

and more. Faced with the plethora of scholarship in each of these fields, we all tend to focus on one or two of these interlocking issues in our own work. We do so at our own peril. The analyses provided by each of these sets of scholarship will enrich our thinking, writing, and teaching. If we cannot read everything on every topic (and no one can any more), then we will have to be more aggressive in finding other ways of sharing our attempts to integrate these issues into our work, and more open to new angles on old topics.

Promoting Labor's Heritage of Solidarity: The Great Labor Arts Exchange

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From the slave spirituals to the songs of the sit-down strikes and the labor theater of the 1930s, music and the arts have been an integral part of working people's struggles in the United States. Yet working people's efforts to organize, make a living, or resist injustices are rarely reflected by the "entertainment industry," which for the most part buries labor culture in trivial pursuits or degrading stereotypes.

A number of well-known commercial artists in recent years have begun to reassert the tradition of musical and dramatic protest, and a few have turned to labor themes. One recent example of the popular revival of the protest tradition is the Smithsonian Institution's Folkways album (jointly issued by Columbia Records), *A Vision Shared*, with songs of Leadbelly and Woody Guthrie performed by Sweet Honey in the Rock, Bob Dylan, Little Richard, Bruce Springsteen, U2, Willie Nelson, Emmylou Harris, Taj Mahal, John Mellencamp, Brian Wilson, Arlo Guthrie, Doc Watson, and Pete Seeger. Many more—organizers, musicians, educators, editors, union officials, actors, and working people from all walks of life—have been applying music and the arts in union struggles, on picket lines, in demonstrations, and in union halls as well as in front of university and community audiences. The use of labor's artistic and cultural traditions has been increasingly important during the 1980s as a way to counter an antilabor political culture and mind-numbing commercial entertainment with a culture of empowerment and change.

These efforts have been nurtured in recent years by a series of annual conferences where participants swap song, theater, poetry, painting, cartoons, film, and other forms of artistic endeavors. Titled "The Great Labor Arts Exchange," these meetings have been held since 1984 at the George Meany Labor Studies Center in Silver Spring, Maryland. A wide range of activists—workers

involved in battles against union-busting coal companies in West Virginia and Wyoming, strikers from Yale and organizers from Harvard, a South African woman educating the public about the Shell boycott for the United Mineworkers, United Auto Workers members involved in the “Workers Concept Theater” in Detroit, farm workers organizers, Salvadoran trade unionists, airline attendants blacklisted for union activity, and many others have brought their struggles to these conferences. Historic figures such as John Handcox (author of “Roll the Union On,” and a tenant farmer organizer during the 1930s), and James Orange, Bernice Reagon Johnson, Guy Carawan, and other song leaders of the 1960s civil rights struggles have appeared there to reintroduce their music. Stalwarts of labor and folk music Pete Seeger and Joe Glazer have continually offered their support and knowledge to new generations of musicians and organizers. Hundreds of people have now passed through the Great Labor Arts Exchange, and each year new concepts, traditions, and forms for empowering workers have appeared.

Held each June, the Great Labor Arts Exchange is organized by the Labor Heritage Foundation (LHF), officially incorporated as a nonprofit foundation in 1983. Its board includes union leaders, musicians, artists, organizers, and educators, and it is staffed part-time by Laurel Blaydes, a well-known singer and swing band leader in Washington. The Foundation is housed in offices donated by the AFL-CIO’s Industrial Union Department, whose director, Joe Uehlein, serves as LHF president. Joe Glazer, employed by a variety of unions since the 1940s to do musical and educational work, chairs the organization, and Saul Schniderman, a union activist and publisher of *Talkin’ Union*, a magazine of labor music and folklore, is LHF’s secretary (and the third guiding light). According to its own description, the Foundation seeks to promote labor’s rich heritage of music and art in local unions and in organizing drives, rallies, marches, and strikes, and, more generally, to “educate, organize, and reform within the labor movement and among the general public.” It also seeks to build links among performing artists and to help produce “a timely and vital body of art which speaks to the interests of working people today.”

The Foundation not only sponsors the Arts Exchanges in Washington but also has helped local organizers to promote regional labor arts exchanges in Chicago, Detroit, Santa Cruz, Ft. Madison (Iowa), Pawtucket, and Seattle (and has published a booklet on how to organize arts exchanges). It has produced and promoted concerts and provided musicians for striking Phelps-Dodge workers, for other union meetings and rallies, for labor history conferences and university audiences, and for the general public. It published a Labor Heritage songbook; is promoting Pete Seeger and Robert Reiser’s new compendium of labor songs, *Carry It On*; and publishes a newsletter, *Art Works*. It presented a performance of “Ladybeth,” a play by and about unemployed steelworkers. On the twenty-year anniversary of the death of Martin Luther King, Jr., it contributed music to “Jobs with Justice” rallies in the South. The LHF currently promotes a history-music program on the links between the labor and civil rights movements, and makes a variety of musicians

and artists available to interested groups. Of particular use for classrooms is a thirty-minute video tape, "Singin' for the Union," filmed at the Labor Arts Exchange and aired on public television on Labor Day in 1985.

Labor Heritage started out as an idea in a workshop on labor song writing at the George Meany Labor Studies Center. While supported by and affiliated with AFL-CIO unions, it remains financially independent and organizationally autonomous. Like most such organizations, much of its work is done by volunteers. Based on her experience in the last several years, Laurel Blaydes concludes that "the sense that music and art can promote the interests of working people is spreading."

For literature, songbooks, recordings, videos, and information about the Labor Arts Exchange held each June, contact Laurel Blaydes, LHF, 815 16th St. NW, Room 301, Washington, DC 20006 (202/842-7880). The LHF's program of songs, photographs (slide show), and narrative, "Links on the Chain: Songs and History of the Labor and Civil Rights Movements," performed by Michael Honey and David Sawyer, is also available for booking. It has been an especially popular program for Black History Month presentations on campuses and in public schools.