

WHY ARE UNIONS IN THE FOLKLIFE FESTIVAL?

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masonry in Vermont or laying bricks in downtown Philadelphia. While the superficial differences are of interest, the similarities are far more important.

In the area of folkloric traditions, including occupational jokes, rituals, beliefs, and customs, there is only a fine line separating rural workers from urban industrial craftsmen. For example, the greenhorn cowboy tricked into mounting a docile-looking, but totally unbroken bronco, or the teenage farmworker sent out on a snipe-catching midnight hunt, is certainly brother to the young trainee ironworker who, on his first day on the job, is sent out to get a sky hook. Certainly, in such cases, labor lore is every bit as meaningful and functional as the lore of ethnic, regional, or religious groups.

One may, of course, argue that American labor does not constitute a cultural subgroup as do the groups mentioned above. But the argument does not hold water because the factors that contribute to its "groupness"—stability, homogeneity, and continuity—are also to be found in varying degrees in those other groups. These, in turn, are reflected in shared values, group pride, a sense of history, and a commitment to the future—sometimes to an even greater degree than one might find among more traditional folk groups.

Most citizens probably picture the average American as a white-collar worker, based on stereotypes presented in movies and on television. Rarely does the blue-collar worker get a chance to present his side of the story. But he, too, needs to be given a platform on which he can express his pride, reveal his identity, and explain his values. If we are to have a true understanding of contemporary American folk culture, the perspectives of working Americans of all types must be presented in broadly based cultural forums. The American Folklife Festival is such a forum. The American worker finds here his opportunity to have a voice in a program designed to reach all America via the stage of an American cultural institution.

"I dig your ditches, I'm labor;
I man your switches, I'm labor;
I teach your kids and make your shoes,
I sew your pants and write your news,
With brain and brawn, with nerve and
thews,
I'm labor.
I fight your fires, I'm labor;
I cleanse your mires, I'm labor,
Your towers that top the mountain crest,
Your teeming east, your bounteous
west,
I wrought them . . .
I drill your sewers, I'm labor;
I plow your moors, I'm labor,
On earth, in mine, on sea, in sky,
I swarm and toil and fight and die . . .
I'm labor!

—Samuel H. Friedman

Rebel Song Book, Rand School Press,
N.Y. 1935

In 1971, for the first time since the Folklife Festival was established, labor unions were invited to take part. A large proportion of the some 750,000 people who came to the Festival saw and wondered at the skills displayed by members of five AFL-CIO unions: the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen of North America, the Bakery and Confectionery Workers International Union of America, the Glass Bottle Blowers Association, the Iron Workers, and the American Federation of Musicians.

In spite of the obvious enjoyment visitors to the Festival experienced watching sheep-shearing and expert meat-cutting, the making of sausages and displays of other skills of meat-cutters, people were puzzled as to

why labor unions were taking part.

Well, as students of labor know, the modern labor movement traces its ancestry back thousands of years to the very first workers who ploughed the fields and, before that, made primitive garments and "invented" tools for hunting, sewing, and the sustaining of human life.

Down through the centuries, men and women became interested in and developed skills at particular kinds of work. And gradually, workers who specialized in such trades as tinsmiths, silversmiths, goldsmiths, tailors, bakers, stonemasons, builders, artisans of all kinds founded guilds and developed high standards of excellence for admission into a given trade.

The unions invited by the Smithsonian Institution to take part in the Folklife Festival are, in a very real sense, the descendants and inheritors of the guilds of the Middle Ages and those artisans that preceded them.

The point is, millions of American men and women make the things that all of us take for granted—our food, clothing, housing, medicines, airplanes, trains, automobiles, plastics, computers, matches, etc. In large measure the high standards of production, the extraordinary skills so frequently required in performing these tasks are skills preserved by the unions.

Labor is a vital part of life. Unions belong in the Folklife Festival.

*Tom Cummings, retired lithographer
from Canada, preparing a litho stone.*

