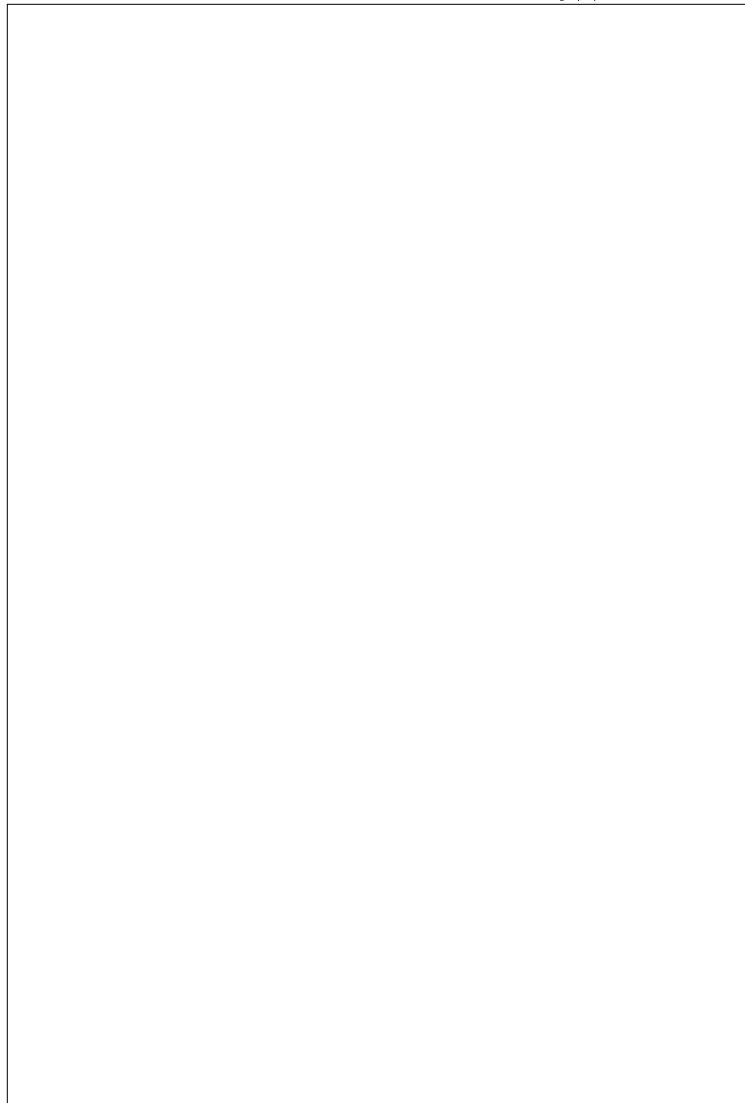
When John Henry was a little baby  
Sitting on his pappy’s knee  
He grabbed a hammer and a little piece of steel,  
Said, “This hammer’ll be the death of me, Lord, Lord,  
This hammer’ll be the death of me.”

Now, the captain said to John Henry,  
“I’m gonna bring that steam drill around,  
I’m gonna take that steam drill out on the job,  
I’m gonna whop that steel on down, Lord, Lord,  
Gonna whop that steel on down.”

John Henry told his captain,  
“A man ain’t nothing but a man,  
But before I’ll let that steam drill beat me down  
I’ll die with my hammer in my hand, Lord, Lord,  
I’ll die with my hammer in my hand.”

John Henry drove fifteen feet,  
The steam drill only made nine,

Autobiography of Mother Jones (1925)



Mother Jones (1830-1930), a labor organizer, fought vehemently for the rights of organized coal miners.

But he drove so hard his poor heart broke  
 So he laid down his hammer and he died, Lord, Lord,  
 He laid down his hammer and he died  
 Now some say he was born in Texas,  
 And some say he was born in Maine,  
 But I don't care where that man was born,  
 He was a steel-driving man, Lord, Lord,  
 He was a steel-driving man.

#### Why did workers sing about unions?

George Korson recorded "Miner's Lifeguard" in Mt. Hope, West Virginia in 1940. The song recounts the difficulty of a miner's life and stresses that his only hope for improvement is through the miners' union. Korson traced "Miner's Lifeguard" back to approximately 1900. However, the origin of the song is considerably older.

Religious hymns and military songs were frequently adapted and turned into labor songs. The tune to this song has been traced to a Welsh religious song, "Calon Lan," and there is also a Welsh coal miner's version. In the United States, the tune was used for a Protestant hymn, "Life is like a Mountain Railway," and during the Civil War, it accompanied the mournful ballad, "Vacant Chair."

Students should read the excerpt from "Miner's Lifeguard," analyze the meaning of the lyrics, and discuss reasons why labor songs were frequently based on religious and military music. Three ideas tend to emerge in these discussions. First, coal miners were being cheated by bosses who short weighted the coal and found other ways to deprive them of their pay and their dignity. Hard work and individual effort were not enough to improve someone's life. The only hope for miners was collective action through the union. Second, many workers were largely non-literate or, at best, had limited literacy. Basing a labor song on an already familiar tune made it easier for people to memorize the lyrics and learn the message of the song. Third, religious, military, and labor songs frequently share a common theme, collective struggle for a better world, either in this life or the next. Miner's Lifeguard is recorded on the album *Talking Union*.

#### **Miner's Lifeguard**

Miner's life is like a sailor's  
 Board a ship to cross the wave;  
 Every day his life's in danger,  
 Still he ventures being brave.  
 Watch the rocks, they're falling daily,  
 Careless miners always fail;  
 Keep your hand upon the dollar  
 And your eyes upon the scale.

#### *Chorus*

Union miners, stand together,  
 Heed no operators' tale;  
 Keep your hand upon the dollar  
 And your eyes upon the scale.  
 You've been docked and docked, my boys,  
 You've been loading two for one;  
 What have you to show for working  
 Since this mining has begun?  
 Overalls, and cans for rockers,  
 In your shanties sleep on rails.  
 Keep your hand upon the dollar  
 And your eyes upon the scales.

#### How do you organize a labor union?

Labor balladeer Pete Seeger has been a musician, songwriter, political activist, and union organizer since the 1930s. He wrote the song "Talking Union" with Millard Lampell, Lee Hays, and other members of the Almanac Singers, while they were helping to organize CIO unions in 1941. It is recorded on the album *Talking Union*.

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 112 North Bryan Avenue, Bloomington IN 47408  
 (812) 855-7311 • fax: (812) 855-0696 • email: [oah@oah.org](mailto:oah@oah.org)

This song explains to workers how and why they should join a union. Like contemporary “rap music,” it is a “talking” song with music in the background. Students should read and/or listen to the song and discuss why workers organized unions and why songs were important in organizing drives. As a follow-up activity, students should write their own “talking songs” or “raps,” using them to convince a new generation of workers to organize unions.

### **Talking Union**

If you want higher wages, let me tell you what to do:  
You got to talk to the workers in the shop with you;  
You got to build you a union, got to make it strong,  
But if you all stick together, now ‘twont be long.  
You get shorter hours, better working conditions.  
Vacations with pay, take the kids to the seashore.

It ain’t quite this simple, so I better explain  
Just why you got to ride on the union train;  
‘Cause if you wait for the boss to raise your pay,  
We’ll all be waiting till Judgment Day;  
We’ll all be buried—gone to Heaven—  
Saint Peter’ll be the straw boss then, folks.

Now, you know you’re underpaid, but the boss says you  
ain’t;  
He speeds up the work till you’re about to faint.  
You may be down and out, but you ain’t beaten,  
You can pass out a leaflet and call a meetin’—  
Talk it over—speak your mind—  
Decide to do something about it.

You got a union now, and you’re sitting pretty;  
Put some people on the steering committee.  
The boss won’t listen when just one squawks,  
But he’s got to listen when the union talks.  
He better—he’ll be mighty lonely.

Suppose they’re working you so hard it’s just outrageous,  
And they’re paying you all starvation wages;  
You go to the boss, and the boss would yell,  
“Before I raise your pay I’d see you all in hell.”

Well, he’s puffing a big cigar and feeling mighty slick,  
He thinks he’s got your union licked.  
He look out the window, and what does he see  
But a thousand pickets, and they all agree  
He’s a bastard-unfair—slave driver—  
Bet he beats his wife.

But out in Detroit here’s what they found,  
And out in Frisco here’s what they found,  
And out in Pittsburgh here’s what they found,  
And down at Bethlehem here’s what they found:

That if you don’t let Red-baiting break you up,  
If you don’t let stool pigeons break you up,  
If you don’t let vigilantes break you up,  
And if you don’t let race hatred break you up  
You’ll win. What I mean, take it easy—but take it.

### **Labor Resources for Teachers Recordings**

*American Industrial Ballads*. Pete Seeger (Folkways FH 5251).

*Carry It On*. Pete Seeger, Si Kahn and Jane Sapp (Flying Fish FF 90104).



A convention booklet from the Industrial Workers of the World, or Wobblies. Their motto: One Union! One Label! One Enemy!

*Shout On*. Leadbelly (Folkways FT 31030 S).

*Songs of Work and Freedom*. Joe Glazer (Washington Records WR-460).

*The Original "Talking Union"*. Almanac Singers and Pete Seeger (Folkways FH 5285).

*We've Only Just Begun: A Century of Labor Songs*. Joe Glazer (American Federation of Teachers/ Collector Records 1934).

*1993 Live and In Solidarity*. New York City Labor Chorus.

The Labor Heritage Foundation sells cassette and compact disc versions of the work of most of the great labor minstrels, including Pete Seeger, the Almanac Singers, Joe Glazer, Utah Phillips, Hazel Dickens, and Mike Seeger. For their catalogue, write: Labor Heritage Foundation, 815 16th St. NW Suite 301, Washington, D.C. 20006. The Labor Heritage Foundation also publishes a newsletter, *Art Works*, and sponsors the "Great Labor Arts Exchange," an annual three-day conference on the music, drama, and art of working men and women at the George Meany Center for Labor Studies.

### Books and Articles

Peter Blood and Anne Patterson, *Rise Up Singing* (Bethlehem, Penn.: Sing Out, 1992). A comprehensive international folk song book. Most songs about labor are collected in the section on "Work," though some are included in other sections (e.g., "women," "mountain voices," "hard times," and "struggle." The book includes recent songs, updated versions of older songs, chords for string instruments.

Edith Fowke and Joe Glazer, *Songs of Work and Freedom* (New York: Dover Publishing, 1973). This book includes 100 songs, more than half about unions and workers. Sections include "Solidarity Forever," "On the Line," "Down in a Coal Mine," and "Hard Times in the Mill." Every song is accompanied by its history and a story about its author.

Joyce L. Kornbluh, ed., *Rebel Voices: An I.W.W. Anthology* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 1968). This book is both a history of the Industrial Workers of the World and a collection of primary sources by and about the Wobblies. The chapter "Joe Hill: Wobbly Bard," includes the lyrics to songs by Joe Hill with a brief discussion of each song.

George Korson, *Coal Dust on the Fiddle: Songs and Stories of the Bituminous Industry* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1943). A classic account of the music of workers in a major American industry.

Richard McCarthy, "Fear A Movement That Sings": *Music and the American Labor Movement* (unpublished doctoral dissertation,

City University of New York, 1991). Research on the ways that labor songs express the ideology of working people.

Richard B. Morris, ed., *The U.S. Department of Labor History of The American Worker* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1976). This history of the United States labor movement was produced for the 1976 Bicentennial of the Declaration of Independence. It includes a chapter, "Songs of Triumph and Tragedy," with work and union songs from different eras in U.S. history.

Carl Sandburg, *The American Songbag* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1955). Originally published in 1927, Sandburg's book collects American folk songs from every region and all walks of life. The book includes sections on the "Great Lakes and Erie Canal," "Railroad and Work Gangs," "Lumberjacks, Loggers, Shanty-Boys," and "Sailorman."

Pete Seeger and Bob Reiser, *Carry It On!: A History in Song and Picture of the Working Men and Women of America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985). The authors call this "a book of history" with songs and pictures. The songs (which include music) are presented chronologically. Each song is introduced with a brief discussion of the historical setting and illustrated with drawings and photographs.

Seidman, "Folksongs: Magic in Your Classroom," in *Studying U.S. History Through Songs*, a thematic issue of *Social Education* 49 (October 1985): 580-7. The article focuses on work songs from the whaling and lumber industries.

### Organizations and Periodicals

*Folksongs in the Classroom*, P.O. Box 264, Holyoke, Mass. 01041. This magazine is published by a special interest group within the National Council for the Social Studies.

*Talkin' Union*, the newsletter of labor music, lore, and history. Box 5345, Takoma Park, Md. 20912. No longer published. Back copies are available.

*Sing Out* is a quarterly magazine focusing on folk music. For information about subscriptions, publications, or back issues, contact *Sing Out*, P.O. Box 5253, Bethlehem, Penn. 18015; or call (215) 865-5366.

Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, Taniment Institute Library, New York University, 70 Washington Square South, New York, N.Y. 10012. Their excellent staff helps teachers locate labor materials. Call (212) 998-2630. □

*Alan Singer is a professor in the Department of Curriculum and Teaching, Hofstra University.*