

High School Activity-Based Lesson on the Labor Movement

UNIT: High school (11th grade) Industrial America

AIM: Why did workers organize unions?

GOALS/OBJECTIVES:

- Read and listen to primary source documents (labor songs) with understanding
- Compare the importance of an institution (labor union) past and present
- Understand conditions that faced workers during period of industrial change.
- Understand and evaluate the decision to organize a labor union.
- Discuss the importance of music in working-class culture.
- Examine the implications of NCSS Thematic strands: Culture and Cultural Diversity; Time, Continuity, and Change; Individuals, Groups, and Institutions; Production, Distribution, and Consumption; and Science, Technology, and Society

MAIN IDEAS/UNDERSTANDINGS:

- Unions used songs as teaching and organizing tools because many workers were not literate.
- Many workers experienced industrial change as an attack on their livelihood and way of life.
- Labor unions made it possible for workers to win higher pay and better working conditions.
- Labor unions contributed to the dignity of labor.
- Working-class struggles often bridged racial differences.

MATERIALS: Songs: John Henry and Talking Union; Record player. Handouts.

DO NOW: Read the lyrics to the song “John Henry” and answer questions 1 - 4.

MOTIVATION: Does any one here (or your parents) belong to a union? Why?

ACTIVITIES/QUESTIONS/TRANSITIONS:

1. Listen to recording of John Henry. Review and discuss.

Key Questions: Why did workers tell there stories using songs? In your opinion, why is this an important song in the history of American workers?

2. In groups, examine Talking Union. Review as a class.

Key Questions: Labor unions might have been necessary for working people in 1941, when this song was written. Do you think they are still necessary today? Why?

SUMMARY: Based on our examination of these songs and our discussion today, why did workers organize unions in the industrial era?

APPLICATION: Present song as contemporary culture. Perform Talking Union as a rap.

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT: Write (or re-write) a labor song using contemporary language and music. Be prepared to perform your work.

Aim: Why did workers organize unions?

Do Now: Read the lyrics to the song “John Henry” and answer questions 1 - 4.

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,
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.

1. What does John Henry say to his father when he is just a baby?
2. Why does John Henry challenge the steam drill?
3. Who won the contest?
4. In your opinion, why is this an important song in the history of American workers?

Talking Union

by Millard Lampell, Lee Hays, and Pete Seeger

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According to Pete Seeger, this song almost wrote itself while he and the other songwriters were helping to organize labor unions for the Congress of Industrial Organizations in 1941. The song has eight stanzas. Parts of four are included here.

1. 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.

2. 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.

3. 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.

4. 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.

Questions

1. According to this song, what are three benefits of belonging to a labor union?
2. How does this song view the relationship between employers and employees?
3. In your opinion, why were songs used in campaigns to organize labor unions?
4. Labor unions might have been necessary for working people in 1941, when this song was written. Do you think they are still necessary today? Why?