

# Labor History Through Song – Part II

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September 1, 2020 John Coleman

## **Music – The Left’s Dilemma: Ethics Or Ideology?**

With the 1917 revolutions in Russia the international Left was flush with victory. Marx’s stages of history were seemingly vindicated and the capitalists were on the back foot. Then the purges, displacements, and reprisals began. In their moment of greatest victory, the workers’ movement, long in the neighborhood of the Left, was faced with a choice between ethics and ideology. Both sides would take to song.

The *Internationale* became one of the obvious rallying cries for the supporters of the new, scientifically managed, workers’ state. Written by laborer Eugène Pottier in June 1871, following the Paris Commune, the Soviet Union chose the song for its anthem in 1944. Its choice shows that not only Christians are interested in apostolic succession. The Bolsheviks

were eager to claim not just the support of the majority of Russians – “*bolsheviki*” means majority, a dubious appellation for Lenin’s party in 1917 – but also the mantle of the entire Leftist cause, going back to Pottier’s day and before.

With the devil-may-care boldness of a new regime in power, and with the proper modifications of the future into the present tense, the Soviet *Internationale* thunders belief in its self-sufficiency: “Stand up, ones who are branded by the curse/ All the world’s starving and enslaved!/ Our outraged minds are boiling/ Ready to lead us into a deadly fight/ We will destroy this world of violence/ Down to the foundations, and then/ We will build our new world/ He who was nothing will become everything!”

At the other end of the story, following the fall of the Soviet Union, Leon Rosselson’s *Song of the Old Communist* encapsulates the ultimately pro-Bolshevik stance of one communist painfully aware of the crimes of the USSR, yet doggedly in support of the movement still. Addressing smug post-Cold War Western capitalism, the chorus repeats, “You who have nothing at all to believe in/ You whose motto is ‘money comes first’/ Who are you to tell us that our lives have been wasted/ And all that we fought for has turned into dust?”

Anarchists, of course, were less enthused by Lenin-cum-Stalin’s Soviet Union. Alistair Hulett’s song, *Ethel On the Airwaves* is about the young Scottish broadcaster Ethel McDonald who traveled to Civil War Spain. The self-induced Republican collapse is referenced with the word, “Isolated and poorly armed, the revolution starts to fail/ Moscow gave the order, ‘Put the anarchists in jail.’” It continues, “Change the flag from black to red, the tide of revolution changed.” With friends of the Left like the Soviets, who needs enemies?

### **The Other Side Of The Story?**

As mentioned before, capital’s corpus of song is absolutely silent when it comes to the labor struggle, or rather their anti-labor struggle. It is not as if businessmen have proven bereft of the artistic touch. They’ve long kept songwriters busy churning out doggerel for all manner of kitsch. From diamonds and cars, to frying pans and beds, the bosses can be creative when they want. *Plop, plop, fizz, fizz, what a relief it is!*

The commercials of commercialism can rise to genuinely moving heights. We recall a spot from the late Super Bowl. Lasting all of a minute, it delineated the varieties of “love” known to men. The commercial probably contained more erudition, and it certainly contained more Greek, than modern church-goers hear all year. We viewers are near to tearing up until we come to the spot’s climax: it’s an insurance ad. Yes, indeed, moneymen have proven numinous when they want to be.

Clanking prison doors and cracking billy-clubs are all the “music” bosses have left for posterity. Yet we still want to know the other side of the story. Left to itself labor music is one-sided. Like any social group, labor plays up its triumphs and keeps mum on defeats.

If we don't have the opportunity of hearing musical composition from one entire side of our story, the owners, we must look at what we do have. We must look between the lines of labor songs themselves. Where and when have they been silent? What significant events in labor history have songsters not written about? Three come to mind. One is the 1981 Air Traffic Controllers' strike; another is the slow bleed of union membership these last 50 years; and the last is the chronic infighting which has sapped labor over the last century. These are vital events in the story of labor, and pointed musical omissions.

## **Masculinity**

*Which Side Are You On?* has doubtless secured its place in the canon of organizing music. Written in 1931 by Florence Reece, the wife of a union leader, the song is an example of shame being used in the musical arsenal of labor. Like many a folk song, the piece uses a local event to extrapolate on a larger theme. Which Side was written during the Harlan County War (1931-32) in the very hours following a police raid on Reece's Kentucky home. With the earnest tenor of the wronged, the wife-narrator declares, "You'll either be a union man/ Or a thug for J. H. Blair." And she pointedly asks, "Will you be a lousy scab/ Or will you be a man?" In a decidedly masculine job such as coal mining these are biting questions. The bone-weary work and obviously inequitable power balance leave little for miners to take pride in other than their masculinity.

The unfortunate narrator of *Bloody Harlan* informs us that he, "Was a full-grown man when I was 12 years old, got me a job mining coal." In this song Harlan's infamous "bloody" adjective is interpreted in a personal light. The circumstances are narrated, much of it related to the singer's limited means, which led to his imprisonment.

*Bloody Harlan* opens a whole vista of commentary on the nature of society, since the Industrial Revolution and its bifurcation of life into "public" and "private." He says, "From dawn to dusk is a miner's life/ My darling grew tired of being a coal haulers' wife/ This kind of life didn't suit her plans/ So she ran off with another man." Imprisoned for 33 years since killing his wife and her lover, the narrator is a worker 'til the end. When he dies, he requests that we, the listeners, "Carry me back, and let me body lie/ In the mines of Harlan, bloody Harlan." This is a fine crossover between the personal and the political. Masculine honor asserts itself as soon on the picket line as in amorous slights.

Going back to Reece's song, we also see the concept of generational continuity. For whatever reason, songs with industrial speakers and factory men, and particularly folk songs about coal mining, take an extraordinary pride in grandfathers and fathers and sons participating in the same occupation. Reese's piece begins, "My daddy was a miner/ And I'm a miner's son." This is an interesting expression to an active auditor, since we are as soon aware as the narrator that coalmining is an extremely undesirable occupation.

Britain's *Dalesman's Litany* bluntly states, "I've walked at night through Sheffield lanes/  
T'was just like being in hell/ Where furnaces thrust out tongues of fire/ And roared like the  
wind on the fell/ I've sammed up coals in Barnsley pit with muck up to my knee." I hate this  
job, I hope and pray that my kid doesn't get stuck here, but I'm proud to keep the family  
legacy alive. Such are the contradictions of song, and such are the contradictions of men.

## **Atlantic Crossover**

In *Banks of Marble*, we look at the cross-Atlantic journey of labor music. The American  
version written by New York apple-farmer Les Rice declares, "But the banks are made of  
marble/ With a guard at every door/ And the vaults are stuffed with silver/ That the farmer  
sweated for." Joining a most happy exodus, Banks became part of a long tradition of  
American music which has given expression to Irish topics. The U.S. contribution to Irish  
music is larger than commonly thought. For every Daniel O'Donnell or Seamus Moore  
keeping the 1990s honky-tonk flame burning strong in 2020's Dublin, there are dozens more  
irenic influences to atone for *Achy Breaky Heart* sung with an Irish brogue.

When *Banks of Marble* was recorded by the Irish Brigade band during The Troubles (1968-  
98), the civil rights movement-turned-insurgency-turned – thanks to MI5 – sectarian-  
killing-hamster wheel, Rice's song took on a more militant flavor.

Leftist labor consciousness was brought to the fore in 1969. That year the IRA split between  
the nationalist Provisionals and the communist Officials (pejoratively called, "the Red IRA").  
The Irish version of Banks of Marble now declared, "Let's rise up and take our country/ Let's  
rise up and take our land/ Let us all rise together/ For together we must stand." In case a  
listener was unclear on the song's sharpened teeth, the piece concludes, "We'll blow-up the  
banks of marble/ With the guards on every door/ And share out the vaults of silver/ That the  
worker sweated for." Tougher stuff this, as compared to the original.

## **Reinvention**

In *Solidarity Forever*, we see a piece of endless reinvention. It also distinctly contains the  
"obligatory positive verse," as singer Shannon Murray calls it, which is so customary in the  
folk tradition. Like the men and women who inspired it, labor folk has had to keep its spirits  
up in the face of setbacks and difficulties. Solidarity closes with, "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!"

## **Melodic Pedigree**

While it needn't be a 1:1 match, as evident in the dynamic we discussed between labor and  
religion, the tunes which a movement adopts for its material do matter. If you think this is a  
tenuous point, imagine a Sunday morning service praising God with the *Internationale*, or a

Liberal prime minister entering parliament to the *Horst Wessel Lied*.

*Solidarity Forever* is set to *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*. *Battle Hymn* is possibly the weirdest song to come out of the American Civil War. It's hardly a labor song in the sense we've been using the term, but the two pieces have similarities worth considering. Julia Ward Howe's song was written in 1861. It was at a time when the Civil War was underway, but at a stage before the real bloodletting began. The real work remained to be done, and everyone knew it.

Likewise *Solidarity Forever*. By its 1911 composition, the labor struggle was well underway. Events like the Haymarket Riots (1886) and the Shirtwaist Fire (1911) had attracted attention and sympathy to the workers' cause, yet when *Solidarity* was written the big fights were still to come. *Solidarity* came into the world before the Left was presented with the Soviet decision, before the General Strike of 1926, and before labor faced a whole new level of cant and co-option in the Postwar decades.

Ralph Chapin, *Solidarity Forever's* composer, knew the herculean efforts needed just to bring labor to negotiating parity with capital, let alone to achieve enduring success. As a boy he saw a union man shot dead by police. In Mexico, Chapin heard the firing squads of technocrat and Freemason Porfirio Diaz. Steeled by these experiences, steeled by the size of the struggle to come, the songs defiantly asks, "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?" The struggle can't be indefinite, however. As many an activist has learned, there must be a silver lining to strive for.

## Updates

In the best tradition of folk music, *Solidarity Forever's* lyrics also have proven plastic and elastic, as labor allocations have shifted, since its composition during the Second Industrial Revolution (c.1850-1950). The original song obviously is designed with agricultural and manual laborers in mind ("It is we who plowed prairies, built the cities where they trade/ Dug the mines and built the workshops, endless miles of railroad laid"). However, as such situations became less the experience of modern workers, the website of the I.W.W. proudly notes a number of updates which have been made over the last decades.

Women's concerns are noted in the Wobblies' Hungarian versions, "It is we who wash dishes, scrub the floors, and clean the dirt/ Feed the kids and send them off to school – and then we go to work/ Where we work for half men's wages for a boss who likes to flirt/ But the union makes us strong!"

Racial concerns find their way into Canada's *Solidarity*, "When racism in all of us is finally out and gone/ Then the union movement will be twice as powerful and strong/ For equality for everyone will move the cause along/ For the union makes us strong!"

The flagging labor participation which so defined the cause since 1973 Oil Crisis is addressed with this stanza, “They say our day is over; they say our time is through/ They say you need no union if your collar isn’t blue/ Well that is just another lie the boss is telling you/ For the Union makes us strong!”

All God’s creatures got a place in the choir, and educationalists find theirs with the words, “The schools were underfunded and the teachers got no supplies/ The district hoarded money and fed us a bunch of lies/ The union finally responded to the working people’s cries/ So the teachers joined as one.” Oddly enough, this addition to *Solidarity Forever* is difficult to sing without alterations. For a profession which is endearingly punctilious in their protest signage, this particular composition doesn’t quite fit the metre.

## **Folk Mythology**

This essay is a celebration of labor music. Even in setbacks and outright defeats, we’ve seen how music celebrates this enduring aspect of life. We turn now to the most playful and sincere subgenre in labor folk: the mythologization of workers into folk heroes. The cynicism so characteristic of the 20th-century sours us to this topic. After all, Lei Feng and Alexey Starhonov are two phony, party-made characters whom millions were encouraged to emulate. They may have lived, they may even have done impressive deeds, but whatever truth there once was to them is long gone by the time party apparatchiks were through. The world was well along in humorless modernity by the 19th-century, but not so far gone as to fake folk heroes like those of a century later.

In Ewan McColl’s *Big Hewer*, our narrator was fit for work from day one. He says, “In a cradle of coal in the darkness I was laid, go down/ Down in the dirt and darkness I was raised, go down/ Cut me teeth on a five-foot timber/ Held up the roof with my little finger/ Started me time away in the mine, go down.”

In *The Ballad of John Henry*, we meet a like peculiar infant, “John Henry was about three days old/ Sittin’ on his papa’s knee/ He picked up a hammer and a little piece of steel/ Said, ‘Hammer’s gonna be the death of me, Lord, Lord/ Hammer’s gonna be the death of me.’”

Paul Bunyan meshes Canadian and American logging tales in a mythos pleasant to both peoples. He is sufficiently obsessive in his work ethic to appeal to Americans, yet his trade is bucolic enough to appeal to Canadians as well. Like the endearing Henry, Bunyan boasts remarkable strength and size. Danny Mack’s *Ballad of Paul Bunyan* states that he was, “Taller than a Maine pine tree, bigger than King Kong in that old movie.” Many a son of many a mother has wondered his paternity, but not our Paul. “I’ll tell you how he came to be/ The son of a great white oak was he.”

If you blink you’ll miss the giantism which affects not only Bunyan himself, but also his surroundings. “His father,” we hear in the song Paul Bunyan, “was a redwood tree/ From out in California.... That western Minnesota.” Again, “He took Arizona in his hand, and made a

line in the sand/ He made a canyon and called it grand/... in southern Minnesota.” And once more, “The silt began to rock one morning/ All the folk knew Paul was born/ And ships were wrecked going ‘round the Horn [of Africa]/.... In southern Minnesota.” Giant states for giant men.

A darker take on North American’s most famous lumberjack is Hick’ry Hawkins’ song, also disarmingly named *The Ballad of Paul Bunyan*. Hawkin’s go is less a story fit for Disney and more apt for a cheesy B movie. The song contains the ominous refrain, “The sins of the fathers will be paid for by the sons.” Bunyan is imagined as a horrible vagrant which the town is afraid of discussing.

The appearance in Midwestern newspapers of various Bunyan tales around 1900 is a phenomenon historians have actually written about. Hawkins’ scary song sets the record straight. You see, the mortified townsmen, “Told a fancy legend so the logger camps would stay.” But the city fathers only had themselves to blame since, “A boy into a monster took the whole damn town to raise/ Cut and beat and chained up, they buried him away.” Who knew the lovable figure reared in our minds by the New Christy Minstrels, and, alas inevitably, by Walt’s animation Kingdom, had such a rough childhood!

Hawkins’ imaginative take goes to show that once a figure enters the folk mind there’s no telling where he will end up. And if your avocation requires an ax, you’re almost certainly destined for the likes of Abraham Lincoln Vampire Hunter.

## **Workplace Safety**

From the revelry of Industrial Revolution mythology to safety on the factory floor, tragedy in American history has also been memorialized in song. The Triangle Shirtwaist, March 25, 1911, was a remarkable event for both labor safety and organization. Shirtwaists are Edwardian blouses, and on that date 145 workers horrifically died making them. Their bosses were in the habit of locking the workers in, so most workers jumped to their deaths.

One song which addresses this is Ruthie Rublin’s *Ballad of the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire*. It says, “Then on that fateful day, dear God, most terrible of days/ When that fire broke out it grew into a mighty blaze/ In that firetrap way up there, with but a single door/ So many innocent working girls burned to live no more.” It might be rash to blame the company owners for something as uncontrollable as a fire, except that a year later they were caught locking once again the exit doors of their new factory!

Long a favorite of hard-wintered Anglosphere lands, coal mining songs haven’t stopped short of addressing the hazards of the profession. *Big Coal Don’t Like This Man At All* brings our story to the present day. It is about Charles Scott Howard, his court fights for miner safety, and the opprobrium organizers perennially get for their humanitarian efforts. The narrator says, “It’s safety versus profits, Howard has no doubt/ When miners are endangered, he knows he must speak out/ They’ve fired him and fined him, tried to put him in his place/ But

the courts just reinstate him. He always wins his case.” Like many a reformer before him, however, bosses resent the new cost of safe working spaces. The song continues, “Fighting for miners’ safety causes stress and strain/ Last summer working underground, there was an injury to his brain/ He was found slumped unconscious in his mining car/ He still has no memories of that incident so far.”

## **2020: Atomized And Gentrified But Still Singing**

Digitization, automation, and union busting have not stymied the throats of workingmen. David Rovic is a repeat guest on my show and he occasionally highlights Apocatastasis’ seasonal educational events. He sings in *Living On the Streets of LA*, “So many mansions overlooking the sea/ Stretch limos, Rolls Royces, and movie stars all over Los Angeles County/ It’s 2019, and one thing I know it that most people wish we could rewind to a couple of decades ago/ Before the rents tripled folks began to move out into their cars, into their tents, where drivers look on however loudly you shout.” The wealth disparity of our age is brought home as the song continues, “It’s 2019, but in a black and white photo it could be 1929 wherever you go/ In every single neighborhood hungry people wonder why/ Some make billions on a blockbuster why so many are left out to die.” With the late Coronavirus labor disruptions, Rovic’s association to 1929 may be most apropos.

## **Conclusion**

Labor is intimate. It is who we are. Not in a capitalist or communist sense do I say this, not in the tone that one’s social worth consists in being a worker. I say we are laborers in the perennial tradition of long-downtrodden, much-forgotten Christendom. The drive to work is the drive to create. It is one of the theopneustic echoes which remind us of our origin and end.

Perennially under the threat of swindling, menacing, and outright violence, the working man continues to agitate, organize, and sing. He sings of his frustrations, and his struggles, and his history, and his myths, and, most important, his resolve. This resolve is as encouraging as to the state of the workers’ struggle, as it is to the state of humanity.

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The image shows, “Song of the Lark,” by Jules Breton, painted in 1884.