

Putting a Face on the Organization of Labor

The Basics

Time Required

Several class meetings

Subject Areas

Middle and High School History, Language Arts, Social Studies

The Great Depression and World War II, 1929-1945

Common Core Standards Addressed:

Writing Standards K-5

Writing Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies 6-12

Writing Standards for English Language Arts 6-12

Author

Jim Shannon (2004)

The Lesson

Introduction

Joe Hill was born Joel Hagglund in Sweden in 1879. Joel liked to make up songs to tease his brothers and sisters, and he played guitar, accordion, violin, and piano. (Smith, 44) His family was very poor, and when his father died, the family had no recourse but to send the children out to work. Joel was only eight years old when he began to work in a rope factory. When Joel was twenty-three, he came to America, where he became known as Joe Hill.

In a letter dated September 30, 1915, Joe Hill writes,

Biography do you say? No! We shall not ruin the fine letter paper in writing such trash—the only time that exists for me is the present. I am a “citizen of the world” and I was born on a planet called the Earth. On which side or edge of this planet I first saw the light means so little that it is not worth talking about.

(Foner, *The Letters of Joe Hill*, 59)

Consequently, the story of the life of Joe Hill has become hazy, which makes Joe Hill the symbol much clearer. We do know that Joe traveled across America working in several places and helping to organize workers. The information available points to Joe Hill's joining the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in San Pedro, California in 1910, according to Smith (Smith, 52). The Industrial Workers of the World believed that song was the medium that would spread their message to the working people of America. *The Little Red Songbook*, containing several songs by Joe Hill, has as its subtitle *To Fan the Flames of Discontent*, and that is what Joe Hill did.

In 1911, he wrote the words to “The Preacher and the Slave” which parodied the words and used the tune of the popular and well-known hymn “In the Sweet By and By.” In “The Preacher and the Slave” Hill introduced the phrase “pie in the sky” to the American language. In the *Oxford English Dictionary* Hill’s song is the first listed use of this phrase. “The Preacher and the Slave,” Hill’s second known song, was written for the IWW and used as a criticism of the Salvation Army (called the “starvation army”), which told the workers that things would be better in Heaven, but in the opinion of the IWW didn’t address the here and now, as shown in the chorus:

*You will eat, bye and bye
In that glorious land above the sky;
Work and pray, live on hay,
You’ll get pie in the sky when you die.
(Little Red Songbook, 9)*

In *The Songs of Joe Hill*, Stavis and Harmon claim that the song was “the marching song of the unemployed” (Stavis and Harmon, 10) during the Great Depression, more than twenty years after it was originally written.

Joe Hill went to Utah in 1913 to help organize the copper miners there. He was arrested on suspicion of murder in 1914, and executed by firing squad in 1915, which all added to his becoming a symbol for the labor unions.

Alfred Hayes and Earl Robinson wrote “Joe Hill” in 1938. It is one of several songs written about Joe Hill, and it very plainly shows Joe Hill the man as Joe Hill the symbol. The song became widely known when Joan Baez sang it at Woodstock in 1968.

Guiding Questions

What does it mean to play fairly?

Learning Objectives

Students will:

- Clarify understanding through discussion
- Make extensions to related ideas
- Describe historical content and ideas in a reading
- Recognize the situation of workers in America before unionization

Preparation Instructions

Songs used in lesson:

“Sweet By and By” (words: S. Pillietere Rennett, music: J.P. Webster, 18??) sheet music. Chicago: Lyon and Healy, 18--?

<http://www.library.wisc.edu/etext/WIReader/Images/WER1547-1.html>

“Joe Hill” (words: Alfred Hayes, music: Earl Robinson, 1938) MCA Music, ASCAP on *Don’t Mourn—Organize: Songs of Labor Songwriter Joe Hill*. Smithsonian/Folkways SF 40026.

“The Preacher and the Slave” (words: Joe Hill, music: J.P. Webster, 1911) in *The Little Red Song Book*. Chicago:IWW, 1936. Note—This song is also on the Smithsonian/Folkways CD mentioned above.

Lesson Activities

This lesson can be used as an introduction to the labor movement, or it can stand alone as a lesson on symbols or the power of songs to affect our lives. Each of the three parts can also be used independently. Most middle school students are not familiar with Joe Hill, so this is also a useful lesson on finding clues in textual material.

Part One--Laying the Groundwork

1. Play the Hayes/Robinson song “Joe Hill” for the students
2. Ask the students who they think Joe Hill might be. Is he real or imaginary?
3. Initiate a closer investigation of the lyrics. Have students work in pairs to examine the six verses of the song for clues.
4. Instruct students to record the clues they find verse by verse, then discuss.
5. Verse one—Who is the speaker? What is he doing? What does he say to Joe Hill, and what does Joe reply?
6. Verse two—What happened in Salt Lake City? Where is Salt Lake City? (Locate on map) What does “framed” mean?
7. Verse three—What do you think “copper bosses” is talking about? *At this point establish that Joe Hill was in Salt Lake City to organize a union among the copper miners.*
8. Verse four—What does “organize” mean? *Establish that here it means to organize the workers into a union.*
9. Verse five—What is a strike?
10. Verse six—Where is San Diego? Where is Maine? (Locate both on map) Why do you think Joe uses both places?
11. Making the point—In the song it says over and over that Joe Hill didn’t die. What could this mean? Let students discuss, stopping when the term “symbol” is spoken. Fund the term if necessary. *Establish the idea that the song says that Joe Hill never died because he has become a symbol of organized labor, which we also call unions.*
12. Establish that Joe Hill was a real person, who wrote songs to convince people to unionize.

Song discussion questions and activities

Part Two—Song Comparison

1. Hand out copies of “The Preacher and the Slave” and “Sweet By and By.”
2. Say that “The Preacher and the Slave” is a *parody* of the *hymn* “Sweet By and By” and check for understanding of the terms.
3. Read through “Sweet By and By” or sing it if you wish. What is the tone of the song? What is it about?
4. Establish through discussion that it is a hymn about going to a beautiful place, Heaven, after death.
5. Now play the Smithsonian/Folkways recording of “The Preacher and the Slave” encouraging students to pay particular attention to the lyrics. What is the tone of this song?

6. Discuss the meanings of the terms “pie in the sky,” “starvation army,” “coin,” and “grafters.” *Establish that Joe Hill is saying that the people need food now, not promises of good things to come.*
7. Look at verse four. What is Joe Hill telling his listeners to do? *Establish that he is exhorting them to join the union.*
8. Joe Hill became a symbol for the union, because he spent several years of his life writing songs to convince people to join the union. Many people who owned large companies did not want their employees to join a union, because they felt they (the employers) would not make as much money, so organizing or even joining unions was often dangerous. Working conditions were very hard in our country and others because before there were unions, people worked for very long hours, often in unsafe conditions, and for very small wages. Joe Hill himself had to go to work in a rope-making factory when he was only a young boy, because his father died and his family had no food. Many children in our country also worked long hours in harsh conditions.

Part Three—Some examples

1. As an introduction to unionization, we will be taking a look at working conditions faced by children here in America.
2. Divide students into groups of three to four, giving each group copies of the book *Kids on Strike*. Read the introduction to the book, “Shall We turn Out” together in class, and discuss the meaning of the word “strike.”
3. Each chapter of the book is the story of a labor situation involving children. (Chapter two is about a rent strike, but it still relates to the topic at hand.) Assign a chapter to each group.
4. Direct the students to read the chapter and take notes as homework. Explain that they will be presenting their story to the class, so they should also be thinking about a good way to present the information. Hand out copies of the assessment rubric and discuss the expectations. Each presentation should be five to eight minutes in length. (Suggestions—a news broadcast, a skit, a series of posters, which they could discuss, or a song they could write and sing.)
5. In the next two class periods, allow students all or most of the period to decide on the manner in which they will present the material, and the construction of their presentation. By the end of the first day they should have decided on their format and have a list of five important facts they wish to present. They should decide on a point or lesson for the material. By the end of the second day they should be able to show that the presentation is finished, or is able to be finished at home.
6. Student groups will present their work to the class.

Assessment

Students will use reading and discussion skills in small groups to produce a product that describes and explains an early labor situation and its outcome. This work and its presentation will be an assessment of their understanding of the lesson and ability to assimilate what they have learned into their own words.

Extending the Lesson

Sing the songs again, and continue learning about the organization of labor in America.

Use Ernest Riebe’s book *Mr. Block: Twenty-four IWW Cartoons* for a class period, if time allows.

The Basics

Time Required

3-4 class periods

Subject Areas

8th Grade Social Studies and Language Arts

Emergence of Modern America, 1890-1930

Common Core Standards Addressed:

Writing Standards for English Language Arts 6-12

Author

Ellen A. Linhart (2004)

Resources**Lyrics**

“Sweet By and By”

There's a land that is fairer than day,
And by faith we can see it afar,
For the Father waits over the way,
To prepare us a dwelling place there.

chorus

In the sweet by and by,
We shall meet on that beautiful shore.
In the sweet by and by,
We shall meet on that beautiful shore.

We shall sing on that beautiful shore,
The melodious songs of the blest,
And our spirit shall sorrow no more,
Not a sigh for the blessing of rest.

chorus

To our bountiful Father above,
We will offer the tribute of praise,
For the glorious gift of his love,
And the blessing that hallow (sic) our days!

chorus

“The Preacher and the Slave”

Long-haired preachers come out every night,
Try to tell you what’s wrong and what’s right;
But when asked how ‘bout something to eat
They will answer with voices so sweet:

chorus

You will eat, bye and bye,
In that glorious land above the sky;
Work and pray, live on hay,
You’ll get pie in the sky when you die.

And the starvation army they play,
And they sing and they clap and they pray.
Till they get all your coin on the drum,
Then they tell you when you are on the bum:

chorus

If you fight hard for children and wife—
Try to get something good in this life—
You’re a sinner and bad man, they tell,
When you die you will sure go to hell.

chorus

Workingmen of all countries unite,
Side by side we for freedom will fight:
When the world and its wealth we have gained
To the grafters we’ll sing this refrain:

chorus

“Joe Hill” available at
<http://www.folkarchive.de/joehill.html>

Other resources:

Bartoletti, Susan Campbell. *Kids on Strike*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999.

Bird, Stewart, Dan Georgakas, and Deborah Shaffer. *Solidarity Forever: An Oral History of the IWW*. Chicago: Lake View Press, 1985.

DeCaux, Len. *The Living Spirit of the Wobblies*. New York International Publishers, 1978.

Foner, Philip S. *The Case of Joe Hill*. New York: International Publishers, 1965.

Foner, Philip S., ed. *The Letters of Joe Hill*. New York: Oak Publications, 1965.

Nolan, Dean, and Fred Thompson. *Joe Hill: IWW Songwriter*. Chicago: Chicago General Membership Branch IWW, 1979.

Riebe, Ernest. *Mr. Block: Twenty-four IWW Cartoons*. Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1984.

Smith, Gibbs M. *Joe Hill*. Salt Lake City, Utah: University of Utah Press, 1969.

Stavis, Barrie, and Frank Harmon. *The Songs of Joe Hill*. New York: Oak Publications, 1960.

Stegner, Wallace. *Joe Hill: A Biographical Novel*. Lincoln, Nebraska, and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1950, 1980.