

LABORLORE

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From what experiences are labor traditions wrought? A robust picket line chant; a tool chest lid lined with faded dues slips; a secret hand clasp in a dim entry way; an echo of John Lewis' or Eugene Debs' oratory; a visit to a weathered stone marker at Homestead or Ludlow—all are part of the language, belief, and customs that comprise *laborlore*—the special folklore of American workers within trade unions.

At times laborlore reaches out as a force to touch persons far removed from unionism. When the Massachusetts Institute of Technology named Jerome B. Wiesner to its presidency on March 5, 1971, Wiesner, in a *New York Times* interview, attributed his "keen social awareness" to his childhood in Dearborn, Michigan. As a child, Wiesner would "run downtown after school to watch the pitched battles between automobile union men and Ford goon squads." Wiesner never became a unionist, but the image of the Dearborn beatings was etched on his mind. A part of labor folklore? Perhaps.

It is the ability to retain tension and emotion in memory linked to the need to project feelings into dramatic, musical, or linguistic form that turns everyday experience into folklore. Obviously, brutality at a plant gate is not folklore. But a mournful ballad or wry jest about the happening may enter tradition to be passed on among union men for generations.

Perhaps the best way to identify laborlore is to mention specific examples. There are well-known labor songs written and sung by such performers as Joe Glazer, Sarah Gunning, Utah Phillips, and Pete Seeger. Less well-known than the songs are short anecdotal tales told to reinforce philosophical positions and to

build solidarity in times of stress. One such tale follows, a tale I heard from John Neuhaus, a San Francisco machinist and "double header" unionist (John held dual membership in the International Association of Machinists, AFL-CIO, and in the Industrial Workers of the World, "Wobblies"). It is called "The Striker's Wife."

The iron ore miners were on strike up in Minnesota. It was a long hard strike but the men held out pretty good. A lot of them were Finns; Finns believe in solidarity. One day a striker's wife was about out of money. She went to the butcher shop to try to buy some cheap cut of meat that might last the family for a week. She saw a calf's head in the case and figured it would make lots of soup. So she asked the butcher, "How much?"

He said, "One dollar."

That was too much so she started to leave. But just as she got to the door, she asked "Is this a union ship; is your meat union?"

He was surprised but replied, "Sure, I'm a member of the union (Amalgamated Meat Cutters and

Butcher Workmen of North America). I cut my meat by union rule—see my shop card in the window."

The lady said, "Well, I don't want any union meat. Don't you have a scab calf's head?"

The butcher was stumped but he was smart. So he said, "Just a minute, Ma'am," and he took the calf's head into the room back of the shop. Pretty soon the lady heard a lot of clatter. The butcher came out of the room and handed her the wrapped package. He said, "That'll be seventy-five cents, ma'am."

She was very pleased at the saving, paid up and started for the door. But she was curious, so she asked, "Isn't this scab calf's head the same as the union head you tried to sell me for a dollar?"

The butcher said, "Yes, ma'am, it is. I just knocked out two bits worth of brains!"

A tale such as the one above can be told anywhere workers gather, and laborlore abounds with such stories. Ritual, however, is often confined to particular places and partic-



ular times. From my experience as a young shipwright in San Francisco on the eve of World War II, I recall, for example, the practice of the tool auction:

Shipwrights, marine joiners, boatbuilders, caulkers, and drydockers organized one of San Francisco's earliest trade unions, for they were there to dismantle ships for needed lumber and metal parts during the Gold Rush. When I joined Local 1149, United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America, it was filled with immigrant mechanics from every shipbuilding center in the world: the Clyde, Belfast, Malta, Hamburg, Hong Kong. In the mid-thirties, our local was involved with the longshoremen and other maritime crafts in two waterfront strikes. Although the local was divided between radicals and conservatives, it was united on the need to preserve craft custom, to maintain solidarity, and to honor the dead. The tool auction was a unifying part of union tradition.

When an old-timer died, his tool chest was carried to the union hall. Chests were big and heavy, frequently ornate, and usually filled with handmade tools, including, perhaps, rosewood planes. (They were made of wood so that they would float if dropped overboard.) At the conclusion of the meeting, the union president would begin to auction the tools one by one and to gather a purse for the departed member's family. The chief function of the auction appeared to be to provide an unsophisticated form of social security, but there were other functions, as well. The local was small and the mechanics worked closely. When one of them purchased a dead colleague's tools, he kept some of his friend's skill alive. He also kept the tools out of skid-row pawnshops and, hence, out of the hands of strangers.

As is the case of much folklore, the tool auction ritual employed elements of sympathetic magic far older than unionism itself.

For lack of space, these two examples of tale and ritual must represent in this booklet the many




kinds of literary genres and behavior patterns that constitute the large body of American laborlore. It grows with every day, but it still serves a fundamental purpose to the union men. It serves to bind people together and to give individuals a sense of dignity on the job and within their movement.

In the *Wall Street Journal* on March 4, 1971, Tom West, a member of the International Association of Bridge, Structural and Ornamental Iron Workers, described what it is like to be a top connector working three hundred feet above the Chicago Loop. (A connector bolts together the derrick-lifted structural steel units of a skyscraper under construction.) He also inadvertently revealed how much laborlore has become a part of his life.

In the article, West explained that incompetent ironworkers, or "Joe McGee's" as they are known, are recognizable by their mangled fingers and toes. Good workers are known by their stance aloft. Along with craft skills, Tom West had learned during his breaking-in period the essence of a journeyman's style—that it isn't enough just to walk the steel. To be fully esteemed by one's fellows, one must walk high steel with a "clump," hands and feet swinging normally, not rigid, and always ready



to work.

In part, a worker like Tom West clumps along because he can "cut the mustard" on the job; in part, he holds his head high because of a card in his wallet, a button on his cap, and an awareness—however dim—that he is in a movement, bigger and older than himself. When he expresses this awareness in traditional form, when he engages in "union talk," he forges a link in the chain of laborlore and contributes, as well, a tiny chip to the variegated mosaic of American tradition. 

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