



## GUIDE TO TEACHING LABOR’S STORY

Incorporate the experiences of working men, women and children into your existing curriculum with professionally selected & resourced documents

**Source Selection and Teaching Guide** by Nikki Mandell, Professor of History, emerita, University of Wisconsin-Whitewater.

<p>Historical Era</p> <p><b>THE GREAT DEPRESSION AND WORLD WAR II (1929-1945)</b></p> <p>Document 8.1</p>	<p>Document Title: <b>U.A.W.– C.I.O., 1942</b></p> <p>Document Type: <b>Song</b></p> <p>BRIEF DESCRIPTION:</p> <p>This song is about the struggles by auto workers to organize a union and their patriotic pride as both producers for and soldiers in the American war effort during World War II. It equates unionism with patriotism.</p>
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### SOURCING THE SOURCE

Song lyrics written by Butch Hawes and Bess Lomax Hawes, 1942. The Hawes’ were members of the social activist Almanac Singers. Other members of the group included: Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, Lee Hays and Millard Lampell.

Audio recording by the Union Boys, for Asch Records’ “Songs for Victory: Music for Political Action,” 1944. The Union Boys were drawn from the Almanac Singers, and closely connected musicians for the purpose of making the 1944 recording. The Union Boys were: Burl Ives, Tom Glazer, Alan Lomax, Brownie McGhee, Pete Seeger, Sonny Terry, and Josh White.

**Intended Audience:** All Americans, broadly. In actuality, the audiences for live performances and the recording consisted primarily of gatherings of union members and political progressives committed to social justice causes, labor organizing, and U.S. victory in WWII.

### UNDERSTANDING THE SOURCE

**Historical Context:**

The Great Depression (1929-1940) is the medium-term backdrop for the story and sentiments in this song. Although millions of people were desperate for work, many millions were also desperate for wages that would make it possible to support their families and for working conditions that respected their human dignity

and did not threaten their health and safety. There was a great upsurge in workers' efforts to form or join labor unions. Since unions were not legal at the time workers were often met with violence and arrests.

This began to change with passage of two labor relations laws during President Franklin D. Roosevelt's first term. The second and most significant of these laws, the 1935 National Labor Relations Act [NLRA, aka the Wagner Act] granted workers the right to form unions and obligated employers to bargain in good faith with those unions. The NLRA also created the National Labor Relations Board [NLRB] to administer the law. Many employers refused to comply with the law. Since NLRB rulings were slow in coming and not well-enforced, it was up to workers to turn the law on the books into a reality in their lives. The most famous and influential effort to do this erupted between the newly-formed United Auto Workers union [UAW] and General Motors Corporation [GM]. The UAW's sit-down strike against GM (December 30, 1936-February 11, 1937) drew national attention. The strike ended when GM agreed to meet in contract talks with UAW representatives.

Despite the UAW victory and the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling a few months later that the NLRA was constitutional, a number of employers still refused to follow the law. These stand-offs reached a new crescendo in 1941 after President Roosevelt declared that the United States must become a "great arsenal of democracy," producing the "guns, planes, ships and many other things" needed by Great Britain and others fighting the spread of fascism.<sup>1</sup> As defense production and corporate profits increased, the Congress of Industrial Organizations [CIO] embarked on a campaign to enforce workers' right to organize and to improve wages. Historian Nelson Lichtenstein reports that there was a "strike wave of historic proportions" in 1941 with "4,288 strikes involving almost 2.4 million men and women."<sup>2</sup> One of the key battles occurred between the UAW and Ford Motor Company. Six years of on-again-off-again confrontations had left Ford's pro-union workers literally beaten and bruised and Henry Ford still refusing to allow the mandated NLRB union election. That spring tens of thousands of Ford workers went out on strike. The intensity of his workers' solidarity, in combination with government pressure to keep production going, and his wife's lobbying finally forced Ford to negotiate a contract with the UAW.

The Almanac Singers, whose members wrote and performed the "U.A.W.-C.I.O." song, strongly supported these labor organizing efforts. Formed in 1939, the Almanac Singers' repertoire promoted social, economic and political justice and the fight against fascism. The Almanacs appeared most frequently at union meetings and labor rallies. Their songs validated the lives and needs of working people, celebrated working class solidarity, and encouraged political activism as a patriotic right. Always singing on the side of struggling workers and farmers, the Almanacs initially opposed calls for to the U.S. to join the European war. Their isolationism reflected socialist and communist beliefs that politicians and the capitalist class were once again sending working men off to fight and die in a war that would benefit only the capitalist class. They reversed position, however, when Germany invaded the Soviet Union in mid-1941. Although the Hawes' composed "U.A.W.-C.I.O." after the Almanac Singers stopped performing as a group, this song combines its members' fervent dedication to the labor movement and the fight against anti-fascism. (Some of the Almanac singers regrouped as the Weavers after the war.)

While the Almanac Singers offered lyrical support for the CIO's organizing drive, the government had a national security incentive to compel workers and employers to comply with national labor law. In order to be the arsenal of democracy, manufacturing needed to continue, uninterrupted. Union leaders were persuaded to sign patriotic "no-strike" pledges in exchange for the government's promise to require employers to meet their legal obligation to bargain in good faith with their unions. War-time agencies, including the National

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<sup>1</sup> "The Great Arsenal of Democracy," Fireside Chat, December 29, 1940.

<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/fdrarsenalofdemocracy.html>

<sup>2</sup> Nelson Lichtenstein, *Labor's War at Home: The CIO in World War II*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987): 46.

War Labor Board, joined the NLRB in this effort. Thus, it was the wartime emergency that finally turned the New Deal era labor laws into reality.

As the blue collar workforce grew to encompass almost 45% of all non-farm workers, American workers – and their unions - gained a renewed sense of importance in national affairs. Although production of war materiel exported to countries abroad had boosted the United States out of economic depression, the country was totally unprepared to fight a two-front war when Japan bombed Pearl Harbor in December 1941. One of the spectacular backstories of the American victory is the massive and rapid build-up of the country’s military capabilities in both men and materiel. The U.S. armed forces grew from 200,000 in 1939 to more than 8 million by 1945. By the end of the war American workers had produced “86,000 tanks, 296,000 airplanes, 15 million rifles and machine guns, 64,000 landing craft, and 6,500 ships” as well as clothing, food and myriad other war supplies. The men and women who worked long, hard hours to produce this equipment did not do so as isolated employees. Union membership grew from less than 10 million before the war, to almost 15 million at the end of the war.<sup>3</sup> Supplying and fighting the war was the work of unionized workers for whom the ability to exercise their rights at the workplace was part and parcel of their defense of democracy and the fight against fascism abroad.

#### □ **Meaning and Significance of the Document**

Songs are uniquely valuable historical sources. Since songs must resonate with an audience, they offer a window onto the sentiments and experiences of people whose perspectives are often absent from more frequently used kinds of sources (such as speeches, newspapers, government reports, letters, diaries).

“U.A.W.-C.I.O.” reflects the sentiments of the labor union audiences for whom the Almanac Singers and their members sang. Pride, patriotism and unionism are inextricably connected throughout the song. For example, to the unspoken question “How will the U.S. win the war?” the chorus answers that unionized workers on the home front make sure that soldiers on the battle front are well-supplied with high quality equipment. Union (not generals) “makes the army roll and go.”

The first stanza is a special shout-out to the working men and women of Detroit (“defense town”). As much as 25% of all wartime military equipment was manufactured in Detroit.<sup>4</sup> It also recognizes that soldiers carried their union identity as part of their patriotic identity (“and I’m union too, I’m proud to say”).

The second stanza celebrates auto workers’ year’s long struggle to bring dignity and democracy to the workplace. The first line memorializes the UAW’s 1936-1937 sit-down strike against GM; this was the crucial event that established the UAW as a viable union (“when the union came to town”). Mid-20<sup>th</sup> century audiences would have quickly understood this reference. The rest of this stanza refers to the 1941 strike against Ford Motor Company. The strike began with union workers blockading the Gate Four entrance to Ford’s River Rouge plant in Dearborn, Michigan. It ended successfully for the workers when Ford agreed to meet with their union representatives (“when old Henry Ford went down”). UAW members and their CIO brethren across the country celebrated this victory for workers’ dignity (“ain’t gonna kick the auto workers ‘round”).

The third stanza tells a story of workers’ patriotism. The first two lines reference the attack on Pearl Harbor; the rest of the verse describes how union workers responded. Cadillac Square, where workers had rallied in support of union, was the place workers rallied to express their patriotism and commitment to sacrifice for their country.

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<sup>3</sup> James Henretta, et. al., *America’s History, Volume 2: Since 1865*, (New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s), 4<sup>th</sup> edition: 839, 843.

<sup>4</sup> See map of defense plants and linked documents at: <http://wwii.detroithistorical.org/>

The final stanza looks forward to an American victory, which was not a certainty at the time the song was written. Rather, the verse avers that unions and their worker-members will defeat fascism and make victory possible. Significantly, the final line equates unionism with the democracy that must replace fascism. This is an understanding that would have resonated with millions of Americans during and immediately after the war. It is an understanding largely expunged from history textbooks. Song allows us to re-connect with that past.

## GLOSSARY

**UAW-CIO:** UAW is the acronym for the United Auto Workers union. CIO is the acronym for the Congress of Industrial Organizations. The CIO was formed in 1936 as the result of a split within the American Federation of Labor [AFL] over organizing strategy. The UAW left the AFL to become one of the first CIO-affiliated unions.

**UAW stamp:** see union label, below

**Henry Ford:** founder and chief executive of the Ford Motor Company (1903-1945).

**Gate Four:** one of the main entrance gates to the Ford Motor Company's factory in Dearborn, Michigan. During the UAW's organizing efforts in 1937, two well-known labor leaders who were standing outside Gate 4 were severely beaten by Ford "goons" (Ford Service Department employees). The beating attracted national headlines.

**Cadillac Square:** Named after the French founder of the city of Detroit, Cadillac Square was an enormous intersection at the heart of downtown Detroit. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century it was the site of the city hall and city market. In the 1930s and 1940s it was the key site for large public gatherings, and especially for labor rallies and protests. In recognition of its importance as the site of many workers' rights struggles, Democratic presidents and presidential candidates from Harry Truman to Lyndon Johnson chose Cadillac Square to deliver Labor Day speeches and/or to launch their presidential campaigns.

**Union label:** the image of a union logo that is affixed on a tag or stamped into a product; the union logo verifies that the product was made by workers whose work conditions were protected by a contract that was collectively bargained between the workers' union and their employer.

## QUESTIONS -- DISCUSSION POINTS

### **Document-Specific**

- The song is narrated in the first person. What does the soldier mean in the last line of the first verse, when he says "And I'm UAW too, I'm proud to say."
- Verses 2, 3, and 4 are each about a different event and time. For each verse: first identify "what, when and where" the event happened. (A textbook or other source could be consulted to learn more about each of these events.) Then, explain the narrator's perspective on each event. Use specific words or phrases from the song as evidence to support this explanation.
- A song's chorus conveys the core message of the song. What is the meaning or message of this song?

### **Historical Era**

- Considering that this song gave voice to the sentiments of many working men and women: What connections does it make between their battles with employers and the war-time fight against fascism? What does it reveal about workers' notions of what it meant to be American?

- In what ways does this song connect the “New Deal” and “World War II” eras? Does it suggest that these were distinct and disconnected time periods? If so, how? If not, how?
- What does the song suggest about working people’s expectations for post-war life?

### **Labor and Working-Class History**

- How did wartime demands for increased production affect working people and their unions?
- How might ideas expressed in this song help to explain why 5 million working men and women engaged in more than 4,600 strikes in the year after the war?

### **CITATION**

Lyrics: Hawes, Butch. “U.A.W.-C.I.O.” 1942. Labor Arts. <http://www.laborarts.org/exhibits/laborsings/song.cfm?id=20> [accessed 8/3/2016]

Audio Recording: “U.A.W.-C.I.O” from *Songs For Victory: Music For Political Action*. Asch Records 346, 1944. Labor Arts. <http://www.laborarts.org/exhibits/laborsings/song.cfm?id=20> [accessed 8/3/2016]

### **ADDITIONAL SOURCES**

Rachel Donaldson, “The Almanac Singers,” The Ultimate History Project.

<http://www.ultimatehistoryproject.com/the-almanac-singers.html> [accessed 8/10/2016]

Brecher, Jeremy. “The World War II and Post-War Strike Wave”: <https://libcom.org/history/world-war-ii-post-war-strike-wave> [accessed 8/3/2016]

Chrysler Arsenal of Democracy, documentary. [http://www.uaw-chrysler.com/uaw\\_new/the-arsenal-of-democracy/](http://www.uaw-chrysler.com/uaw_new/the-arsenal-of-democracy/) [accessed 8/3/2016]

Fowke, Edith, Glazer, Joe, and Bray, *Songs of Work and Protest*. New York: Dover Publications, 1973.

Labor Arts (curated exhibits and collections of working class and labor related art, images, lyrics):

<http://www.laborarts.org/>

Meyer, Steven. “Rise of the Unions and the Effects of World War II,” *Automobile in American Life and Society*: [http://www.autolife.umd.umich.edu/Labor/L\\_Overview/L\\_Overview6.htm](http://www.autolife.umd.umich.edu/Labor/L_Overview/L_Overview6.htm) [accessed 8/3/2016]

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## **CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS and STANDARDS**

### **Curricular Connections:**

NCHS US Era 8 [Standard 3](#): The causes and course of World War II, **the character of the war at home** and abroad, and its reshaping of the U.S. role in world affairs

This document celebrates industrial workers and connects them to the American war effort in two essential ways: (1) as producers of war materiel without which the war could not be fought and (2) as the soldiers who were fighting on the front lines. The document reveals how wartime patriotism and anti-fascism was equated, by some, to union membership and working class values.

### **Common Core Standards:**

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.1](#) Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.2](#) Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.4](#) Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including analyzing how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term over the course of a text

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.5](#) Analyze in detail how a complex primary source is structured, including how key sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text contribute to the whole.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.6](#) Evaluate authors' differing points of view on the same historical event or issue by assessing the authors' claims, reasoning, and evidence.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.8](#) Evaluate an author's premises, claims, and evidence by corroborating or challenging them with other information

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.9](#) Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.