



“Union Makes Us Strong” CD a great resource for labor historians

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Peter K. Siegel and Eli Smith, two musician-activists, have done the labor history field a huge favor by recording a set of important labor and union folk songs, written by the likes of Joe Hill, Aunt Molly Jackson, Florence Reece, and the Almanac Singers (which included the redoubtable Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie). The fourteen songs on the CD—some familiar and venerable; others now obscure—were sung on picket lines and at rallies during the epic labor struggles of the first half of the twentieth century, including: the 1909 garment workers strike in New York; the 1912 Lawrence strike; the Harlan county coal wars of the early 1930s; and the 1934 San Francisco general strike. These songs remind us that building a labor movement was about much more than winning better wages and working conditions; it also involved creating, sometimes from whole cloth, a vibrant working class culture that very much relied on songs and collective singing to spread the message of trade unionism.

Of particular note on the CD are the Joe Hill standards, “[There is Power in a Union](#)” and “The Preacher and the Slave,” and two less well known Joe Hill songs, “Scissor Bill” and my

favorite, “Casey Jones, the Union Scab,” in which Hill offers a new, militant twist on the old folk ballad about the railroad engineer. All four were written by the Wobbly balladeer between 1911 and 1915, according to the excellent and profusely illustrated 20-page booklet/liner notes (one good reason to buy the CD instead of downloading the songs), written by Cliff Conner, my colleague at the School of



Photograph by Peter K. Siegel of 1.00 Scrip Coin issued by the Norton Coal Co., Norton, Virginia, included inside the jewel case of “The Union Makes us Strong” CD.

Professional Studies at CUNY. “Which Side Are You On?”, written by Florence Reece in the midst of the 1931 Harlan County, Kentucky coal war between the coal operators and the National Miners Union (NMU), became a labor and civil rights movement favorite in the years that followed. Eli Smith performs the classic song solo (and hauntingly) on the banjo using traditional D tuning, as the liner notes indicate, “made famous by Dock Boggs, himself a coal miner and a union man.” The Harlan County coal war is also memorialized in “The Death of Harry Simms.” Simms was a nineteen year-old NMU organizer shot to death in 1932 by a deputy and two of his friends, Jim Garland and Aunt Molly Jackson wrote the song as a tribute to Simms’s memory. There are also two songs written by three of the four Almanac Singers (Lee Hays, Millard Lampell and Pete Seeger): the well known and oft performed “Talking Union” and the more obscure (and decidedly less catchy) “Song for Bridges,” which valorizes the leadership of Harry Bridges during the 1934 longshore workers’ strike in San Francisco that ended in a general strike and the creation of the ILWU and helped to launch the massive CIO organizing drives over the next few years.

Siegel and Smith are devoted and conscientious musicians who carefully research and

perform the playing and singing styles of the songwriters and singers featured on the CD. They both play guitar and banjo and sing all of the songs on the album. They are accompanied on several of the songs by Andy Statman on mandolin,

Walker Shepard and Bob Marlin on guitar, or Craig Judelman on fiddle. Siegel and Smith's careful curation and enthusiastic renditions of these labor movement classics should prove invaluable in helping students appreciate the importance of movement culture in the emergence of the early labor movement. Moreover, the songs included here serve to remind us that, though the labor movement didn't win all of the battles, as Tom Lehrer memorably noted about the Spanish Civil War, we had all of the good songs.

"The Union Makes Us Strong," (2012) CD by Peter K. Siegel and Eli Smith is available from Weave Room Records \$9.95 (or \$.99 a song) in the iTunes store; \$17.95 on Amazon; and \$12.99 for the CD (or \$9.99 for a download) from [CDBaby, independent online music store](#).

Author



• [Steve Brier](#)