FIGHT FOR UNION RECOGNITION: The Role of Protest Songs

Protest songs were sung by farm workers in California who had migrated from Oklahoma, Arkansas, Kansas, Texas, New Mexico and Arizona during the Dust Bowl in the late 1930s. The songs were collected by Charles L. Todd and Robert Sonkin, who were hired by the Farm Security Administration to document conditions within the FSA camps. Many of the protest songs they recorded were performed by Ruby and Bert Rains, union organizers in Bakersfield, who learned them at a field workers school in Pomona, CA, in 1939.

Protests songs such as "Fight for Union Recognition" often take the form of setting new texts to familiar tunes so that the songs can be easily learned. According to field notes for *Voices from the Dust Bowl*: *The Charles L. Todd & Robert Sonkin Migratory Worker Collection*, the Rains "picketed during the cotton strike last year—every day for two months." This song was created by Jack Latham during the Arvin cotton strike of 1939.

Migratory field workers picking cotton in the San Joaquin Valley, California. Negroes, Mexicans, and refugee whites pick cotton together in this field. These pickers are being paid seventy-five cents per one hundred pounds of picked cotton. Strikers, organizing under the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), are demanding one dollar. Dorothea Lange, photographer, Nov. 1938. https://www.loc.gov/item/2017770991/

Activities

Listen to recording of "Fight for Union Recognition" https://www.loc.gov/item/toddbib000173/

- Who might have sung this?
- What is the purpose of the song?
- How much more do these workers want to be paid?

Show Lange photo of cotton pickers (above), without description.

- What are workers doing?

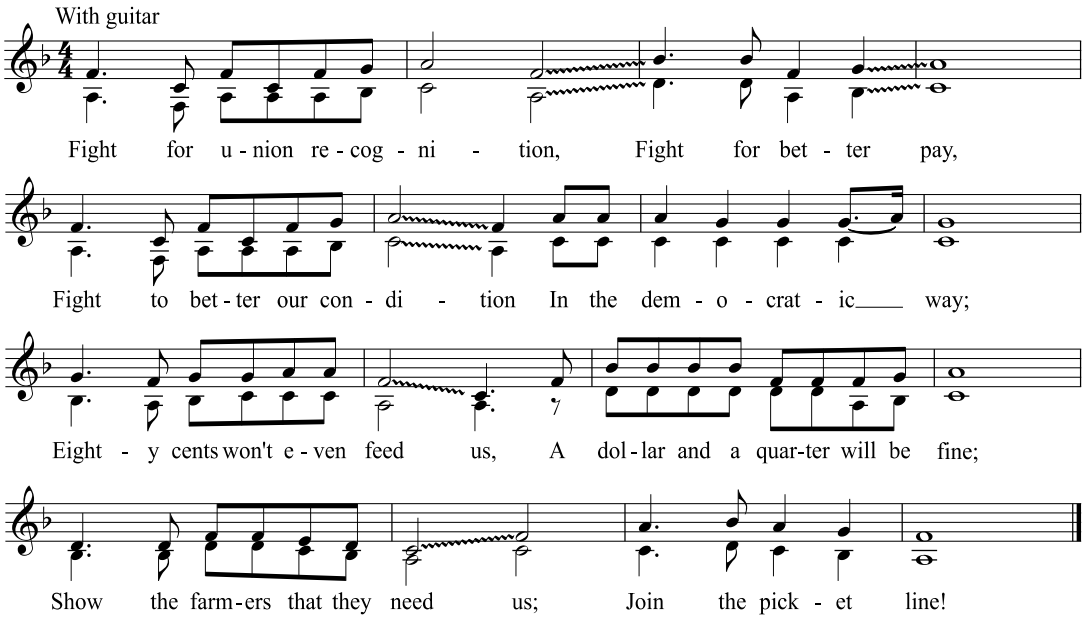
Share caption and discuss where these workers have come from (escaping the Dust Bowl)

Share the transcription below, listen again, then sing through together (with recording if needed)

Fight for Union Recognition

Informant/Performer:
Ruby Rains (from Arkansas) and Bert Rains (from Texas)
Bakersfield, CA, 1940

Source:
Library of Congress AFS 4141 A2
Collected by Charles L. Todd and Robert Sonkin



Transcribed by Gail Needleman, available at http://kodaly.hnu.edu

Question/Reflect:

- How does singing this song unite the workers?
- How does the difference in compensation that workers were asking for then compare with today's low wage jobs and the suggested federal minimum wage of $15/hour?
- What percentage of workers belonged to unions in 1940, and what is the percentage today?
- What is the role of protest songs today?
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Students can use Primary Source Analysis Tool (below) to record their observations, questions and reflections regarding this activity

If time, listen to "Associated Farmers Have a Farm" or another protest song, to hear the concerns of migrant workers.

Other protest songs from *Voices from the Dust Bowl:*
ASSOCIATED FARMERS HAVE A FARM. https://www.loc.gov/item/toddbib000171/
ROLL OUT THE PICKETS. https://www.loc.gov/item/toddbib000170/
LET'S JINE UP. This song was composed rather late in the strike, but "was about the most popular song after it was composed."

Connecting with literature: (from Todd-Sonkin field notes*)*
https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/service/afc/afc1985001/afc1985001_fn001/afc1985001_fn001.pdf
The Arvin Migratory Labor Camp was established by the Farm Security Administration in 1937 at Weedpatch California, near Arvin, in the cotton-growing region of the San Joaquin Valley. It was the first of its kind in California, and **is notable as the scene of John Steinbeck's "Grapes of Wrath."** At the time of these recordings it contained 145 families (650 persons). The camp consists of 106 metal shelters (steel, painted with an aluminum paint said to cut off the sun's rays perceptibly), 98 tents, and 20 adobes. At the peak of the cotton picking the camp population rises to 250 families, or 1200 persons. . . The adobes are assigned on a selective basis. The occupant must show a record of 6 months employment in agriculture during preceding year. The adobes are permanent homesteads — including an acre of ground; we saw flower gardens, etc. Rent is $8.25 per month. Rent for the shelters or tent platforms is $.25 per week. The Comm. which chooses the residents of the adobes is a camp comm. The occupants of the adobes are "permanent" — the occupants of the tents and shelters may not stay in the camp for more than a year.

For further investigation:
Exploration of LOC materials for teachers, including the Dust Bowl primary source set
https://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/primarysourcesets/

Article and photos documenting migratory labor camps
https://www.loc.gov/collections/fsa-owi-black-and-white-negatives/articles-and-essays/documenting-america/fsa-migratory-labor-camp/

Protest Songs Roundtable: Civil Rights, Unions, Immigrants and Stonewall
https://blogs.loc.gov/music/2013/11/protest-songs-roundtable-civil-rights-unions-immigrants-and-stonewall/

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