

# Solidarity Forever! Solidarity Never! Labor History Through Song

[thepostil.com/solidarity-forever-solidarity-never-labor-history-through-song](http://thepostil.com/solidarity-forever-solidarity-never-labor-history-through-song)



April 1, 2020 John Coleman

When labor organizes, it sings. Music has been an integral part of the workers' struggle since its early days in the Nineteenth Century. The history of organized labor through song is a long story. True to labor's international ethos, ours is a tale which spans various nations, generations, and language communities. We have a massive corpus of material to sift through in order to take the pulse of the topic at hand. Indeed, making our task hairier still, labor's is a story whose definite start is hard to ascertain and whose end is nowhere in sight.

In order to respect the essay format, we will strictly hold to some parameters. They are these: We will maintain a general chronological flow whilst using one main song, with some ancillary helpers, to illustrate a various work-related theme as we plod along. In doing so we will maintain both the narrative pace and topical diversity of our story. At the same time, we will ascertain common trends down through the years of struggle.

Further study recommends the 2019 texts by Steven Greenhouse, *Beaten Down, Worked Up: The Past, Present, and Future of American Labor*, and James Sullivan, *Which Side Are You On? 20th Century American History in Protest Songs*.

## **Timeliness**

Workplace organizing is back in the news. From the “Fight for \$15” movement in America, to France’s Yellow Vest unrest, to Singapore’s protesting bus drivers, the working man is on the march once more. Even monolithic WalMart and sacrosanct Google, implacable foes of unions, have lately felt the pressure of labor. And with the fallout of the late Coronavirus shutdowns, some American economists are predicting a shockingly high 30% unemployment rate.

With this labor revival – I blush with pride from my pedagogical perch – the vanguard has been led largely by teachers. My profession has been shamefully eager, historically, to cooperate with a wide variety of schemes ginned up by every backroom Yaleie and stockjobbing finance bro who toddles along.

Ranging from a mass phrenology photographic campaign in the last century, to loansharking three generations of 18-year-olds and counting, no debasement, no sellout, has been too humiliating for my once-sublime profession. But, moryah, Saul can be Paul as soon as anyone. Even in labor-hostile America, scholars are fast repairing their deserved infamy. Teachers have hit the picket lines from Wisconsin to West Virginia, and from New York to California these last few years.

## **To Sing**

Men sing from passion, or at least they ought. They sing in war “by the rocket’s red glare,” and they sing for women with “their technicolor cheeks.” Overcome by urban steel, men sing in cities “where seven million are screaming for space,” and humbled by nature, men sing with “sunshine on [their] shoulders.” Men sing because they love, and because they care, and because they are alive.

Of course, the obverse is just as true. That Christians in the so-called First World sing of a Sunday with all the gusto of a late-’80s Soviet Party Congress is one of the ominous portents for Western spirituality.

History does not hesitate to support my melodic social observation. Men sing because they care, and they’ve been at it since day one. In the great Christological controversies of the 4th and 5th Centuries, all factions busied themselves between bouts of rioting in scribbling out hymnody. The same was certainly true during the Reformation; Protestants explored the vernacular and Catholics doubled-down on chant. And whilst Tories belted out *God Save the*

*King*, Enlightenment republicans answered with *God Save Great Thomas Paine*. Trench-up, and Home Office-down, Axis and Allies vied with each other through two world wars to out-sing the foe, this time with the timely aid of radiophone and loudspeaker.

And so, with labor. It's a struggle that has all the hope and frustration, all the tease and triumph, of love and war and God. Thus, labor is a cause to which songsters have just as soon thrown in their pens and talents and throats for.

## **Limitations and Failures**

At this early hour in our essay, historical impartiality requires that I address a topic which perhaps has occurred to fair-minded readers: What about anti-labor songs? In a fact that is as damning as it is absolute, there actually is no corollary corpus of anti-union songs. Nothing at all, so far as I've been able to find. There are examples of states co-opting various musical styles for their ends, particularly rock in Europe and country music in America. But as far as organic specimens go, we search in vain.

Never, after an afternoon of beating the skulls of miners or longshoremen, did the police of William Martin Murphy or Allan Pinkerton strike up a chorus of celebration and steeled resolve. They were the baddies, after all. Much less have the spoilers of our day sung, those more recent bureaucrats who delivered the Traffic Controllers' pink slips in 1981, or General Motors' ones in 2009, or Ikeas' today.

## **An Overview**

As mentioned above, labor history is a vast subject. Our main selections in this essay and the topics they raise are as follows. We start with the Luddites of the Industrial Revolution. We witness the transformation of a historic loafing worker into a mythological reformer through songs like, *The Triumph of General Ludd*.

Then we look at the musical celebration of labor itself through *Greenland Whale Fishery*, *Canadian Railroad Trilogy*, and *The Fireman's Song*. Next we have *There Is Power In The Union*, where we consider labor's tensions with religion. In *Banks of Marble* we look at transatlantic connections between labor struggles on different continents. *Which Side Are You On?* gives us an insight into masculine archetypes in workers' music. And in *Solidarity Forever* we dissect a fine specimen of hope, reinvention, and continuity in song. *The Internationale* and the Left's decision – and ultimate split – in 1917 follows.

We then see the use of existing hymnody by the *Catholic Worker Movement*. In *The Ballad of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire* we feel the perennial anxiety of workplace safety, and the biting regret of warnings not heeded. Rounding out our time together and bringing our exploration up to the present day, we have David Rovics' piece *Living On the Streets of LA*. It shines a light on the trials of atomized and indigent workers in the modern gig economy. In addition to these main pieces, about a dozen auxiliary works will illuminate our analysis.

From Marx to Uber, but with fall more soul and pizzazz than either Nineteenth Century theoreticians or Twenty-First Century apps conjure, we will sing our way through the basics of labor history.

## **General Ludd**

Many moons before former DNC candidate Andrew Yang alerted us to the dangers of automation, workers were wary of their bosses' late penchant for machines.

In the throes of the First Industrial Revolution some of Britain's weavers began destroying the new mechanical looms which were occupying ever-more floor space. The contraptions were able year by year to do the specialized work which men developed over a lifetime. Playing out the future in their heads, the men of Nottingham reasoned that workingmen would soon or late be replaced altogether. These wary weavers formed loose associations of economically astute hooligans, and by 1812 they signed their corporate missives "Ned Ludd."

The actual Ludd is said to have been a lazy or impassioned youth – the sources differ, though teens have been known to be both b'times – who, a generation before the Luddites arose, destroyed his father's looms. Historians disagree, but he was probably grounded. The noun became an adjective, and England's Luddites give us a fine jumping off point in our labor saga.

Folk memory is a slippery thing, and proverbially one man's hero is another man's villain. Like other far-sung foes of the Crown before him, like Robin Hood and Roddy McCorley, like Jamie MacPherson and Ned Kelly, the historicity of Ludd takes a backseat to common memory. How Ned Ludd morphed from a moody, loafing youth into an anti-automation hero is the stuff of another essay. What matters is that in peoples' minds he did, and that those people decided to sing about it.

As early as 1850, Ludd was canonized by a street balladeer in *The Triumph of General Ludd*. Here he is imagined as a full-blown, doctrinaire revolutionary. We sing, "Let the wise and the great lend their aid and advice/ Nor e'er their assistance withdraw/ Till full-fashioned work at the old-fashioned price/ Is established by custom and law." In a song that was given a studio recording by Chumbawamba ("I Get Knocked Down") in the late 1980s, Triumph continues with Ned's manifesto, "Then the trade when this arduous contest is o'er/ Shall raise in full splendor its head/ And colting and cutting and swearing no more/ Shall deprive all his workers of bread."

Robert Calvert's 1985 Ned Ludd says, "They said Ned Ludd was an idiot boy/ That all he could do was wreck and destroy/ And he turned to his workmates and said," with Unabomber echoes, we note, "Death to Machines!/ They tread on our future and they stamp on our dreams."

Continuing the common memory of Ludd in Britain, General Ludd from the UK band Seize the Day says, “Cause ‘en if we don’t break ‘em [i.e., machines], our lives they will take ‘em/ Our croft, our cottage, our village as well/ No freedom or laughter for those who come after/ But a servant and master in a factory hell.” Giving a full-blown first-person narrative, the song goes on, “So the door was kicked in, and the frames were all broken/ And the owner was woken and raised the alarm/ And the yeomen came riding, but we were in hiding/ The people providing, to keep us from harm.”

Steeleye Span deserves many honorable mentions for their innovative career, not the least for making a 16-minute epic on everybody’s favorite frame-breakers.

## **Celebration**

A little later on I will address the Church’s musical consideration labor in the May 1st commemoration of St. Joseph the Worker. As Joseph Piper reminds us in his fine essay on leisure, all liturgy is celebratory. Thus, we can say labor is sublimated and celebrated in the Church’s ceremonies. However, grace builds on nature, and there is in labor folk a more basic element of rejoicing which we now turn to.

In work’s daily trials, and flow, and mundane happenings, men have sung. *The Creamery Song*, *Greenland Whale Fishery*, *Canadian Railroad Trilogy*, and the *Fireman’s Song* are our examples.

In *The Creamery Song* our familiar morning routines are considered. It says, “Paddy Stokes was the first in at daybreak/ The boiler to stoke and ignite/ There was plenty of steam, the machinery sang/ A day’s work in the dairy began.” But mornings are deadly for distraction, and many an idle minute’s been spent on another cigarette or another cup of coffee. “Then the farmer arrived in his pony and car/ And while waiting they’d have an aul spar/ They’d talk of the games and the state of the land/ Then they’d swing the tanks up on the stand.”

All the energy and physicality of industrialization is captured by Gordon Lightfoot in *Canadian Railroad Trilogy*. It says, “Look away, said they, across this mighty land/ From the eastern shore to the western strand/ Bring in the workers and bring up the rails/ We gotta lay down the tracks and tear up the trails/ Open ‘er heart let the life blood flow/ Gotta get on our way ‘cause we’re movin’ too slow!”

A particular type of man all of us have likely worked for is comically memorialized in *Greenland Whale Fishery*. The whalers deploy in the verse, “The harpoon struck and the line paid out/ With a single flourish of her tail/ She capsized our boat and we lost five men/ And we did not catch that whale, brave boys.” Tragedy has struck, yes, but it’s not where you might think. The song goes on, “The losin’ of those five jolly men/ It grieved our captain sore/ But the losin’ of that sperm whale fish/ Now it grieved him ten times more, brave boys/ Now it grieved him ten times more.”

Not to rag too heavy on on bosses, but in Ian Campbell's *Fireman's Song* the coal stoker-narrator good-naturedly notes, "The driver sits there like a god/ A decent mate but an idle sod/ Though I'll be shovelling on me knees/ Still he'll sit there at his ease." But no matter. This job has given me physical fitness and dexterity, if nothing else. "The pick and shovel are tools of me trade/ And two strong arms to swing the blade/ Hands with palms as hard as leather/ And nimble feet as light as a feather."

Going forward, it is important to remember that the element which gives labor organizing its artistic energy is because labor itself is worth celebrating.

## **Wobblies**

No treatment of workers' history, much less labor music, is complete sans mention of the I.W.W. Their motto was their philosophy. "One big union," they said, and they meant it. Well did these "Wobblies," as I.W.W. members were called in the slang of the time, know how to fight fire with fire.

The International Workers of the World was formed in 1905. What differentiated it from contemporary movements like the Knights of Labor or the American Federation of Labor was its belief in a united working class, not one segmented by trade. The dynamic of wage-earners organized across professions would allow for "sympathetic strikes."

With this tool, if a lone factory went on strike, nearby sympathetic strikes could magnify its power. Should management hire scabs to replace the factory workers, for example, sympathetic action called for other sectors to make that bosses' life hell.

A sympathetic strike would oblige the truckers which supplied the original factory, the operators of the power plant which kept the factory's lights on, the groundskeepers who plowed the snow and cleaned the gutters, and so forth and so on, to join the factory hands and bring, not just one location, but potentially an entire town, city, or region, to a standstill.

A couple of years ago I greatly expanded *The Ballad of James Larkin*. Originally written by Donagh McDonald, son of the poet and 1916 signatory Thomas MacDonagh ("I See His Blood Upon the Rose"), the '60s Ballad beat contemporary historians to the punch in linking the Great Dublin Lockout of 1913 to the Easter Rising of 1916.

As regards a sympathetic strike, my expansion goes, "Then Larkin left us, he'd gone to England/ A Fiery Cross for some sympathy/ From Southampton and from London/ Labor joined hands across the sea." Presaging the chronic weakness of 20th Century labor leadership, the stanza continues, "But union bosses were worse than useless/ And there'd be no general strike/ With 'friends' like this, you'd not need foemen/ Dublin's heroes pushed on alone."

## **Joe Hill and Religious Tunes**

Joe Hill, originally an immigrant from Sweden, and himself the subject of no shortage of musical memorials in the wake of his famed (and framed) execution in Utah in 1915, was especially adept at co-opting religious hymns for organizing purposes. During Hill's I.W.W. junkets through the American West, local capitalists routinely hired Salvation Army bands to play music over the speeches of Wobbly organizers like Joe Hill. There was no electronic amplification in those days, none within the budget of traveling Wobblies, at least. The appearance of a brass band playing *There Is Power in the Blood* or *Onward, Christian Soldiers* would be enough to put the kibosh on the most earnest speechifying.

Making lemonade of his lemons, Hill set his prolific compositions to tunes commonly used by churches. We recall that religious observance was much higher a century ago, and thus many tunes were generally known by the public. One example of Hill's use of a religious anthem is *The Preacher and The Slave*. It employs the tune of *In The Sweet By-And-By*, and the song directly aims its barbs at the General Booth's "Sally Army" interrupters. Hill's song croons, "The Starvation [sic] Army, they play/ And they sing and they clap and they pray/ 'Til they get all your coin on the drum/ Then they tell you that you're on the bum." Preacher is also notable for containing Hill's famous expression, "Pie in the sky." Like the memory of Hill himself, the expression would live on long after its initial appearance.

"Pie in the sky," wasn't a baseless phrase. Besides some papal encyclicals and the efforts of the Catholic Worker Movement, popular and institutional Christianity was silent on the labor topic. Any Protestant who brought up organizing a century past was also likely to be as soon fuzzy on doctrine, and thus suspect by the pious.

Culpable of guilt by association, observant upper- and middle-class Catholics joined Protestants in an ecumenical wariness of labor issues. However, the majority of American Catholics were poor, and their support of unions brought them into regular conflict with religious leaders.

As for the Orthodox response to the labor topic, of course there were not enough of them in the West to generate a conversation in that quarter. And indeed, set upon by Modernity far more abruptly than the Western Church, Eastern Christians still are nowhere nearer in 2020 to forming a labor theology than they were in Hill's day.

Another example of the co-opting of pious tunes for labor purposes is *Because All Men Are Brothers*. With lyrics which would surely startle Johann Sebastian Bach, who notably used the setting for his St. Matthew's Passion, labor's rewriting states, "Let every voice be thunder, let every heart beat strong/ Until all tyrants perish our work shall not be done/ Let not our memories fail us, the lost years shall be found/ Let slavery's chains be broken the whole wide world around."

Also, from the prolific pen of Joe Hill is the 1913 piece *There Is Power In The Union*. Ripped from the formerly pious background of its original setting, *There Is Power* defiantly barks, “If you like sluggers to beat off your head/ Then don’t organize, and unions despise/ If you want nothing before you are dead/ Shake hands with your boss and look wise.”

Occasionally immigrants embody the ethos of a country better than natives. If Europe took our Henry James a century past, they at least had the good manners to trade their talented Joe Hill.

## **The Gospel of Christ Meets the Gospel of Labor**

In juxtaposition to the antipathy or hostility towards labor from bourgeois Christians, the Catholic Worker Movement sought to bridge the gap between secular labor and the Christian tradition. Their Catholic spiritual tradition was an old hand in the ideological use of music.

Founded by Peter Maurin and Dorothy Day in 1933, the CWM sought to make the Church a dynamic social force once again. On the back foot since the French Revolution, it was time to be proactive. As Dan McKannan writes in a contemporary Movement publication, “The Catholic Worker [community] is the place in which the American Catholic Church as a whole meets the American Left as a whole.”

Towards that end, I’ve stumbled across a contemporary mini-retreat inspired by Dorothy Day’s life which is suggested by the Movement. The recollection concludes with *I Bind My Heart This Tide*, a hymn from the turn of the last century. It contains these verses, “I bind my soul this day/ To the neighbor far away/ And the stranger near at hand/ In this town, and in this land.” With a distinct flavor of St. Patrick’s *Lorica*, it continues, “I bind my heart in thrall/ To the God, the Lord of all/ To God, the poor one’s friend/ And the Christ whom he did send.” It’s a fitting hymn for a day dedicated to the spirituality of one such as Day, herself an Oblate of St. Benedict and those religious’ commitment to “ora et labora.”

The response of the pious from the 19th Century through the foundation of the Catholic Worker Movement gave fuel to the secular Left’s claim that religion was in the keep of the ruling class. As Karl Marx and Frederick Engles succinctly wrote in the 1848 Communist Manifesto, “Communism abolishes all religion.” However, the plucky Catholic Worker Movement had enough sense to snatch the brand from the fire. Seeing labor quickly spinning off into the worldly, secular arena, they used songs too.

Unlike the I.W.W., the CWM tended to use existing Christian hymns to express their social gospel, a message which saw the Corporal and Spiritual Works as concrete marching orders as adamant as Marx’s *Ten Planks*. Much like the inclusion of the Memorial feast of St. Joseph the Worker, the CWM uses existing hymns to sanctify the daily concerns of working men with religious iconography. For their efforts Catholics today still grouse about Dorothy Day being a “communist.” No good deed goes unpunished.



## Liturgical Music

Much in the vein of the CWM, the institutional Church appointed May 1st the Feast of St. Joseph the Worker in 1955. It was a commemoration which had been knocking around since the 19th Century under different titles and ranks. That St. Joseph kept a second liturgical day on the Postconciliar calendar, when many saints lost the one they had, is a testimony to the gravity of the labor issue on the mind of the Church.

On both Joseph's March 19th major celebration, when his historic and celestial assistance is remembered, and his minor honor on May 1st, when his silent laborings are recalled, the hymn *Te Ioseph Celebrant* is sung at Vespers. We mightn't associate Latin liturgical hymnody with folk music, but really it is. It is no harder to sing than any folk piece, and a damn sight easier than many contemporary songs in those horrid missalettes.

When churchmen cease dumbing down the liturgical life of the faithful, once again the *Volk* can sing the decidedly folk piece *Te Ioseph Celebrant*. It honors the spiritual ends of labor with the stanza, "Death brings to other saints their rest/ Through toil they win the victor's place/ Thou happier, like the Angels blest/ Alive, hast seen God face to face."

*John Coleman co-hosts Christian History & Ideas, and is the founder of **Apocatastasis: An Institute for the Humanities**, an alternative college and high school in New Milford, Connecticut (USA). Apocatastasis is a school focused on studying the Western humanities in an integrated fashion, while at the same time adjusting to the changing educational field. Information about the college can be found at their website.*

*The image shows, "Protectors of our Industries," an illustration from Puck Magazine, February, 1883.*