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 Ryan S. Pettengill, Collin College-Wylie Campus

Historical Era **THE GREAT DEPRESSION AND WORLD WAR II (1929-1945)** Document 8.7	Document Title: **The Soup Song, c. 1930** Document Type: **Song** BRIEF DESCRIPTION: "The Soup Song" uses humor and sarcasm to convey workers' experiences and attitudes during the Great Depression. As a widely popular participatory song, it was an effective tool for labor organizing.

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SOURCING THE SOURCE

Maurice Sugar was a labor lawyer who served as the general counsel for the United Auto Workers (UAW) from 1937 to 1947. Throughout his career Sugar defended a litany of political dissidents, radicals, and other marginalized people. Alongside his legal work, Sugar wrote numerous folk songs, a few of which embedded themselves as soundtracks of the labor movement.

"The Soup Song" was arguably the most commonly sung of Sugar's many songs. Inspired by his conversations with men at a Detroit homeless shelter in the early days of the Great Depression, the song was similar to Rudy Vallee's "Brother Can You Spare a Dime" of the same era. Both songs captured the resentment of the common man and woman who had toiled away in the nation's factories only to find themselves in a breadline through no fault of their own.

Intended Audience: "The Soup Song" was a participatory sing-along. Workers heard and learned the lyrics at marches and rallies, and through song-books published by workers' organizations. Several of Sugar's songs were recorded by organizations like the Workers Music League and The American League Against War and Fascism. These organizations sent his songs to groups like the Friends of the Workers School who, in turn, used them as part of their "proletarian music" program. Organizations such as the Workers Library Publishers published his music for their song books so that striking workers could sing them at rallies and on picket lines.

UNDERSTANDING THE SOURCE

- ☐ **Historical Context**:

The 1920s are often presented as a period of carefree indulgence. Thanks in part to innovations in manufacturing and newly introduced installment plans (buying on credit), more Americans – including the working class – could afford to partake in the consumer economy of the era. But, beneath the bliss of the Jazz Age were social and political forces that pushed back against changing mores and workers' demands for better conditions.

Cultural traditionalists, conservative politicians and business leaders used their power to advocate assimilation into and obedience to their notions of "Americanism." State-sponsored repression, such as the 1919-1920 Palmer Raids, created an opportunity for these groups to shape political discourse and acceptable social norms. They linked Americanism to Protestant religiosity in a number of ways, as evidenced in the Dayton School Board's ban on teaching the theory of evolution (Scopes Monkey Trial); the popularity of the Ku Klux Klan's one-hundred per cent Americanism, which asserted that Catholicism was incompatible with American democracy; and Bruce Barton's best-seller, *The Man Nobody Knows,* which not only encouraged Americans to publicly identify themselves as Christians, but also presented Jesus as a tough and successful businessman.

Unflinching loyalty and deference to the business community became an important part of what it meant to be a dutiful American in the nineteen-twenties. In this spirit, President Calvin Coolidge proudly proclaimed "the chief business of the American people is business." Such a thundering endorsement presented businessmen in a transcendent light, which many used to preach obedience and thriftiness to the working masses. Large corporations launched programs, known as "welfare capitalism," that sought to win the loyalties of their workers. These initiatives ranged from sponsoring recreational sports leagues to employer-controlled savings plans. Businessmen also embarked on a public relations campaign, insisting that American prosperity depended upon business ingenuity, which could only be guaranteed through unfettered markets free of governmental regulation and labor unions. Business beat back workers' attempts to organize unions in order to improve their working conditions. In the 1920s a million workers in industries ranging from steel to textiles to railroads walked off their jobs demanding union recognition. But, local, state, and federal officials regularly intervened on behalf of business interests. For example, when 400,000 railroad workers protested wage cuts by going on strike in 1922, US Attorney General, Harry Daugherty, secured a court injunction that allowed him to force the strikers back to work. Although there were exceptions, the combination of a friendly political environment and a concerted public relations campaign made it difficult to challenge the hegemony of cultural traditionalism, political conservatism, and business authority.

This changed dramatically when the economic collapse of the 1930s exposed contradictions inherent in this business-friendly version of Americanism. For example, while Americans were instructed to save their money in banks and live frugally, they were simultaneously encouraged to spend more than they could afford by purchasing cars and other big-ticket items using the new installment plans. While Americans were told that their loyalty and hard work contributed to the nation's economic prosperity, they were simultaneously discouraged from demanding a share in that prosperity by joining a union. Instead of the promised prosperity, the stock market crash exacerbated structural weaknesses in the American economy that led to massive levels of unemployment, homelessness, and hunger by the early 1930s. Light manufacturing, heavy industry, construction, and mining, already in decline by the late 1920s, were particularly hard hit. Unemployment soared in the mid-Atlantic and Midwestern regions where these industries were concentrated. In industrial centers like Detroit, Youngstown, Chicago, Pittsburgh, and Cleveland unemployment climbed as high as 34 percent and hovered around 25 percent throughout 1932. The national unemployment rate reached an

estimated 25 percent.[1] The unemployment rate was even higher for workers of color due to discriminatory hiring and firing practices. At the same time, institutions that Americans had been taught to trust began to fail. By the early months of 1933, the American banking system was on the verge of collapse. Thousands of banks closed their doors; millions of people lost their life savings. An estimated 2 million Americans lost their homes due to foreclosure or eviction throughout the1930s. The need for food, jobs, and housing overwhelmed philanthropies and mutual aid societies which had historically served struggling families; many had to shut their doors. In sum, the institutions Americans had been taught to trust had failed them and, to many of the unemployed, it seemed that their government had also forsaken them.

President Herbert Hoover believed that direct aid to the poor was both unconstitutional and would lead to a general dependency on the government. American political culture had long emphasized limited government. Although progressive reformers had enacted a limited number of safety net programs, also known as social welfare programs, in a handful of states during the previous two decades – unemployment insurance, workmen's compensation, and mothers' pensions (later called "welfare") – national social welfare programs, like Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid, did not exist at all.

Jobless and impoverished, with few prospects for employment or other aid on the horizon, many workers felt betrayed. Workers responded to their plight with new levels of political activism. Membership in the Socialist and Communist parties surged. These groups and fellow labor activists formed unemployed councils, organized mass demonstrations, and staged rent strikes. Millions of workers took to the streets to demand that government and business leaders be more proactive in addressing the crisis. In Detroit, for example, trade unionists teamed up with communists and socialists in 1932 to organize a Hunger March of unemployed and other workers to the Ford Motor Company, one of the region's largest employers. They wanted to present Henry Ford with a list of demands, most of which insisted he take action to address the employment crises. Dearborn city police and Ford's private police force attacked the marchers, killing four and injuring more than sixty. Henry Ford, arguably the most celebrated exemplar of successful free market enterprise throughout the 1920s, was vilified and his reputation was largely discredited in the aftermath of what many called the Ford Massacre. The unemployed movement was not limited to the industrial Midwest. Later the same year, unemployed World War I veterans from across the country gathered in Washington DC to demand early payment of long-promised wartime bonuses. Like the Ford marchers, the Bonus Army was met with force. President Hoover dispatched the Army to disperse them. Under General Douglas MacArthur's command, the Army set fire to the veterans' camp at Anacostia Flats, driving them from the city. Further south, in Georgia, Communist-led unemployed councils played a central role in demanding state officials implement a social safety net and equalize relief to unemployed African Americans.

By the fall of 1932, President Hoover was widely disliked and voters turned to Franklin Delano Roosevelt to lead them out of the Depression. On the campaign trail, Roosevelt hinted at the government reforms that would come to be known as the New Deal. At a commencement address at Oglethorpe University Roosevelt proclaimed "It is common sense to take a method and try it. If it fails, admit it frankly and try another. But above all, try something." But for the worker in the factory, the unemployed veteran standing in a breadline, or the single mother who faced homelessness, a sense that they were a "forgotten man" began to crystalize. Numerous songwriters, including Maurice Sugar, managed to capture this sentiment in their music.

☐ **Meaning and Significance of the Source**

Maurice Sugar wrote songs throughout the 1930s that described the struggles, despair, and ambitions of working people. Sugar's songwriting coincided with an explosion in mass singing within the labor movement in the 1930s. His songs served as an inspiration to workers who sang them on picket lines, at rallies, and inside fraternal houses.

"The Soup Song," encapsulated working-class grievances against the contradictory instructions from their social betters, failing institutions and an unresponsive government. Like many popular and enduring songs, "The Soup Song" was sung to a familiar tune – "My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean." The familiar tune, combined with the song's use of the first person to express workers' grievances, made it easy for working people to identify with the song's lyrics and join in.

The song consists of five verses and a chorus. The first verse directly confronts the notion that the unemployed were vagrants or lazy. The singer proclaims, "I'm spending my days on the streets. I'm looking for work but I find none…" The singer wants to work and spends every day looking for a job. S/he does not like sleeping in a flop house (very cheap rooming house or dormitory-type lodging). The unemployed are not to blame for their poverty; they would work if business would employ them. The second verse takes on the notion put forward in the 1920s that dutiful workers would be rewarded: "I spent twenty years in the factory" doing "everything I was told." This is a proud statement from a long-time worker whose employer had acknowledged was "loyal and faithful." Yet, employers had not repaid their workers' loyalty in kind; instead, they terminated their workers ("even before I get old"). In the third verse, the worker asserts that s/he was thrifty ("I saved fifteen bucks with my banker") at the same time poking fun at the notion that a wage earner would ever be able to buy into the consumer economy (to buy a car or yacht). Even more infuriating, the supposedly trustworthy banker had lost the worker's hard-earned savings: "I went down to draw out my fortune…" but was sent away empty-handed. After calling out employers and bankers, the next verse focuses on the betrayal of the government: "I fought in the war" willing to "bleed and die," for a country that refused to help veterans in need. The final verse contrasts religious teachings with the rejection faced by workers looking for help. Each verse uses humor and irony to contrast the decency and industriousness of the worker to the hypocrisy and betrayal of her/his supposed betters. The chorus captures the failure of those in power, whose only answer to the worker's distress is to send him/her away – to the soup line.

Whereas "Brother Can You Spare a Dime" worked best as a song one listened to, "The Soup Song" was an inspiring participatory song – one that was fun to sing and popular with workers. According to Sugar, the Flint sit-down strikers sang it "with gusto" at mealtimes during their six-week strike against General Motors in 1936-37. The *Detroit Times*, the city's newspaper of choice for the business community, characterized "The Soup Song" as "Flint's song hit of the week" throughout the strike. The *Times*' reporter noted that a sound truck led workers inside the factory and pickets on the outside in mass singing. "Thousands of voices roar the words…The crowd particularly relishes the whip-like effect of the 'sou-oops. EXCITEMENT HIGH."[2]

Part of what makes "The Soup Song" song historically significant is its wide appeal. While Sugar composed the song to tell the story of homeless unemployed workers, it also held deep meaning for sit-down strikers who belted out the lyrics as they stood in meal lines inside the factory, as well as for those preparing the food in the strike kitchens– largely female relatives and union allies who sang along just as enthusiastically. Sugar's lyrics described widely shared experiences and deeply felt sentiments. Singing it with others, and belting out the chorus, built solidarity among workers.

Because folk music could be applied to virtually any segment of working-class life, it could be used to reinforce the rhetoric of labor militancy and increase group cooperation. As noted above (see Intended Audience section), a number of labor-oriented groups regularly published worker songbooks. After the success of the Flint sit-down strike, the United Auto Workers' newsletter, the *United Automobile Worker,* began including songs written by union members. Like Sugar's songs, these published songs highlighted central issues affecting workers. Today they provide critical insight into the lived experience, hopes, and struggles of people who often left few written records.

GLOSSARY

American League Against War and Fascism: This organization recorded and catalogued music as part of its "proletarian music" program. The League was formed in 1933 to oppose fascist expansion in Europe, and like the Workers Music League, it attracted members from a wide array of liberal, progressive, communist, and socialist, as well as African American groups. The League disbanded in 1939 following the announcement of the German-Soviet Nonaggression Pact.

Bonus Army: A cross-country demonstration of unemployed World War I veterans during the summer of 1932. The Bonus Army marched from Oregon, picking up veterans along the way, and set up camp in Washington DC. The veterans asked the President and Congress to authorize early payment of a service bonus already authorized by Congress. Although the House passed a bill, it failed in the Senate. President Herbert Hoover ordered the Army to clear the veterans' camp. It did so with tanks, tear gas, and fire.

Forgotten man: A concept that took on new meaning during the Great Depression. President Franklin Roosevelt evoked the image of the forgotten man to describe the common man (and woman) who toiled away in American industry and fought foreign wars only to be "forgotten" when the economy collapsed into the Great Depression. These hard-working Americans were left to suffer and muddle through on their own, forgotten by business, banks, charities, and governments that failed to take any meaningful action to meet their immediate needs or to restart the economy.

Fraternal house: Fraternal organizations were a voluntary organization whose members share a common set of ideals, skill, or ethnicity. They became quite popular among men in the nineteenth century and many continued to thrive through the twentieth century. The reference here was most likely to immigrant-based working class fraternal associations.

Friends of the Workers School: A left-leaning organization that was in operation throughout the 1930s and 1940s. The Workers School was the American Communist Party's school for party members. Like the Workers Music League, the Friends of the Workers School published music written by workers and activists throughout the interwar years (1920s-1930s).

Ku Klux Klan: Revived in 1915, the "second" Ku Klux Klan (KKK) portrayed itself as a respectable political movement dedicated to protecting what it defined as traditional American values. Those values rested on a presumption that middle-class White, Anglo-Saxon Protestants were superior to other socio-ethnic groups. Coming amidst a large wave of European immigration and labor struggles, the second KKK added anti-unionism, anti-immigration, anti-Catholicism and anti-semitism to its hallmark pre-Civil War anti-Black agenda. This, along with savvy marketing, broadened the organization's appeal and political clout far beyond the states of the old Confederacy. Indiana, Ohio, Oregon, and Pennsylvania were second KKK strongholds.

Palmer Raids: A major government action of the post-World War I Red Scare. A. Mitchell Palmer, the US Attorney General, was a fierce anticommunist who worried that a revolution, as happened in Russia in 1917, could happen in the United States. Under Palmer's direction, federal agents spied on, disrupted, and raided the homes and headquarters of political radicals whom they suspected of Marxist (socialist or communist) and other far-left ideologies (such as syndicalism and anarchism). Thousands were arrested, imprisoned, and in some cases deported. Agents often arrested people who had little or nothing to do with seditious activism; they simply subscribed to radical (or unpopular) political doctrines or had been known to associate with members of radical organizations.

Rent strikes: A form of collective opposition and refusal to pay rent owed to one or more landlords. During the Great Depression, when so many were unemployed through no fault of their own, rent strikes (and resistance to foreclosures on home owners) signified a mass rejection of a political and economic system that privileged property rights over human rights, and that expected the victims of the economic depression to pay for a situation created by others.

Sit-down strike: A strike tactic employed by workers during the Great Depression and beyond. Instead of going on strike by walking out of (leaving) their workplace, workers stay inside, but refuse to work (sit down) until their employer agrees to their demands. The sit-down tactic makes it impossible for employers to bring in other workers and restart operations. Auto workers used the sit-down tactic most famously against General Motors' during the winter of 1936-37. The workers occupied GM's Flint, MI factory for six weeks, preventing the company from replacing them and, thus, crippling GM's production capacity. Workers won the strike. Their victory over GM, the largest corporation in the world, inspired many thousands of other workers to employ the sit-down tactic in their organizing campaigns.

Unemployed Councils: Formed during the early months of the Great Depression by the Trade Union Unity League (an arm of the American communist party). Each council planned its own actions at the local level. Other progressives, labor activists, employed and unemployed workers joined the councils, and many more non-members participated in actions organized by Unemployed Councils. The councils demanded that major employers do more to restore the economy. They pressured local governments to do more to alleviate the suffering of the unemployed. And, Unemployed Councils sought to organize the jobless so that employers could not use them as pawns to further gouge employed workers by undercutting already low wages.

United Auto Workers (UAW): An industrial union established in 1937 following the workers' victory in the sit-down strike in Flint, MI and other General Motors plants. The union originally represented workers in the automotive industry, but has since broadened its scope to include members and represent workers from sectors as diverse as health care and higher education.

Welfare capitalism: A constellation of company-sponsored programs that employers hoped would transform their employees into obedient and loyal workers. Welfare capitalism encompassed a menu of programs, ranging from financial (eg. savings and bonus plans) to recreational (eg. dance parties and sports leagues) to facilities (eg. cafeterias and restrooms) to personal (eg. counseling). Companies with welfare programs often paid marginally higher wages than their competitors, but were vociferously opposed to unions – arguing that their better treatment of their workers made unions unnecessary.

Workers Library Publishers: The publishing house for the Workers Party, previously known as the Communist Party USA. It published political pamphlets and cultural works (poetry, literature, music) of activists and workers throughout the interwar years.

Workers Music League: A left-leaning organization that was in operation throughout in the 1930s and 1940s. The Workers Music League recorded music and published the *Workers Songbook* to help unite workers and build a mass workers' movement. Members of the New York-based Composers Collective wrote many of the songs in the *Workers Songbook*. The Collective was dedicated to creating music of the masses or what its members called "proletarian music." Charles Seeger (Pete Seeger's father) and Aaron Copland were leading members of the Composers Collective.

QUESTIONS -- DISCUSSION POINTS

Source Specific

- According to "The Soup Song," in what ways was workers' lived reality similar to, and/or different from, how they were instructed to live by their social betters?
- What aspects of 1920s-era Americanism does "The Soup Song" critique? What reforms or actions, if any, does the song suggest?
- What are examples of humor or satire in "The Soup Song"? Why might this use of humor and satire have appealed to working people in the 1930s? How might it have contributed to the song's success as a sing-along?

Historical Era

- What does "The Soup Song" tell us about faith in or the trustworthiness of American institutions during the Great Depression (business, banks, government, the church)?
- How does "The Soup Song" help us understand the ways in which the American working class experienced the Great Depression?

Labor & Working Class History

- "The Soup Song" helped to tell labor's story during the 1930s. In what ways do the lyrics of labor songs from other eras paint similar or different pictures of working-class life?
  Consider, for example, "The Preacher and the Slave," "Bread and Roses," "Dark as a Dungeon," "Too Old to Work," "Automation." Also see the "UAW-CIO" song in this Teaching Labor History repository.
- Can you think of examples of mass culture today that are, or could be, used to organize for social justice?
- Folk songs are often updated and the words changed to suit the time and place. Do you think this song is relevant to today? Could any of the verses speak to issues you or others confront today? What words would you change or verses would you add?

CITATION

"The Soup Song" (Original Copy), folder 25, box 14, Maurice Sugar Collection, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs (ALUA), Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan.

Audio recording "The Soup Song," Cisco Houston Sings Songs of the Open Road, Folkways Records FA 2480. Provided to YouTube by Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, 2015. [accessed 6/10/2022]

Audio recording, Tony Paris, "The Soup Song," 2021. Provided to LAWCHA by Tony Paris.

ADDITIONAL SOURCES

Media and Web-Based Sources

"Labor Songs of the Month," Higgins Labor Program, Center for Social Concerns, University of Notre Dame, https://socialconcerns.nd.edu/labor-song-month

"Classic Labor Songs from Smithsonian Folkways," Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, https://folkways.si.edu/classic-labor-songs-from-folkways/american-folk-struggle-protest/music/album/smithsonian

"Songs of Unionization, Labor Strikes, and Child Labor," Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200197381/

Books and Articles

Cohen, Ronald D. *Depression Folk: Grassroots Music and Left-Wing Politics in 1930s America.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016.

Fowke, Edith and Glazer, Joe. *Songs of Work and Protest.* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1960, 1973.

Fox, Aaron. *Real Country: Music and Language in Working-Class Culture.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2004.

Johnson, Christopher H., *Maurice Sugar: Law, Labor, and the Left in Detroit, 1912-1950.* Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988.

Lorence, James J. *The Unemployed People's Movement: Leftists, Liberals, and Labor,1929-1941.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009.

Lieberman, Robbie. *My Song is My Weapon: People's Songs, American Communism, and the Politics of Culture, 1930-1950.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989.

McElvaine, Robert S. *The Great Depression: America 1929-1941.* New York: Times Books, 1993.

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CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS and STANDARDS

Curricular Connections:

NCHS US ERA 8 Standard 1: The causes of the Great Depression and how it affected American society

"The Soup Song" describes the problems of unemployment poverty, and neglect suffered by millions throughout the Great Depression. It underscores the hollowness of the teachings of the established order in that the song's worker-narrator did everything s/he was told only to be forced into poverty and left dependent on charity for a meager meal.

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.11-12.7 Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.

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.

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[1] Robert S. McElvaine, *The Great Depression: America 1929-1941* (New York: Times Books, 1993), 27-39; David Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: the American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 65-77.

[2] "Marchers Led by Club-Swinging Women," *Detroit Times*, Feb. 4, 1937, p. 6.