

Introduction

The Turbulent Poetics of 1930s Labor Poetry

The standard history of labor in the 1930s calls that decade simply the “turbulent years,” and with good cause.¹ Even before the stock market crashed on October 24, 1929 (“Black Thursday”) businesses had begun to curtail production and lay off workers. And after the stock market crash, the economic contraction turned into a full-on depression. In December 1929, four million workers were unemployed. By spring of 1933, in contrast, some fifteen million (roughly one out of every three workers) had no job, and millions more worked only part-time. By 1931, five thousand banks had failed, and some nine million people lost whatever money they had managed to save. Breadlines and soup kitchens formed in every major city, even though local relief funds quickly evaporated—and federal funds arrived slowly if at all. Many people could no longer pay their rent or mortgage and so moved into makeshift camps on the outskirts of cities—named “Hoovervilles” after the largely ineffectual president, Herbert H. Hoover. By 1932, farmers earned just two-thirds what they had in 1929; many had to declare bankruptcy and many lost their farms altogether. Drought descended upon the Great Plains, while dust storms—essentially walls of dirt—rolled across parts of Kansas, Oklahoma, Colorado, New Mexico, and the Texas Panhandle, destroying crops and livestock and driving over three million people off the land.²

In January 1937, Franklin Roosevelt surveyed the country and offered his famously bleak portrait of “one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, and ill-nourished.”

Turbulence, though, literally means a stirred up crowd, an etymology that might remind us that in the 1930s turbulence did not just fall on workers and their families from on high in the form of economic depression and despair,

but that workers and their families kicked up a good deal of it themselves. Indeed, more than perhaps any other decade, we view the 1930s through an almost permanent cloud of tear gas, and the strikes, marches, and massacres of that period have become legendary.

In 1934, Congress passed the National Industrial Recovery Act, which temporarily (the Supreme Court would later overturn it) endorsed the right of workers “to organize and bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing.” The act did little to force employers to honor that right, but it nevertheless inspired some ailing American Federation of Labor unions—the United Mine Workers of America and the International Ladies Garment Workers Union especially—to launch organizing drives, to call strikes, and to win major gains for their workers. More violent, though frequently less successful, were the series of mass and general strikes in 1934 led by migrant farm laborers in California, auto parts workers in Toledo, teamsters in Minneapolis, longshoremen in San Francisco, and textile workers—some 376,000—all along the Atlantic Coast.

At the same time, workers in the new, mass-production industries—steel, automobile, rubber, radio and electrical appliances—also began to stir themselves and organize. These industrial workers, however, did not readily fit into the structure of the AFL or its affiliates, which usually organized workers by their skill or craft—carpenter, electrician, machinist—regardless of where or for whom they worked. Instead, these semiskilled workers both turned toward and made possible a new union structure, one that would remake the labor movement and the country itself in the second half of the 1930s. Motivated by workers’ growing discontent and by passage of the Wagner Act in 1935—which granted workers the right to form a union after the Supreme Court ruled the earlier NRA unconstitutional—the newly formed Congress of Industrial Organizations, led by the United Mine Workers of America president John L. Lewis, set out to organize the millions of unorganized mass-production workers neglected by or disgusted with the craft-oriented American Federation of Labor.

In December 1936, autoworkers in Flint, Michigan, took control of several General Motors factories and began what would turn into a forty-four-day “sit-down” strike to win national recognition for their fledgling, somewhat disorganized, and CIO-affiliated union, the United Auto Workers. When the historically antiunion General Motors eventually capitulated and signed a contract with the striking workers, the victory reverberated across the nation. U.S. Steel president Myron Taylor believed it signaled that “complete indus-

trial organization was inevitable,” and so it more or less did. Taylor himself later signed an agreement with CIO-backed steelworkers, and in the months that followed, workers sat down or walked off their jobs in the rubber, auto, meatpacking, electrical equipment, textile, trucking, and dock work industries, among others. In 1938, 4.7 million workers would take part in a strike, and by the fall of that year, 3.7 million of them had joined or affiliated with CIO unions.

What does all this turbulence have to do with the supposedly unturbulent genre of poetry? To answer that question, we need to appreciate just how much the 1930s experienced a cultural revolt as well as a labor one. Horrified by the Great Depression and inspired by workers’ responses to it, many writers, artists, critics, and culture workers—sometimes though not always aligned with the increasingly influential Communist Party of the United States of America—sought to remake the nation’s literary and cultural domains. “Go Left, Young Writer!” the irascible literary Communist Mike Gold urged in 1929, and many heeded his call. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, previously unpublished worker-writers found a home for their literary ambitions in the CPUSA-backed literary journal *New Masses* (edited by Gold) and the many—also sponsored by the CPUSA—magazines and journals published by local literary organizations, the John Reed Clubs, which sprang up in most major industrial cities. But even more established writers of the 1930s turned toward producing fiction, poetry, reportage, drama, and even literary criticism that could document the exploitation and suffering of the working class and (they hoped) help make good on its revolutionary potential.³

While labor historians have long had to make sense of the turbulent 1930s, the disciplines of English and literary criticism have lagged behind. Indeed, with the exception of the occasional anthology and a handful of critical works, for roughly fifty years the literary 1930s remained taboo to a discipline still influenced by the anti-Communist zeitgeist of the Cold War and by the poetic and political prejudices of the New Criticism. All that has changed in the past two decades, though, and the proletarian and Popular Front phases of 1930s culture have recently attracted the attention of literary scholars and cultural historians.⁴ For the most part, however, critics have focused on those literary and cultural figures who may have sympathized with, identified with, and sought to advance the interests of workers, but who nevertheless considered themselves primarily writers, directors, performers, or other culture workers. Moreover, critical focus has tended to remain on the sphere of writers and artists affiliated with, fellow-traveling with, or reacting against the

Communist Party and its various literary organs and programs. Curiously, though, for all the recent attention paid to the culture—literary and popular, leftist and mainstream—of what one prominent scholar has called “the age of the CIO,” few critics or anthologists have examined the literary and cultural products of the workers and organizers who made that age the age of the CIO in the first place—that is, the literary and cultural products of workers and labor organizers themselves.⁵

To be sure, one cannot for long maintain hard-and-fast divisions among all these literary, labor, and left figures and organizations in the 1930s. After all, many of the CIO’s best organizers were Communists, the left-wing poet Edwin Rolfe briefly edited *Furniture Worker*, the newspaper of the Furniture Workers Union, and some of the poets in this collection were members of the Communist Party as well as members of their respective unions. Some may have even wished to make writing their vocation and not just their avocation. Nevertheless, and regardless perhaps of the cause, the unarguable effect has been that recent anthologists and critics have tended to neglect individuals who considered themselves workers or organizers first and poets or writers second—if at all—but who nevertheless produced, as this anthology attests, much work of literary value and interest.

Indeed, as autoworkers continued to occupy General Motors factories in Flint in January 1937, the *United Auto Worker* published some half dozen of the songs workers and their auxiliaries had composed and sung in the course of their ongoing strike. “The practice,” the *United Auto Worker* noted of such songs, “was universal,” and the editors of the newspaper linked this “creative activity” to the “veritable up-surge of creative activity along the lines of letter-writing, poetry, drawing, etc. among our people since the strikes began.” “What work has already been done,” the UAW editors concluded, “is only a slight indication of the vast creative resources possessed by the American working people.”

With notable exceptions, then, and for the reasons suggested above, workers’ collective creative activity in the 1930s has gone relatively undocumented. The anthology that follows, therefore, is devoted to the recovery of one of the genres—poetry—into which American working people channeled their (as the *United Auto Worker* put it) vast creative resources. Throughout the 1930s, but especially in the latter half of that decade, hundreds, easily thousands of workers—not just autoworkers but also musicians, teachers, actors, sleeping car porters, bartenders, waitresses, machinists, carpenters, textile workers, sailors, tenant farmers, garment workers, appliance manufacturers,

packinghouse workers, miners—would write poems and see them printed in their AFL, CIO, and unaffiliated union newspapers. As a whole, those poems offer some of the most immediate and oftentimes moving evocations of working, living, and political conditions during the Great Depression, the efforts of workers to change those conditions, and the recalcitrance and resistance those efforts more often than not met from their employers, and, sometimes, the state. In other words, in these turbulent times, many workers responded with equally turbulent poems. Moreover, far from the way a generation of literary critics has mistakenly characterized left poetry of the 1930s—that is, as slightly embarrassing or amateurish sloganeering—the poetry workers wrote during this period is ceaselessly inventive, oftentimes unexpectedly funny, wickedly satiric, and realized in a variety of poetic forms and techniques.

Whether because of what they say or how they say it, then, these poems constitute a regrettably neglected moment in the history of modern American poetry and the history of the American labor movement. It is the aim of this collection to help restore these poems and the category of labor poetry more generally to their deserved place in our literary and social history. In addition to helping us understand the cultural and political work they may have done in their own time, it is also my hope that these poets and their poems will do cultural work *today*, not the least of which is to remind us of a collective, political, and rhetorical use for the genre of poetry that celebrated—and helped to secure—the rights of workers.

They Wrote?

In approaching this forgotten body of labor poetry in the 1930s, it helps to begin by asking where it fits into the long tradition of working-class poetry in the United States, especially as that tradition began to compete with other—including mass and popular—cultures of the first decades of the twentieth century.

As long as workers have earned wages, worked under compulsion, or tried to form unions, they have tended to compose songs and poems about their experience. In his groundbreaking anthology, *American Labor Songs of the Nineteenth Century* (1975), Phillip Foner credits the first organization of workers in the United States, the Federal Society of Journeymen Cordwainers of Philadelphia, formed by Philadelphia shoemakers in 1791, for also producing what he calls “the first trade union song in American history”: “Address to the Journeyman Cordwainers of Philadelphia,” which emerged from the Cordwainers’ 1799 strike against scab labor and a reduction in wages (11). And

over the next century or so, Lowell mill girls, slaves, Knights of Labor, miners, Socialists, and Wobblies all composed songs and poems that reflected—and oftentimes inspired—working-class dissent and resistance.⁶

For many historians of labor culture, however, labor poetry of the 1930s does not follow in an unbroken line from the workers' poetry and song that preceded it, but instead remains an unexpected and therefore largely unlooked-for development—which may explain why, in addition to the legacy of the Cold War and the New Critics, even historians of labor culture and critics interested in the literary 1930s have rarely discussed this tradition of poetry. Indeed, many scholars seem to have assumed that when the working, living, and cultural conditions that enabled the production and distribution of nineteenth-century song-poetry ceased to exist, the labor song-poem subculture ceased to exist as well. In the conclusion to *Democracy, Workers, and God*, for example, his otherwise remarkable study of the nineteenth-century labor song-poem, Clark D. Halker argues that “song-poetry declined measurably after 1900, never again to enjoy the level achieved in the Gilded Age” (193). Halker attributes this decline to the widespread repression against labor in the 1890s, the economic depression of 1893, and the AFL's more conservative brand of business unionism, which held that workers should not try to replace capitalism or wage labor with socialism—a frequent theme of worker-poets in the late nineteenth century—but should instead concentrate on higher wages and lower hours. For Halker, these two causes for the decline of the labor song-poem—capitalist repression of unions and AFL business unionism—were joined by a third of equal if not more fundamental significance, “the rise of popular culture and the industry responsible for its production” (199). “As popular culture made inroads into [the movement culture] environment,” he concludes, “and popular music and literature enjoyed a wider and wider working-class audience willing to purchase the industry's latest wares,” working-class writers would compose fewer and fewer songs and poems (200). “Throughout the nation,” Halker concludes, “workers turned to products the popular culture industry offered as new forms of entertainment or as replacements for traditional indigenous forms” (201).

Halker's conclusions match those of the renowned early- and mid-twentieth-century folklorist George Korson, who in a series of influential books documented the “amazing vogue” “balladry attained . . . among the anthracite mine workers” in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Like Halker after him, Korson blamed mass and popular culture for the disappearance of his beloved “minstrels of the mine patch” (7). “Isolation of the mine

patch, a semi-primitive plane of living, harsh working conditions, illiteracy, the need for amusement, and folk imagination—these factors,” Korson observed in 1938, “produced anthracite folk lore” (7). In contrast, he mourned, “The spread of popular education, the newspaper, the automobile, the movies, and the radio—these have combined to standardize life in the anthracite region as elsewhere in the land. Undoubted blessings, they have nevertheless blighted the folk imagination and checked the growth of folklore. By removing the need for self-amusement, they have deprived the miner of his urge toward self-expression” (12).

For many cultural historians of the labor movement, then, the moment of song and poem composition by workers more or less passes with the nineteenth century, and the onset of modernity and the rise of mass and popular culture render the labor song-poem as obsolete as oil lamps and daguerreotypes. Why should workers create or even participate in labor culture when, as Halker puts it, they could turn “to boxing and baseball, vaudeville, burlesque, nickelodeons, movies, and amusement parks” (200–201)?

Halker appears to borrow much of his critique of popular culture from the Frankfurt School, the group of pre- and post-World War II German thinkers and exiles who worried over the relation between capitalism, mass culture, and politics; so too Korson, who seems to anticipate that school of critical thought (note his use of the verb “standardize”). In other words, both Halker and Korson clearly regret that the rise of popular and mass culture rendered workers passive consumers of culture rather than active producers of it. Moreover, since the decades of the 1920s and, even more so, the 1930s, witnessed the greatest consolidation of popular and mass culture yet to occur in the United States, if one takes Halker and Korson at their word, one would expect to find little in the way of song or poetry during precisely those two decades—just sports fans and film star worshippers humming the latest radio jingles. Yet as the labor historian Lizabeth Cohen argues in *Making a New Deal*, her study of industrial workers in Chicago between 1919 and 1939, mass and popular culture of the 1930s enabled working-class solidarity as much as or even more than it impeded it—largely by breaking down the rigid ethnic (and thus linguistic) barriers between workers. “The Polish and Bohemian worker laboring side by side at a factory bench,” Cohen observes, “were now living much more similar lives than they had in 1919. Not only were they more likely to speak English, but they also could talk about seeing the same motion pictures, hearing the same radio shows, and buying the same brand-name products from the same chain stores. They also shared problems about

the job that, even more important, they had begun to solve together, not just within their own ethnic work enclaves as in 1919” (211). “Ironically,” Cohen later concludes, diverging from the traditional claims of labor historians, “the broader dissemination of commercial culture that accompanied its consolidation in the 1930s may have done more to create an integrated working-class culture than a classless American one” (357). In other words, not only could one listen to the radio *and* make a new deal in the 1930s, but those actions might mutually reinforce each other.

Moreover, one could listen to the radio, make a new deal—and, what is important for our purposes—write labor poetry about all of it. Indeed, one poem in this collection, “Ford Sunday Evening Hour,” by an anonymous poet affiliated with the United Auto Workers, dramatizes just that method of composition. Still, that is not to say that organizers and worker-poets did not share Halker’s and Korson’s concern for the pacifying effects of mass and popular culture; as the anonymous poet of “Ford Sunday Evening Hour” demonstrates, they most certainly did. It is to say, however, that when organizers and worker-poets worried about mass and popular culture in the 1930s, they sometimes wrote poems about it. Further, to the extent that mass and popular cultures brought workers together, as Cohen argues, it also enabled the “turbulent” political and labor movements that inspired the labor poets in this collection. Even when mass and popular culture did not inspire poetry, then, it did not seemingly impede its production either. This collection does not incorporate any material from the first three decades of the twentieth century, but there is evidence to suggest that while the Depression decade did witness an “up-surge of creative activity,” it did not witness a literal revival of that creative activity. In other words, if one looked closely at decades before the 1930s, one would probably discover that the production of labor poetry and song never died.⁸ Thus while we owe these historians of labor culture an enormous debt for their work recovering the song-poetry of earlier periods, that research may have unintentionally contributed to the continued obscurity of later poetry by workers.

At the very least, Halker and Korson exaggerate the effect mass and popular culture had on the production of poetry and song by workers. Indeed, just tallying up the numbers is revealing. Halker observes that in the period between 1865 and 1895, “hundreds, if not thousands” of worker-poets “yielded several thousand song-poems” (2). In the period between 1929 and 1941, however—that is, in about one-third the number of years—at least as many worker-poets yielded perhaps just as many songs and poems in hun-

dreds of union publications across the country. Moreover, these songs and poems are not the product of a professional cadre of composers, as Halker elsewhere charges, but the compositions of workers and organizers who seem just as “indigenous” and anonymous as nineteenth-century song-poets.

In contrast to the antimodern misgivings of early- and late-twentieth-century historians of labor culture, all the evidence points to the fact that working-class poetry (and song) continued to function throughout the twentieth century as a working-class cultural practice.

What They Wrote

Having survived the advent of mass and popular culture, what sort of topics did these worker-poets in the 1930s address? We have already noted that many of them worried about the same rise and potential influence of mass and popular cultures lamented by Korson and Halker, and oftentimes with just as much anxiety and unease as those two scholars. In addition to addressing the effects mass and popular forms like radio, comic strips, vaudeville, and films might have on working-class consciousness, however, worker-poets also treated the experience of *work* in the new mass and popular culture industries, whether the work of producing the hardware that made such culture possible (United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers of America) or the work of providing content for that culture (the American Federation of Musicians, the Associated Actors and Artistes of America). Here, for example, is Ann Winthrop cleverly describing the lot of the unemployed Broadway actor:

I'm utterly and completely bored
With the theatre; and starving for my art.
It's come to the point where I just can't afford,
To wait any longer for a part.
Somewhere in this land of milk and honey,
There must be a practical solution.
I wonder if there would be any money,
In starting a one-man revolution?

In addition to the occasional poem about mass and popular culture and the occasional poem—like Winthrop's—about work in the mass and popular cultural industries, many labor poems during the 1930s address what we might consider the more perennial themes of poetry. A few poems—especially those from the International Ladies Garment Workers Union and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters—celebrate nature in the pastoral tradition of American

and British romantic poets. As with many of those poets, worker-poets often seem to turn to nature because of its distance from industrial capitalism, especially, as in the case of the garment workers or miners, because nature offers release and in many ways redemption from the confined and stifling space of the urban sweatshop or the underground mine.

Many worker-poets also composed poems in the tradition of what the ancient Greeks called *encomia*—that is, poems that praised a person’s achievements and character, though instead of specific persons, worker-poets often chose to praise “labor” more generally (and thus to establish labor’s claim to fair treatment and a decent wage) or to celebrate the accomplishments and victories of a given union. As Martin A. Dillman put it in his spirited poem dedicated to Waitresses’ Union No. 249 and published in the *Catering Industry Employee*:

Our Waitresses’ Union—its equals are few,
Has shown to the world what a Union can do!
It marches right on in defense of its rights;
Gosh! how those girls do win their court fights!
It succors its members at home and at work,
Then when a fight comes, no duty they shirk!
This Local loves peace, yet it’s never afraid;
I take off my hat to the fight it has made!

In a similar celebratory vein, as throughout the nineteenth century, worker-poets often turned the traditional elegy—that is, the expression of grief on the occasion of a person’s death—into what we might call the labor elegy. In these labor elegies, poets memorialized workers who died either through natural causes or in the course of their oftentimes dangerous work; they also mourned workers who died at the hands of the state or their employers, whether en masse (as sometimes happened in strikes) or singly, as in the long list of labor’s executed or imprisoned martyrs. Indeed, the labor elegy occurs far more frequently in the pages of union newspapers than is included in this anthology. Nevertheless, Billy H. Quinn’s “The Fatal Gilberton Mine,” from the *United Mine Workers Journal*, represents the tradition well, as does Willie Sue Blagden’s “To the Seamen of the International Brigades,” which celebrates those—including Harry Hines, the editor of the International Seamen’s Union newspaper *The Pilot*—who died defending republican Spain from the Fascists during the Spanish Civil War.

Despite Blagden’s and other poems that celebrate the cause of Spain and

those who defended it (as in “Madrid,” Robert Whittaker’s *Industrial Workers of the World* poem included here), worker-poets were far more likely to regret rather than to celebrate those who died in war, a regret that often inspired an outright denunciation of all war. These poets did not lack for opportunities to announce that antiwar position, either, since in the course of the 1930s Europe, Asia, and Africa all devolved into corpse-strewn battlefields. By the middle of the decade, Italy under Mussolini had invaded and conquered Ethiopia. Franco, with the help of Germany and Italy, defeated the republican government in Spain after three years of horribly violent civil war. Meanwhile, in Asia, Japan invaded mainland China, killing hundreds of thousands of Chinese peasants in a period of weeks. Back in Europe, Hitler annexed Austria, captured Czechoslovakia, overran Poland and the Netherlands, and, at the beginning of 1940, invaded and occupied France.⁹

Still smarting from the death, profiteering, and seemingly pointless conclusion of World War I, a majority of workers in the United States remained deeply opposed to involving themselves in another European war. Workers and their families concluded that as in World War I, they would do the bulk of the fighting and dying and receive little in return. Workers also feared that another war would distract from the problems of unemployment and housing at home, as well as roll back what economic gains they had managed to achieve in the second half of the 1930s. As the “poet laureate” of the United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers Union, Walter Mugford, put it in “Never Again”:

Four years fought I for England’s fame,
Thinking the Kaiser was to blame.
Dreaming poor fool, the blood of me
Was shed to spare democracy.
For what fought we? A nation’s pride?
Why have those brave boys fought and died?
Through dripping bayonets, mud, and lice,
God, what a turmoil: What a price.

“Let labor learn such wars are vain,” Mugford concludes: “Then we may live in peace again.” To be sure, after Japan bombed Pearl Harbor and Germany declared war on the United States, many of these poets changed their stance toward the war. Prior to that, however, they built one of the sharpest bodies of antiwar poetry in the country’s history.

Closely related to this broad, now mostly forgotten antiwar poetry is what

we have now learned to call the “poetry of witness”—that is, poetry that seeks to document the extreme suffering of human beings in order to combat the very human tendency to forget such extremity and suffering.¹⁰ The Great Depression, of course, created suffering on an enormous scale—unemployment, poverty, even starvation—and poets oftentimes sought to provide witness and thus remembrance of that suffering. Examples abound in the collection that follows, but the first stanza of Ruth Lechner’s “If This Be My Native Land,” published prominently in the newspaper of the United Rubber Workers, perhaps best represents that mood:

If this be my native land, I am not proud,
For mirrored in the searching pools that plunge
And pry into the villages and towns,
Are weak and hungry faces, gaunt and streaked
With lines of rain. These are my people,
And I am bitter with their sorrow.
These are my people—and I am not proud.

Not satisfied with simply witnessing such suffering, many poets—especially those affiliated with the openly revolutionary Industrial Workers of the World—used poetry to inveigh against the economic system of capitalism that they believed represented the source of this inequality and suffering.

But we could not for long keep up a distinction between the poetry of witness (even the poetry of revolution) and easily the most frequent—and perhaps the most expected—themes of labor poetry in the 1930s: work, working conditions, and the struggle to improve those conditions. Indeed, the poetry of work in this collection provides bracing glimpses into the conditions that characterized many industries during the first half of the twentieth century. Miriam Tane, for example, poet and later organizer for the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, offered this description of the lives of Manhattan seamstresses:

Soft, folded body
forms an acute
angle to sewing machine,
and from tensioned limbs
leap movements minutely
calculated, hoarded from
defeating time.

And as the void of listless
day widens into release
of night, the inert become
catapulting crowds seeking
the swift-running course
to the boroughs. Tide of
the going and the coming
is harnessed to the subway.
The days are similar as
one grain of salt to
another, and tomorrow is
formless to them who hate
what they are, yet have no
breath to sigh for what
they are not.

Tane's workers circulate to and from the alienating, soul-devouring machines of the sweatshop via the alienating, instrumental machine of the subway—a journey that does not even leave them with enough energy to regret their alienated, soul-devoured, instrumental lives. And just as Tane described the conditions of sweatshop workers, so too would other poets describe the special sorts of hell that characterized their own work: the desperation of the “shape-up” on shipping docks, the crushing pace of the automobile assembly line, the dangers and degradations of the coal mine, and, in any industry or craft, the fear of being laid off.

An anonymous poet for the Southern Tenants Farmers Union also described the wretched working and living conditions of sharecroppers. Instead of the merely pacifying and soul-destroying trap of work and subway rides sketched by Tane, however, this poet presented his readers, as he also titled his poem, with a “Share-Cropper's Choice”:

Up early in the morning,
Only a bite to eat,
Mostly Bread and Molasses
Never a bite of meat.
Plowing long rows of cotton
Till noon bell calls to eat
Bean-soup, bread, and molasses
Never a bite of meat.

Plowing in evening sunshine
Tired, too darned tired to eat
Beans, Corn-bread, and molasses
But it's that _____ or organize.

As “Share-Cropper’s Choice” suggests, and as we might gather from a collection of poetry originally published in newspapers of established or incipient unions, many poets did not stop with merely describing the harrowing conditions of their work, but described what happened—the difficulties as well as the successes—when workers made the “choice” to organize and to try to improve their lives. By far the most popular poem of the labor movement, for example, “The Label Tells a Story,” a version of which sooner or later appeared in almost every AFL, CIO, and unaffiliated union newspaper, urged workers to practice solidarity not just as workers but as consumers as well:

You’re a union member I take it, for you pay your union dues
But my friend, is there a label of a union in your shoes?
Do you see the union label on the tobacco that you buy?
Or upon the newspaper you read?
You can get it, if you try.

The majority of these sorts of poems, however, focused on organizing on the shop floor, at the point of production rather than consumption. A poet who identified himself only as a “Canadian Ford Worker” offered this representative injunction to his fellow autoworkers:

To my American brothers,
And democracy lovers,
I jot down a rhyme
On company time.

To make some contribution
To industrial revolution,
And help sound the knell
Of industrial hell,

We must without fear—
Our duty is clear—
Together put a stop
To the last open shop.

Before they could sound the knell of industrial hell, however, workers and organizers encountered many barriers that made the always difficult task of

organizing even more difficult. Prior to and even after passage of the Wagner Act, for example, which nominally outlawed them, many employers started “company unions” that sometimes offered workers life insurance and other perks but which nevertheless remained powerless—or worse, detrimental—when it came to issues like wages, working hours, or the speedup. In order for workers to establish their own unions, they oftentimes had to discredit—or take over—preexisting, ineffectual company unions, and many poems aided in that effort.

In addition to company unions, however, workers and organizers had to confront employers whose commitment to “the open shop” (that is, a non-union shop) remained fierce and who as a result marshaled all possible force—including their own and, in some cases, that of the state—against union movements. During the campaign to organize Ford workers, for example, the Dearborn city council, at Henry Ford’s request, outlawed leafletting, and police arrested organizers who violated that law; ex-boxers and criminals on the Ford payroll also routinely beat up UAW organizers, most famously at the Battle of the Overpass, when photographers captured one particularly brutal beating on film.¹¹ Before they capitulated at Flint, too, General Motors employed what a 1936 congressional committee called “the most colossal supersystem of spies yet devised in any American corporation” in order to infiltrate unions and fire workers who either organized or expressed sympathy for the union. By documenting such abuses—for these specific examples from the UAW, see Murray Roth’s two poems “Dearborn Hospitality” and “A Stoolie’s Lament”—worker-poets underscored the depravity of employers and thus the virtue of the union movement.

Of course not all the poems in this anthology fall neatly into one of these categories, and many poems draw from several categories at once, but they nevertheless provide us with a rough guide to the content and modes of workers’ poetry in labor newspapers. In addition to this variety of content, however, labor poetry of the 1930s—as even the brief survey above suggests—relied on a variety of forms as well. To be sure, most worker-poets chose to use thoroughly standard—even conventional—forms. In other words, their poems usually rhyme, and, though often inventive, imagistic, satiric, and even ironic, they nevertheless strive to remain as accessible as possible to as many readers as possible.

Exceptions to these conventional formal rules, however, abound. The United Auto Workers’ pseudonymous Poll, for example, wrote long, free verse poems that, with their nonstandard capitalization and short, heavily

enjambéd lines, clearly betray the influence of the modernist revolution in poetic form. Miriam Tane, whose work is quoted above, expresses her contempt for the sweatshop specifically and modern life more generally through a sort of imagistic, at times metaphysical free verse that frequently relies on allusions to popular culture and the detritus of the consumer economy. However, the most unusual worker-poet in terms of form and, perhaps, even content, has to be the pseudonymous Mr. Modestus, who published in a number of labor newspapers—the Musicians, the Textile Workers, the Ladies Garment Workers—throughout the 1930s. Like Poll, Mr. Modestus wrote long, free verse poems, yet his poems discursively wind their way from geography to statistics to philosophical speculation and back again—oftentimes building to quite remarkable insights about work and life in the 1930s. Few poets between the wars—or since—have used this form to such effect.

Still, most of the poems included in this anthology—and most of the poems published in union newspapers not included in this anthology—do in fact follow fairly conventional forms. For academic readers still trained in New Critical and modernist poetic sensibilities, which usually value free verse and difficulty over rhyme and accessibility, that conventionality can pose a problem, perhaps even lead them to dismiss this poetry as mere propaganda—as did a whole generation of literary critics. Yet we have to remember that those New Critical poetic prejudices were neither universal nor universally accepted; rather, they have a very specific history. If we ignore the contingency of those beliefs about poetry, we risk anachronistically bringing them to bear on worker-poets who did not share their premises.

Indeed, we should remember that worker-poets had good reasons to choose the forms they did, not just that they failed to hear the news about T. S. Eliot, Cleanth Brooks, and the poetry of the ironic fragment. For one, many worker-poets—and many of their readers—would have had some familiarity with the history of labor poetry and song-poetry in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Those poets oftentimes composed lyrics to be sung—and thus employed that venerable crib of memorization, rhyme; and so worker-poets in the 1930s quite sensibly borrowed that technique for poems that they too wanted workers to, if not memorize or sing, at least remember. As for today, too, most workers encounter poetry in the form of songs on the radio—almost all of which use rhyme. Indeed, one of the songs autoworkers composed and sang during the Flint sit-down strike, “The Fisher Strike,” borrowed its tune from a country-and-western song, Gene Autry’s “The Martins and the Coys,” then quite popular on the radio. It should not

surprise us, then, that when workers turned to writing their own poems, they imagined participating in these ready-to-hand poetic and popular poetic traditions and not the relatively new and relatively obscure modernist poetic tradition of the 1910s and 1920s.

Why They Wrote

But workers chose these standard and conventional forms not simply because they knew them best but because they fit their purpose, which brings us to the question of why they wrote these poems at all. In his remarkable study *Poetry and the Public*, Joseph Harrington describes a tradition of public poetry, especially active in the first decades of the twentieth century, which “understood poetry to engage and intervene in public life” (17). In contrast, high modernist poets and critics displaced this public-oriented view of poetry with their own “private,” now dominant view of poetry, one that valued the poem as an aesthetic object in and for itself and as a way for its poet and its reader to escape the debased mass, popular, and sentimental cultures—including the mass, popular, and sentimental poetic cultures. In contrast, public poetry, as Harrington documents, “was meant to serve a public, often social, function” (17) and to act “as a vehicle or mode for participating in and engaging with the public” (11). As Mark W. Van Wienan describes this tradition, in the context of politically committed poets who responded to World War I through newspaper verse, “The norm for poetry writing—and, at least in certain respects, the ideal—was not high art but journalism” (6). Public poets thus “reversed conventional expectations about what poetry is supposed to accomplish: not the achievement of timelessness, of carving out a place in the canon of great literature, but the impact of timeliness, influencing historical and political conditions here and now” (6).

For the most part, worker-poets belong to this tradition of public and journalistic poetry, and so it of course influenced the forms they chose. In order for poetry to serve that social, even journalistic function, it had to remain accessible to its public readers. And while when they composed and submitted their poems for publication they usually had a more specific public in mind than poets publishing in mass circulation newspapers—not the public per se, but their fellow workers and fellow (or potential) union sympathizers—they still wished to influence those reader-workers, to engage them, to persuade them, to, as Horace put it, instruct and delight them. As we have seen, they wanted to instruct and delight them about politics, about war, about suffering, about their own working conditions, about the perfidy

of their employers, and about “the choice” they had and should make to improve their lives. The poets chose conventional forms, then, because they suited their rhetorical and political aims—not because they were bad poets.

In retrospect, of course, we can question the efficacy of their choice of forms and their poetic and political project, if not necessarily the reasons why they made those formal choices. After all, poetry, as W. H. Auden put it, “makes nothing happen,”¹² a conclusion that would seem to undercut both the aims of public poetry and thus the poetic forms employed to advance those aims. One of the many things to admire about this body of workers’ poetry, however, may be the answer it implies to this problem. In contrast to those critics, even poets, who sometimes overestimate how much culture and literature can affect the political realm, these poems seem to reconcile themselves to Auden’s pessimism. Perhaps because they appeared in newspapers devoted to maintaining or establishing unions, and because their authors oftentimes functioned as not just *de facto* but as actual organizers, the poets included in this anthology seem to recognize that poetry, by itself, could not make a union or, as in the case of the IWW, a revolution. By themselves, these poems seem to say, poems do not form unions; they do not stop bullets or dissipate tear gas; they will not slow down the assembly line; and they will not get you your job back if your foreman lays you off. Henry Ford did not read the poetry published in the *United Auto Worker* and realize the error of his thug and tear-gas ways.

Indeed, instead of apologizing for its political incapacity and abandoning culture altogether, workers’ poetry of the 1930s—and in other periods as well—makes the most of what poetry can do. Together, these poems seem to recognize that organizing workers into unions does not require poems *per se*, but it does require what the labor historian David Montgomery calls a militant minority: “the men and women who endeavored to weld their workmates and neighbors into a self-aware and purposeful working class” (2). And though they may not do much else, poems can contribute some of the rhetorical heat necessary to weld workmates and neighbors together. To say that poetry by itself *makes* nothing happen, then, is not to say that poetry *does* nothing. Indeed, Auden’s line underestimates what poetry can do, and so it underestimates what I believe 1930s poetry by workers did manage to do. And that is to remind workers of the old IWW preamble that “the working-class and the employing class have nothing in common,” an aphorism that while doubtlessly reductive is nevertheless absolutely necessary for the exercise of working-class power (qtd. in Kornbluh 12). As the contemporary labor economist Michael

Zweig puts it, “To exercise power you need to know who you are. You also need to know who your adversary is, the target in the conflict. When the working class disappears into the middle class, workers lose a vital piece of their identity. In political, social, and cultural terms, they don’t know who they are anymore” (74). If they did nothing else, then, these poems reminded people who they were and who their adversaries were. They were workers, sped-up and abused, and their adversaries were their employers, who, when it came down to it, would just as soon throw them in jail and fire tear gas or guns at them as raise their wages or allow organizers to help them form a union. Far from causing us to despair about the efficacy of political poetry, then, the cultural and political pragmatism these poems manifest should only add to their value and to these poets’ accomplishment. They remind us that poetry specifically and culture more broadly can make something happen, but only when allied with an active, collective political or social movement.

If so, then we might harbor some misgivings about recovering these poems in their present context. On the one hand, the repression of political poetry—including poetry written by and about workers during the 1930s—has done considerable damage to our understanding of the field of modern American poetry. It has similarly damaged our understanding of the variety of social forms and functions poetry occupied during that period—and could occupy in our own. On those grounds alone, these poems deserve recovery and study. As Cary Nelson argues in *Repression and Recovery*, “For texts previously ignored or belittled, our greatest appreciative act may be to give them fresh opportunities for an influential life” (14); those texts “can gain that new life,” he continues, “in part through an effort to understand what cultural work [they] may have been able to do in an earlier time” (11). By gathering and reproducing these poems into this anthology, I have tried to aid just that understanding of these poems’ cultural work, as well as to aid an understanding of poetry that sought to *do* cultural and political work in the first place.

Yet if these poems and worker-poets find a new audience today, they will mostly find it within universities, whether among scholars or students, and while that does not rob them of their political and cultural meaning, it does alter it somewhat. These poems were written for workers, most of them by workers, and published in working-class newspapers. Conceived rhetorically, their success and their value depended upon delighting, instructing, and converting their audiences, who were not academics or students, but (again) workers. If they succeed in delighting their newfound contemporary readers and instructing them of the history of working-class organization, the role

poetry played in it, the necessity for it today, and the courage required of it in the face of its ongoing adversaries, so much the better. Nevertheless, my perhaps naive but nevertheless real hope is that these poems might delight and instruct the contemporary counterparts to their original audiences—that is, workers today. Similarly, that they might inspire new poetry, poetry that would both emerge from and inspire new movements for workers' rights and livelihoods. If they did, then they might again accomplish what they once managed to accomplish: aiding in the creation of a self-aware and purposeful, even "turbulent" working class, prepared to meet the new forms of economic turbulence that linger and that seem to gather more force every day.

Organization and Methodology

I have chosen to arrange the poems that follow according to the union publication in which they appeared, instead of by poet or by date of publication. There are many reasons to do so, not least of which is that most of the worker-poets in this collection imagined writing and speaking to members or potential members of their union in the context of other poems and other material to appear in those publications. Within the sections devoted to a union, I have arranged the poems chronologically.

I have also divided the collection into three sections according to the affiliations of the individual unions—that is, whether a given union belonged to the American Federation of Labor, the Congress of Industrial Organization, or had no or only brief affiliation with either of those bodies. Though such a division risks reproducing the uncomplicated belief in a "conservative" AFL and a "radical" CIO, a belief that many of the poems and poets in this collection seriously call into question, the division nevertheless reflects the historical sweep of the decade. For the first half of the 1930s, the AFL predominated; when it failed to take the lead in organizing unskilled and semiskilled workers in the new, mass production industries, only then did the CIO displace the AFL as the leading actor in the ranks of organized labor.

For only a very few poets have I tried—and for even fewer have I succeeded—in tracking down biographical information. Fearing reprisals from their employers, many poets chose to write anonymously or to adopt pseudonyms. Unfortunately, that strategy also makes it extraordinarily difficult for later readers of this poetry to learn anything about these poets' biographies. For poets whose names we do know, however, it nevertheless proved a daunting task to discover biographical details about them; it also seemed like partly a pointless one, though, since many of the original readers of these poems

valued them because of what they said, what they reflected, and what they made possible—not because of *who* wrote them, except of course that they were written by someone like them, someone of their own class, indeed of their own industry, union, even city or factory.

That said, if readers take an interest in these poems, they will undoubtedly take an interest in the people who wrote them. Therefore, whenever I have been able to discover something about a poet, I have given that information in a footnote. I offer these biographical details, though, with the following caveat, which is that they are unavoidably skewed toward poets who, for one reason or another, went on to lead lives sufficiently public that it later became possible for me to learn something about them. In other words, we should not assume that these poets tell us much at all about the other poets in this collection—especially the many who published anonymously or under pseudonyms.

In lieu of extensive biographical information about the poets, I have written brief introductions to the unions in whose newspapers the poems appeared and, when appropriate, introduced some of the history or culture of the workers who labored in the industry or craft covered by the union. For these introductions, I have relied on two works: Gary M. Fink's *Labor Unions* (1977) and the outstanding edited collection, *Who Built America: Working People and the Nation's Economy, Politics, Culture, and Society* (1992). In order to keep the introductions relatively uncluttered, I have not cited these sources. I hope that readers understand such a decision not as an attempt to pass off this long-in-the-making and valuable research as my own, but to present the fruits of it as clearly and conveniently as possible.

For many of the poems, I have provided footnotes that explain the oftentimes esoteric details of working conditions and practices in a given industry or craft, the political controversies of the decade, or the local labor battles of a given union—all of which the authors of these poems rightly assumed their local and immediate readers would understand but which their later and perhaps unimagined readers might not.

Finally, I will say a word about methodology. Given what I have argued about the continuity of labor poetry across the early decades of the twentieth century, the opening and closing dates for this collection deserve comment. While I would have liked to produce an anthology of labor poetry that encompassed the first half of the twentieth century, or even the whole of the twentieth century, such a project would have taken closer to a lifetime rather than the few years this one did. So I have chosen to restrict the

anthology to the period between 1929 and 1941, for several reasons. The onset of the Great Depression in late 1929 introduced unimaginable suffering into the lives of many workers, unlike anything most of them had ever experienced before. At the same time, it also offered historic opportunities for those workers to improve their lives, especially in the context of a federal government that eventually came to recognize workers' right to organize and then compelled employers to recognize that right as well. Not surprisingly, this suffering, paired with these opportunities, inspired many workers to join unions, and many of those to write poetry. Moreover, the Great Depression and the labor movement that arose in its wake also provided workers with an unprecedented outlet for that poetry. Nearly every union published a monthly or bimonthly newspaper in the 1930s. These newspapers and their editors not only accepted workers' contributions and made space for them, but in most cases actively encouraged workers to submit their work. To some degree, these conditions—this suffering and these opportunities, this movement and these newspapers—obtained before the Great Depression, but never in such a concentrated form, and never, I would hold, to such literary effect.

This unique historic interlude, however, largely comes to an end with the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941. The crises of World War II resuscitated the ailing U.S. industrial economy, mitigating much of the suffering of the Great Depression by raising wages and, especially as men were drafted into the army and as industry recovered, by giving work to the staggering number of unemployed. The war also ushered in a whole new set of labor relations. Most unions signed—and most workers supported that decision—no-strike clauses in order to guarantee the flow of material necessary for the conduct of the war; in return, and because they really had no choice, most employers treated their workers more decently than they ever had. Most of the large companies that had successfully fought off the CIO during the 1930s—the Ford Motor Company, for example—were compelled, under the threat of losing war contracts from the federal government or losing production during those boom years, to recognize their workers' unions. With some exceptions, then, the breathtaking labor battles of the 1930s came to an end. From now on, workers and organizers could start a union by voting for one, not necessarily by forming a picket line, sitting down in a factory, or getting arrested, beaten, or murdered by hired goons and the local police. Without more evidence, we cannot say for certain what effects these developments brought on by the war in reality had, but from the survey I have made of the war period, they seem

to have lessened the desire—and the overwhelming need—for workers to write poetry. But we have been wrong about these sorts of things before.

Second, I was fortunate to do the bulk of this research at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, one of a handful of universities in the country that have made a systematic attempt to gather and to preserve (or at least not to discard) the hundreds of periodicals that emerged from the labor movement in the United States. In assembling this collection, I consulted almost every CIO journal from October 24, 1929, to December 7, 1941; so too the “unaffiliated” unions of the Industrial Workers of the World, the Southern Tenants Farmers Union, and the International Seamen’s Union; as well as every major American Federation of Labor craft union. Limits on my energy, my time, and the University of Illinois collection, however, prevented me from consulting all of the many, oftentimes quite small AFL or unaffiliated unions. So while I make no claims to have exhausted this enormous archive, I believe I can confidently claim to have fairly represented it.

I have not been able to determine why a given union (the Teamsters, for example) did not publish poems while other unions did, though it doubtless depended upon a number of interrelated and perhaps inextricable factors: the size of the union, the activity and militancy of the union, the desire of its members to write poetry, a tradition of poetry within that industry, craft, or union, and, finally, the willingness or reluctance of editors of the newspapers to publish poetry.

Finally, since I only include a few more than 150 of the thousands of poems uncovered in the course of my research, I ought to say a word about how I have selected them. Quite simply—or perhaps not simply at all—I have chosen what I considered to be the most historically revealing, the most inventive, and the most indigenous of the published poems. By “indigenous” I mean poems written by workers, members of workers’ families, or organizers with ties to the union, in contrast to the many famous and then-famous poets—like Lord Tennyson, Edgar Guest, and Ella Wheeler Wilcox—that union newspapers, especially unions affiliated with the American Federation of Labor, frequently reprinted, sometimes to fill space. While these poems might tell us a great deal about the taste of editors and perhaps of workers, they remain available elsewhere and rarely reveal much about workers or the unions themselves.

Even after ruling out those reprinted poems, however, thousands remained, and I have opted, as I indicate above, for the most historically revealing and the most formally inventive. To be sure, this mode of selection

sacrifices some of the force of the argument advanced above—that is, that traditional criteria of poetic value like “imaginative” and “inventive” should not overly determine our estimation of these poems’ rhetorical and cultural work, which exists somewhat independently of their aesthetic value. Nevertheless, arguing that evaluation is always a contingent, historical process does not mean that some poems did not realize their rhetorical, cultural, political, and poetic aims better than others. And it is those poems that seem best fitted for winning this remarkable body of poetry the audience it deserves.

Notes

1. See Irving Bernstein, *Turbulent Years*.
2. I borrow much of the discussion of the “turbulent” 1930s in this and following paragraphs from Freeman et al., *Who Built America*, specifically the two chapters “The Great Depression and the First New Deal” and “Labor Democratizes America.”
3. Many writers, who already shared these commitments or came to share them, enlisted (sometimes literally) in the cause. Internationally, Americans—including, perhaps most famously, the poet Edwin Rolfe—volunteered to help Spanish Republicans defeat General Francisco Franco’s German and Italian-backed fascists in the Spanish Civil War, while the novelist Ernest Hemingway volunteered to cover the war for the North American Newspaper Alliance and to raise funds for it in the United States. At home, Communists and their allies organized in support of the Scottsboro Boys, and many artists and poets (Langston Hughes foremost among them) rallied to their defense. Finally, and perhaps most influentially, the Popular Front inspired a cultural front of novelists, poets, playwrights, filmmakers, screenwriters, and singers who would, as their leading historian has characterized it, orchestrate the “laboring” of American popular culture during the second half of the 1930s (Denning, *Cultural Front*, xvii).
4. Some of the best-known anthologies that appeared slightly before or during the 1930s include Manuel Gomez’s *Poems for Workers*; Marcus Graham’s *Anthology of Revolutionary Poetry* (1929); Granville Hicks’s *Proletarian Literature in the United States: An Anthology* (1935); *We Gather Strength* (1933); and Alan Calmer’s *Get Organized: Stories and Poems about Trade Union People* (1939). Later anthologies include Joyce Kornbluh’s *Rebel Voices: An IWW Anthology* (1964); Jack Salzman and Barry Wallenstein’s *Years of Protest: A Collection of American Writing of the 1930s* (1967); Alan Lomax’s *Hard Hitting Songs for Hard Hit People* (1967); Walter Lowenfels’s *The Writing on the Wall: 108 American Poems of Protest* (1969); Aaron Kramer’s *On Freedom’s Side: An Anthology of American Poems of Protest* (1972); and Jack Salzman and Leo Zanderer’s *Social Poetry of the 1930s: A Selection* (1978). Among the few critical works that appeared are Walter Rideout’s *Radical Novel in the United States, 1900–1954* (1956), Daniel Aaron’s *Writers on the Left: Episodes in American Literary Communism* (1961), and Marcus Klein’s *Foreigners: The Making of American Literature, 1900–1940* (1981).

The last two decades, however, have seen a wealth of new scholarship on the 1930s

and labor literary culture more generally. See especially Rita Barnard, *The Great Depression and the Culture of Abundance* (1995); Constance Coiner, *Better Red: The Writing and Resistance of Tillie Olsen and Meridel Le Sueur* (1995); Michael Davidson, *Ghostlier Demarcations* (1997); Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents* (1987) and *The Cultural Front* (1996); Alan Filreis, *Modernism from Left to Right* (1994); Barbara Foley, *Radical Representations* (1993); Laura Hapke, *Labor's Text* (2001); Joseph Harrington, *Poetry and the Public* (2002); Walter Kalaidjian, *American Culture between the Wars* (1993); Sherry Linkon and Bill Mullen, eds., *Radical Representations: Rereading 1930s Culture* (1996); William J. Maxwell, *New Negro, Old Left* (1999); Charlotte Nekola and Paula Rabinowitz, eds., *Writing Red: An Anthology of American Women Writers, 1930-1940* (1987); Cary Nelson, *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910-1945* (1987) and *Revolutionary Memory: Recovering the Poetry of the American Left* (2001); Paula Rabinowitz, *Labor and Desire: Women's Revolutionary Fiction in Depression America* (1991); Robert Shulman, *The Power of Political Art* (2000); Michael Thurston, *Making Something Happen: Partisan Political Poetry in the U.S. between the Wars* (2001); Alan Wald, *Exiles from a Future Time: The Forging of the Mid-Twentieth Century Literary Left* (2002). In terms of recent anthologies, Paul Lauter and Ann Fitzgerald's *Literature, Class, and Culture* encourages its readers to view working-class and other literary texts through the lens of class; John Graham's "*Yours for the Revolution*": *The Appeal to Reason, 1895-1922* (1990) gathers decades' worth of articles, cartoons, stories, and poems from the leading socialist newspaper in the United States; Nicholas Coles and Peter Oresick's anthologies *Working Classics: Poems on Industrial Life* (1990) and *For a Living: The Poetry of Work* (1995) collect contemporary working-class poetry; Cary Nelson's *Modern American Poetry* devotes significant space to left-wing and radical poets throughout the twentieth century; finally, Nicholas Coles and Janet Zandy have recently published *American Working-Class Literature: An Anthology* (2007).

5. Karyn Hollis's "Material of Desire: Bodily Rhetoric in Working Women's Poetry at the Bryn Mawr Summer School, 1921-1938" is a notable exception, as are Colette A. Hyman's "Politics Meet Popular Entertainment in the Workers' Theatre of the 1930s" and Michael Denning's discussion of the ILGWU-sponsored musical *Pins and Needles* in *Cultural Front*. Cary Nelson's *Revolutionary Memory* discusses poems and poem-cards to emerge from the early-twentieth-century labor movement. Two additional works deserve mention here, too: *Rhyme and Reason: Molders Poetry from Sylvis to the Great Depression* (1984), edited by James E. Cebula and James E. Wolfe, and a more recent book, David Duke's *Writers and Miners: Activism and Imagery in America* (2002). Finally, one might mention Robert S. McElvaine's excellent collection, *Down and Out in the Great Depression: Letters from the Forgotten Man* (1983).

6. "In the main," Foner summarizes this poetry, "the songs and ballads in the labor papers dealt with the organizations and struggles of working people, their hatred for their oppressor, their affirmation of the dignity and worth of labor, their determination to endure hardships together and to fight together for a better life" (xiv). "They provide us," he concludes, "with insights into the causes of strikes and other labor issues from the viewpoint of workers themselves, and they indicate what the composers—themselves often participants in the struggles—thought would be the most stirring way to mobilize workers" (xv).

7. To be fair, Halker allows that “song-poetry can hardly be described as a dead letter after 1900” and that “a revival of sorts took place in the [twentieth] century and in a reorganized labor movement” (194). Be that as it may, Halker does not think much of this revival. “With the possible exception of the Industrial Workers of the World,” he argues, “at no time after 1900 did as many individuals contribute song-poems as in previous decades” and that, correspondingly, “fewer labor papers and journals published after 1900 included song-poems in their pages; those that did rarely printed them as a regular feature” (194). Moreover, after 1920, “as in many activities associated with the labor movement,” “professionalism crept into the song-poet’s craft,” and instead of a broad, indigenous movement, “a small number of individuals wrote the majority of songs” (194).

8. For a start, and in addition to the many AFL newspapers published during this period, one might look at the song and poetic practices of the various radical political parties and unions, including the many publications of the Socialist Party, most notably *Appeal to Reason*, and, of course, the publications and circulars of the prolific Industrial Workers of the World. Moreover, and though it presents more of a challenge, in many urban areas workers from similar ethnic backgrounds maintained their own fraternal organizations, out of which came newspapers published in their native language, many of which likely contain much original poetry.

9. For an accessible overview of the diplomatic and military history of the people, see David M. Kennedy’s *Freedom from Fear*.

10. On the poetry of witness, see Carolyn Forché’s remarkable anthology, *Against Forgetting: Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness* (1993).

11. For oral histories of this period provided by Ford workers themselves, see Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin’s *Talking Union*.

12. I borrow this phrase from Auden, of course, but also from Michael Thurston’s study *Making Something Happen*.

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