

“Union in All Our Hearts, All Our Hearts Joined as One”:

Art and the Labor Struggle

By: Samantha Cole

*For my father, as well as all who have sacrificed their lives, art, and work fighting blue-bloods
for the good of the blue-collared.*

Introduction

This collection dedicated to my father, John David Cole. Though not researched, the following piece is sketched from his life and events he has experienced while working in a nonunionized factory in Berea, Kentucky for around 25 years after migrating from Ohio, a largely unionized state. Time and again I have had fellow students ask me why I wanted to put together a poetry collection focusing on artists within the labor movement, or how I first got interested in the union cause. I hope this poem gives the reader a better idea why I pursued such a project.

The Roving Picket

Daddy, I heard tell other workers
spit on you because
you wore that UAW shirt
on the factory floor.
Heard about how you only talked
with those who signed
their Union, Yes! cards.

Twenty-something years
is an awful long time
for your family having
to hear you bitch nightly
about your bosses,
the suck-workers, the cowards.
To hear cuss words fly
from your Teamster-trained mouth.

Solidarity infused
with my blood
by your hardships,
ringed-eyes, and thrown-out
back. Each day, walking
more lowly,
body twisted
by the demands of endless
shifts. Times on and off.

Constant fear clawing
at the backs of your eyelids.
Doctors and sick days avoided,
family vacations planned
but never taken.
No retirement fund,
401K liquidated,
insurance cancelled.
Ten hour days,
seven days a week,
cheating you
of a full lifetime.

The Psalter reads,
“For thou shalt eat the labor
of thine hands: happy
shalt thou be, and it shall
be well...”
Where is your happiness?
Where does your savior dwell?
In lofty cathedrals?
In candy colored stained glass?
Or perhaps
marching hand-in-hand
with men as broken
as yourself.

Billy Bragg



Fieldtrip to Dagenham

Your first musical memory? “...hearing Simon and Garfunkel's ‘The Boxer’ on the coach on a school trip to Holland, and it really moved me, moved me to tears.”

Billy failed his 11-plus...and ended up at the secondary modern, where all the kids were intended for the Ford plant at Dagenham. “I'd been taken to the main body plant a couple of times by school careers officers, and it was like Hades.” (Ross) (Image adapted from: <http://www.last.fm/music/Billy+Bragg/+images/2805455>)

Teachers had given up on you
and your schoolmates
from Barking. Had decided,
from dirty streets you had come,
and to dirty streets you should
return.

So they took you to the place
have-nots were destined for,
a place where the stench of fire
stung your throat.
Where boys, forced into
laboring manhood,
handled shining metal
to be placed on vehicles
they could never afford off the lot.

And you thought of your dead
daddy,
his fingers yellowing from smoke,
lung rattling. Too long spent sewing
hats and caps for men
who stumbled back and forth
to the sound of the shift whistle.

These sensibilities,
along with the voices
of Art and Simon, kept you away
from the factory floor.
Though the hammer's
rhythmic clanging remained forever
in your bones.
Still to that tune you sing.

Hazel Dickens

Raised in a company coal town on the border of Kentucky and West Virginia by a preaching father and mother, Hazel Dickens (left) saw the struggle of workers in her hometown growing up. She often sings about the problems of the coal industry, and also attended union rallies, pickets, and meetings to perform. Her voice was heard on the award-winning documentary Harlan Co. USA, which documents the attempts of miners in a Harlan County, Kentucky coal mine to fight for a union contract with the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA). She is still living. (Dickens)



(Image from: <http://www.thelyricarchive.com/artist/18353/Hazel-Dickens>)

“Busted...”

Little mountain girl,
pity your soul.
A black shadow
crept over
your childhood
of shouting and amens.

A sorrow found
in dust-covered faces
twisted your young voice.
Gave you a mournful wail
meant to tell of people’s troubles,
meant to make those unfamiliar
feel the gaping pit
in your chest.

Heart torn out by draglines,
mules, and swinging pickaxes
that left an open mine there
to howl when you
opened your mouth,
took a breath, and
sang.

Sarah Ogan Gunning



(Courtesy of Candy Carawan)
Sarah Ogan Gunning, labor organizer and musician, 1919-1983.

Born in 1910, Sarah Ogan Gunning (right) was raised in Harlan County, Kentucky. Her life was full of sorrow, from the death of her parents at an early age, to the death of her husband and her own children who starved to death during the years of Bloody Harlan in the 1930s. Two things gave this young widow hope: singing, and the promise of a better life through an organized workforce. She traveled to New York, where she sang with the likes of Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, and Hazel Dickens. In 1983, she died. Gunning's best known song remains, "Which Side Are You On?". (Gunning) (Image from: <http://softrockrenegade.blogspot.com/2010/04/watch-sarah-ogan-gunning-come-all-ye.html>)

Even Dreadful Memories Shall Pass

What a miracle, Ms. Gunning,
that they could forget
about you. Forget
your Daddy lying
dead on the cabin floor,
the bullet holes in your walls left
by streaks of orange gun fire
from the gun barrels of thugs.
A miracle you escaped
to New York town
from these hills.
Along the way, filled your carpetbag
with your own songs and stories.
Union good news
to spread during daytime.
Though nights were spent lamenting
to the tune a banjo
and a lonesome respirator's click.
Now, pretty Sar-o,
we're glad you've gone
on before us. Never living
to see the day when companies lie,
saying there's no more black lung,
and the miners ain't united
anymore.

Pete Seeger

MR. TAVENNER: Are you a member of the Communist Party now?

MR. SEEGER: My answer is the same.

MR. SCHERER: I ask for a direction on that question.

CHAIRMAN WALTER: I direct you to answer.

MR. SEEGER: My answer is the same as before.

MR. TAVENNER: I have no further questions, Mr. Chairman.

CHAIRMAN WALTER: The witness is excused. (US Congress)



Pete Seeger (above) was sentenced to a year in jail for contempt of Congress after his testimony to the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) but appealed his case successfully after a fight that lasted until 1962. Many of the questions at the HUAC hearing revolved around his activities at union and leftist gatherings. At this first court appearance when he asked the judge about bail during sentencing, the judge replied, "There is no bail. Bailiff, take him away." (Dunaway, 205)

(Image from: <http://cableandtweed.blogspot.com/2006/05/legendary-pete-seeger-26.html>)

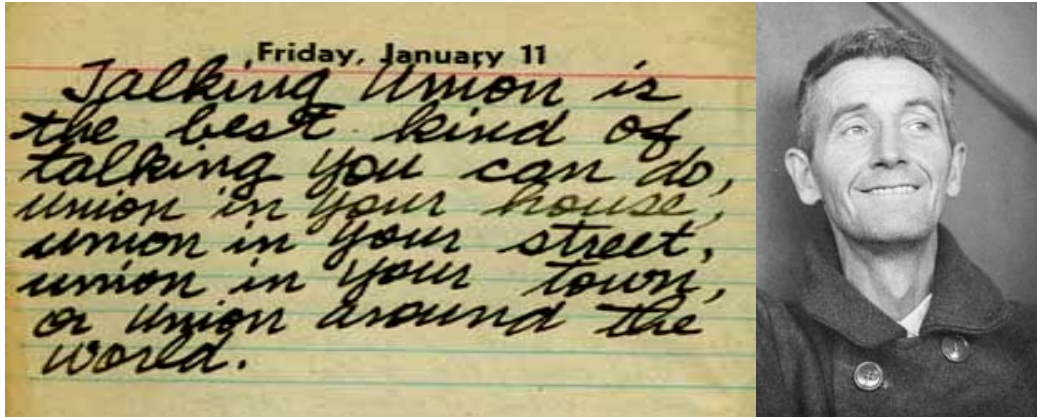
After the Testimony Given to the House Un-American Activities Committee

For the likes of you,
there is no such thing as bail,
for the likes of Communists,
for the likes of peaceable young
men.
Not for those who have adopted
a poor man's ways over letters
and concert halls over
halls of education.

Instead, they're going
to take your banjo,
try to crush it under
the heel of government.
Try to stitch shut your mouth
by sticking your name on a blacklist,
barring you from the stage,
forcing you to beg for scraps
from the people you've tried to save.

HUAC, you never understood.
The answer remains the same.
To force this man down
into the bowels of labor
would only make the workers
resurrect him.

Woody Guthrie



The above was written by Woody Guthrie (also pictured above) in one of his notebooks and reads, "Talking union is the best kind of talking you can do, union in your house, union in your street, union in your town, or union around the world." Guthrie wrote many folksongs such as, "This Land is Your Land," "Talking Union," and "Pastures of Plenty," that told of the hardships of people during the years of the Dust Bowl. (The Woody Guthrie Archives) (Images from: The Woody Guthrie Archives: New York. From: <http://www.woodyguthrie.org/curriculum/curunions.htm>. Photo of Woody from: <http://www.woodyguthrie.org/biography/biography8.htm>)

Ode to a Singing Red

"Sit right here,
I'll tell what I'll do.
Gonna talk a little union
to yer fam'ly and you."

I've seen my people scattered,
workers to the wind.
Hitched rides on trains, heard
hobos and gambling men howl
as they've been beaten
by thug brigades
along picket lines.

"Call a meetin', boys,
heed my song.
Don't organize,
the boss'll cheat ya
all 'fore long."

Able hands standing
in bread lines, backs hunched.
Fates mourned
in government camps.
For Oakie, Hillbilly,
Peckerwood rights
I'll shout till I die.
This dirty faced troubadour
from Okemah
don't care a wit
for bossing folk.

"Union, far as the eye can see.
Joint with the ladies auxiliary."

Don West

Don West (below) got involved with labor largely because he believed his Appalachian heritage and ancestors believed in a more egalitarian society, no matter



class or race. The son of Georgian sharecroppers, West saw the hardships of physical labor among the poor firsthand. He helped to cofound the Highlander Folk School along with Myles Horton in Monteagle, Tennessee. An institution originally focused on organizing workers in the South,

the center later branched out into the fight for Civil Rights. He died in 1992.

(Biggers,

11-18)

(Image

from:

http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/media_content/m-7789.jpg)

Meeting of the Sickle and Plow

Mountain boy, I saw your blood pooled
on the streets of Rome and Atlanta.

Left your wife at home in the hills
to go on down to the meeting,
risk your neck, put body and heritage
on the line.

The scent of sulfur
and smoke forever imbued
in your nostrils,
overalls as your uniform.

Men you once loved
with sun tanned skin
and liver spots,
turning their backs
on you due to politics
when all you wanted
was to empower
those with blue collars.

O, Georgia cracker,
self titled mountaineer,
red blooded Communist,
in your legacy you left poetry
and radicals
who will shape the future
of these hills.

Upton Sinclair

*Upton Sinclair (right) was a struggling young Socialist writer before the publication of his novel, *The Jungle* around 1905, which led to the eventual passing of the Pure Food and Drug Act in 1906 and the establishment of the FDA. He spent a winter in his hometown of Chicago among immigrants in the packing district before writing his book. Greatly moved by the struggles and hardships those on the factory floors endured, he decided to write a story that told of the struggle over wage slavery among the working poor. Instead, the public was concerned with the horrific conditions portrayed in the meat industry. Sinclair said in his autobiography, “I aimed at the public’s heart, and by accident hit it in the stomach.” (Kantor, 1202-4) (Image from: <http://www.slate.com/id/2144889/>)*



The Whole World, a Jungle

If I hadn't been brought
up by a father,
bleary eyed and purple nosed
from drink, and if I hadn't
seen Chicago,
it's underside
in seemingly peaceful Winter,
its slums and immigrants,
I wouldn't have needed to speak
out with pen
and pencil.

Nose covered
to keep from retching
at the sight of bloody muck
that seeped from killing floors
of both animals
and families. Workers
from wool mills begging
in the frozen streets,
their fingers to nubs,
dissolved.

If I hadn't written,
“CHICAGO WILL BE OURS!”
perhaps editors would not
have turned me away,
sent men in coats
to investigate my sanity,
thrown my manuscript in the pile
marked for the landfill.

When my triumph
finally appeared,
hand bound in the same factories
I learned to loathe,
the public mourned,
though not for the packers,
who watched themselves
and theirs
slowly go to the butcher
in sleek assembly lines.
Instead, they bemoaned
sausage casings,
pickles, and potted ham.

Years blinded with tears of rage.
Chicago, never ours.

Lewis Hine



A native of Oshkosh, Wisconsin, Lewis Hine traveled the country taking pictures of the many children who worked in American industry in the early 20th century. Each of the photographs he took was inscribed with a small anecdote about working conditions, age, wages, place of employment, etc. of his subjects. These photographs still speak to what many during this period termed, “child slavery” in America among immigrants and the poor, and Hine’s work led to the change of child labor laws. (Freedman, 7; 1-2). All of the children appearing in the proceeding poem are products of my imagination, with the exception of Shorpy Higginbotham. His photo with other “greasers” appears to the left. (Image adapted from: <http://www.shorpy.com/node/2>)

Inscriptions on Photographs

“Michael and James ‘Ginger’ Evans,
aged ten and twelve,
breaker boys,
Pittston Mines.”

“Jerome Kelly,
aged nine,
exhibiting crippled hand
from twine machine,
Boston.”

“Deborah Levawitz,
aged thirteen,
works up to twenty hours daily
painting labels on tin cans,
New York City.”

“Shorpy Higginbotham,
aged ten, poses
with other boys employed
as greasers, at Bessie Mine,
one being his older brother.
Dropped out of school
at age six, worked ever since,

Alabama.”

“Flora Belle Milton,
aged eight,
starts her workday
in the mule room
at Rome Cotton Mills
by three a.m.
Rome, Georgia.”

“Crowd of shrimpers
in canning plant. Counted
upwards of twenty children,
some looking appearing young
as six. Were told to say
they were at least thirteen.
Highly doubtful.”

Being of greedy heart and mind,
let us put the littlest ones to work.

Here,
in everlasting black and white,
are the ones bosses worked
right to the grave.

Diego Rivera

One of the most well-known Mexican artists of the 20th century, Diego Rivera was a political radical. He supported unions because of his involvement in the Mexican Communist Party. In many of his murals, his beliefs concerning labor, unions, and Communism are portrayed side-by-side. This caused Rivera hardships, especially in America. In 1933, he was commissioned to create a mural in the grand lobby of Rockefeller Center in New York. The mural, part of which is pictured above, is



entitled, Man at the Crossroads. In it a working man is portrayed as the center of the universe, with Communism and the promise of a better life through unionization on one side, technology and the upper classes, or bourgeois, on the other side. Rivera decided to include the Communist leader Joseph Lenin in the far right corner among the working people. Soon after he did this, the mural was taken down, broken into pieces, and thrown away. (Wood) (Image from: <http://jb350.k12.sd.us/Art%20Website/rivera.htm>)

Fifty-five Gallon Drums

They have taken my mural
from the walls, hidden
it in pieces
from the eyes
of the masses.

Plaster and paint mixed
by my own olive hands
destroyed by sledgehammers,
piled in fifty-five gallon drums,
hauled to where rats scurry
and pigeons feast on refuse.

And I say, you who have climbed
the ladders rung with bones,
lashed with sinew
torn from the backs
of the Irishman, Russian, Mexican,
tear it down. Throw it away.
Crush the labors of my soul.

Revolution will forever
live in my paint-box,
just as people will forever
unite where struggle abounds.

You were simply afraid
because I had painted
the faces of their once saviors.
While you wished for workers
to remain blind,
I was busy spreading
sight-giving mud over their eyes.

Viva, viva, cathedral of greed,
now cathedral of liberation.
The altar
set for both the living
and dying, but alive,
so inscribed: "The unions
are the locomotives moving
the train of the revolution."

David Alfaro Siqueiros



David Alfaro Siqueiros was a Mexican muralist who was a contemporary of Diego Rivera. Though much more radical. A union activist, union member, and prolific painter, Siqueiros' politics was a constant theme in his artwork. To the left is his mural entitled, Portrait of the Bourgeoisie. Many may wonder why the members of the upper class were portrayed by the artist as soldiers, bringers of destruction, and lovers of war. I would argue that it is because of Siqueiros' life experiences. Not only did his artwork speak for his

convictions, but so did his war record. He was a soldier in the Mexican Revolution, and also fought with antifascist forces in Spain. Just as he saw fellow soldiers being sent to fight wars began by the members of the upper class, Siqueiros also saw workers fighting to make a living in unfair and unsafe conditions. He was jailed several times for his involvement in the labor movement, and was even exiled from Mexico for a number of years. He died in 1974. (Tuck) (Image from: <http://www.artexpertswebsite.com/pages/artists/siqueiros.php>)

For the Commonwealth of All Workers

To you, dear one,
from the city of the dog
I give you a soldier,
dressed in flak jacket.

A man with a gun forever
shoved into his pocket,
loaded, in case the need should
arise. A piece of charcoal tucked
in the other. He will portray
for the public
your nightmares,
the horrors you glimpse
at night after lying to rest.

Babies weeping,
fire in the cities,
mothers starving,
children at their sides.

When he sees the wrongs
you've been put through,
hears the dictators who believe
lives of others belong to government,
watch your man work.

Picking up his paintbrush,
mixing pigments,
smearing them with white
plaster to make the colors
of earth, of skin,
cured and toughened by sun, wind,
and brutal labor.

He is an unbeliever in greed
costumed in bankrolls.
A red-clothed revolutionary
rejected by his homeland,
his solace will lie in continual war.

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