Singing and Learning Labor History

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Beyond the White Males among Labor Songwriters

Hazel Dickens, “Fire in the Hole”
Bev Grant, “We Were There”
John L. Handcox, “Roll the Union On”
Aunt Molly Jackson, “Hardtimes in Coleman’s Mines”
Bernice Johnson Reagon, “Greed”
Florence Reece, “Which Side Are You On”
Peggy Seeger, “I’m Gonna Be an Engineer”
Ella Mae Wiggins, “The Mill Mother’s Lament”

Labor Choruses and Singing Groups in US & Canada

Charm City Labor Chorus (Baltimore)
DC Labor Chorus
Fruit of Labor Singing Ensemble (Raleigh, NC)
Left Coast Labor Chorus (Vancouver)
NYC Labor Chorus
San Francisco Rockin’ Solidarity Labor Chorus
Seattle Labor Chorus
Solidarity Singers of NJ Industrial Union Council
Twin Cities Labor Chorus
Brief Timeline of Singing in US Labor Movement

**Slavery era**
Slaves sang to express anguish and hope. Abolitionist movement employed singing.

1871
Fisk Jubilee Singers formed to raise funds for Fisk University.

1886
Knights of Labor published first labor songbook to gain international usage.

1909
First printing of Little Red Songbook by Industrial Workers of the World (Wobblies).

1912
Bread & Roses Strike of textile workers in Lawrence, MA inspired classic labor song (James Oppenheim).

Pre-19th Amendment of 1920
Singing was important in meetings and protests of the movement for women’s suffrage.

1910s to 30s
Labor colleges used songbooks to promote singing of labor songs.

1930s
Singing became regular part of strikes during the Great Depression, before/during rise of Congress of Industrial Organizations.

WWII
Almanac Singers shifted from labor and peace songs to pro-war and anti-fascist songs.

1947
Taft-Hartley Act curtailed rights of unions.

1950-53
McCarthyism attacked unions and all artists with pro-labor message. Government revoked Paul Robeson’s passport.

1950s – 1960s
Singing had important role in the Civil Rights Movement.

1981
President Reagan fired striking air-traffic controllers.

1991
NYC Labor Chorus starts with help from Pete Seeger in finding director. At least six more labor choruses in North America have formed since then.
Bibliography for Music in the US Labor Movement


