

HANDOUT #13a: Labour Songs

Union maid

Verse 1

There once was a union maid
 She never was afraid
 of the goons and ginks and the company finks
 And the deputy sheriffs that 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 no you can't scare me, I'm sticking to the union
 I'm sticking to the union 'til the day I die.

Verse 2

This union maid was wise
 To the tricks of company spies
 She couldn't be fooled by the 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

Chorus

Verse 3 (version one)

A woman's struggle is hard
 even with a union card
 You've got to stand on your own two feet
 And not be a servant to the male elite
 We've got to take a stand
 by working hand in hand
 There's a job that's got to be done
 and a fight that's got to be won

Verse 3 (version two)

You women who want to be free, take a tip
 from me,
 Break out of that mold we've all been sold,
 you got a fighting history
 The fight for women's rights with workers
 must unite
 Like Mother Jones, move those bones to
 the front of every fight!

Verse 3 (version three, Woody Guthrie's original)

You gals who want to be free, take a tip
 from me,
 Get you a man who's a union man, and
 join the Ladies' auxiliary.
 A married life ain't hard when you got a
 union card.
 A union man with a union wife has got a
 happy life.

Chorus

1. What words are used to describe the people supporting the boss?
2. Why is there a reference to the National Guard?
3. What is the main theme of this song?
4. What verse do you think was added after Woody Guthrie's death? Is that verse an important addition; if so, why?
5. (a) Compare Woody Guthrie's original verse #3 with the other two (the currently used ones). Why do you think his words have been changed?

Solidarity Forever

Solidarity Forever is perhaps one of the best known songs associated with labour. Ralph Chaplin, of the International Workers of the World, wrote it in 1915. Read the words, and answer the following questions.

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.

Chorus

Solidarity forever! Solidarity forever!

Solidarity forever! For the union makes us strong.

They have taken untold millions that they never
toiled to earn

But without our brain and muscle not a single
wheel could 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

Solidarity Forever

Previous Verses (not often sung)

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

It is we who ploughed 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 'mid the
wonders we have made

But the union makes us strong

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

1. What does the author mean by "There can be no power greater anywhere beneath the sun"?
2. What does solidarity mean?
3. Why does the song suggest people should organize into unions?
4. Read and compare the previous (more radical) verses of *Solidarity Forever*, and those that remain.
 - a) What do the early words mean?
 - b) Why do you think they have been removed?
 - c) Do you think it is better to now include or exclude these words from "Labour's anthem"? Why/Why not?
5. Why do you think this song has been so popular and long lasting?

Bread and Roses

James Oppenheim wrote the words to Bread and Roses; Caroline Kohlsaar wrote the music. They were inspired by a strike by women in the textile industry in Lawrence, Massachusetts more than eighty years ago. The women carried a banner reading “We want bread and roses too,” and at the end of their strike, the women had won gains for all textile workers in the area. Read the words to the song, and answer the following questions.

As we come marching, marching, in the beauty of the day
A million darkened kitchens, a thousand mill lofts gray
Are touched with all the radiance that a sudden sun discloses
For the people hear us singing, Bread and Roses, Bread and Roses.
As we come marching, marching, we battle too for men
For they are women’s children and we mother them again.
Our lives will not be sweated, from birth until life closes
Hearts starve as well as bodies; give us bread, but give us roses.
As we come marching, marching. Unnumbered women dead
Go crying through our singing, their ancient call for bread
Small art and love and beauty, their dredging spirits knew
Yes, it is bread we fight for, be we fight for roses too.
As we come marching, marching we bring the greater days
The rising of the women is the rising of us all*
No more the drudge and idler, ten that toil while one reposes
But the sharing of life’s glories, Bread and Roses, Bread and Roses

* The original wording “of us all” was “of the race”

1. What does the author mean by “Give us bread, but give us roses”?
2. Why do women battle for men too?
4. Why do you think the words were changed from “of the race” to “of us all”? What do you think the original writers meant by this term?
4. Explain the last two lines of the song.

Where the Fraser River Flows

Joe Hill, a member of the Industrial Workers of the World, wrote *Where the Fraser River Flows*, in 1912. The song was written in solidarity with striking railroad workers in British Columbia. Joe Hill is the most famous labour folk singer from the 1900–1914 period. His songs still inspire workers today. He is known as the man who never died. This is because, not only does he live in memory and song, but because his ashes were deliberately scattered across the USA by his followers (all states except Utah, where he was killed).

Fellow workers pay attention to what I'm going to mention,
For it is the brave contention of the workers of the world
That we should all be ready, true hearted, brave, and steady.
To rally around the standard when the Red Flag is unfurled.

Chorus:

Where the Fraser River flows, every fellow worker knows
They have bullied and oppressed us, but still the Union grows.
And we're going to find a way, friends,
for shorter hours and better pay, friends
And we're going to win the day, friends,
where the Fraser River flows.

For these gunny-sack contractors have all been dirty actors,
And they're not our benefactors, as each fellow worker knows.
So we've got to stick together in fine or dirty weather,
And we will show no white feather where the Fraser River flows.

Chorus

Now the boss the law is stretching, bulls and pimps he's fetching.
And they are a fine collection, as Jesus only knows.
But why their mothers reared them and why the devil spared them
Are questions we can't answer, where the Fraser River flows.
Chorus

1. Why is there a reference to the Red Flag?
2. What does it mean to show no white feather?
3. What terms are used to describe the bosses?
4. What are the workers fighting for?
5. Why do you think Joe Hill is known as the man who never died?

Ginger Goodwin

Sean Muldoon, a Vancouver teacher, wrote Ginger Goodwin. Goodwin refused to support World War I, which he considered to be a war to benefit only the capitalist class. According to prevailing labour mythology he was hunted down and murdered outside Cumberland for his antiwar and union activities. He has become British Columbia's most famous labour martyr. Recent critics have claimed that, rather than some deep conspiracy, Goodwin was "killed" by a mentality of the times that assumed he was an "outlaw" (his actions, in effect, removing him from the protection of the law) and therefore, like a mad dog, in need of being put down before the social illness spread. The prevailing attitude, if true, would strengthen rather than weaken Goodwin's labour martyr status, and would put his death in a much wider context of worker struggle.

Ginger Goodwin, he worked hard
Till the police laid him low
Signing up those union cards
The people cried to see him so
Ginger's sleeping sound and fast
A hero of the working class
But he won't hear those May Day Songs
Dead heroes never sing
He was hiding in a shack
In the hills of Cumberland
Police shot him in the back
Because he was a union man
Newspapers said too bad
Ginger was a dangerous lad
He wouldn't kill his fellow man
So he was killed instead

Ginger's sleeping sound and fast
A hero of the working class
He won't sing no May Day songs
Dead heroes never sing
They carried Ginger's body down
They laid him on a bed of straw
All the people gathered round
They won't forget the man they saw
When word spread that he had died
Thousands came to say goodbye
They laid a stone where Ginger lies
Here lies a worker's friend.
Now when I see workers strike
They say we're here to win this fight
I think of Ginger and I know they're right
Here lies a worker's friend.

1. Which lines refer to the reasons why Ginger Goodwin was killed?
2. Why is there a reference to May Day songs?
3. How does the song convey sadness?
4. What is written on Ginger Goodwin's tombstone and why?