Lesson Plan: Songs of the Labor Movement

Grades: 9-12
Subject: U.S. History and Government, Government and Civics, Contemporary Issues, and African American History
Time required: Two class periods
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Overview
Music has provided American workers an outlet to express their thoughts about the workplace. Members of the labor movement in the 1930s through the 1950s used songs effectively to share their opinions about corporate control, poor benefits, and unionization. In the 1950s, civil rights activists would learn several of these labor songs and use them in their fight for racial equality. Even today, labor and civil rights advocates continue to use chants, instruments, and songs to further their causes.

Understanding Goals
Students will examine the tactics of labor activists, recognize the roots of popular folk music in labor songs, understand the role of the Highlander Folk Center in labor and civil rights history, and begin to see the connection between labor and civil rights advocacy.

Objectives
Students will learn how to critically think about music, analyze oral history interviews, and make connections between historical events and people.

Investigative Question
How can music influence a movement? (Think outside the traditional meaning of music. Music can mean singing, playing an instrument, chanting, and call-and-response.)

Curriculum Standards
U.S. History and Government
- US.11 Explain the rise of the labor movement, union tactics (e.g., strikes), the role of leaders (e.g., Eugene Debs and Samuel Gompers), the unjust use of prison labor (e.g., Coal Creek labor saga), and the responses of management and government.

U.S. History and Government (continued)
- US.79 Examine the roles and actions of civil rights advocates (e.g., Malcolm X, Thurgood Marshall, Rosa Parks) and opponents (e.g., Bull Connor, Orval Faubus, Strom Thurmond) and how they coincided with, confronted, and challenged each other.

US.80 Describe the significant events in the struggle to secure civil rights for African Americans, including: ...Marches, demonstrations, boycotts, and sit-ins (e.g., Nashville)...Highlander Folk School

Contemporary Issues
- CI.11 Analyze the lasting impact of history on contemporary issues (e.g., Treaty of Versailles, Cold War, ethnic cleansing, urbanization, human rights, immigration, modern medicine, etc.).

African American History
- AAH.43. Identify various organizations and their roles in the Civil Rights Movement (e.g., Black Panthers, Highlander Folk School, SNCC, etc.).
PROCEDURES

Day 1

Step 1  Explain to your students that they will be examining two songs of labor activism.

Step 2  Pass out the **Vocabulary Info Sheet** and tell your students to look at the definitions of labor and activism. Ask for a volunteer to read the definitions aloud and discuss students’ understanding of these terms.

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**Pete Seeger and “Which Side Are You On?”**

Step 3  Introduce Pete Seeger to the class. Open up the **PowerPoint**, scroll to slide two, and show students a picture of Pete Seeger from 1955. Ask if students have heard of Seeger, and if so, have them share what they know.

Step 4  To supplement student knowledge, pass out the **Musicians, Songs, and Venues Info Sheet**. Have your students read the section on Pete Seeger. If students have difficulty with any of the words, refer them to the Vocabulary Worksheet.

Step 5  Now that your students have read about Pete Seeger, ask them the following questions:
- What do you think Seeger’s song will sound like?
- Think about Seeger’s background and the title of the song “Which Side Are You On?” What do you think the lyrics will be about?

Step 6  Pass out the **lyrics** to “Which Side Are You On,” and tell your students that you are about to play the song. Provide your students some background about the song’s release. The song was first recorded by Seeger in 1955 for the album *Talking Union and Other Union Songs*, a group effort by Seeger, his old band the Almanac Singers, and the Song Swappers. The particular version the students will be listening to came from Seeger’s *Greatest Hits* album in 1967.

Step 7  Go to the PowerPoint, click the link on slide three, and play “Which Side Are You On?” Tell your students to follow along with the lyrics as they listen to the song.

Step 8  When your students finish the song, have each student partner with a classmate. Pass out the **Labor Songs Worksheet** to each student. With his/her partner, have each student complete the section of questions titled “‘Which Side Are You On’—Pete Seeger.”

Step 9  After the students answer the questions with their partners, review the questions and answers as a class. Ask your students the following questions:
- What are the two sides in this song?
- Why are the miners or union men upset? What are some of their reasons?
- Why are the mine owners upset? What are some of their reasons?
- What side do you think Seeger is on? Does this influence the song?
- Is there something more you would like to know?
Step 10 After students talk about their reactions to these lyrics, refer them to their Musicians, Songs, and Venues Info Sheet, to the section titled “Which Side Are You On?” Have them read that particular section.

Step 11 Open up the PowerPoint to slide four and show the students the two pictures of coal miner Thomas Ferguson’s court appearance. Explain that Ferguson participated in the coal miners’ strike covered in the song, “Which Side Are You On?” Your students may wonder what is going on in the pictures. Ask them to talk with their partners about what they think is going on in the picture based on what they can see. After the students have brainstormed thoughts, have them share those thoughts with the class. Following their thoughts, scroll down to slide five and let them read the full captions for the photographs. After the students read the full descriptions of the photographs, ask them if their predictions match up to the facts.

Step 12 Go back the PowerPoint and play the song “Which Side Are You On?” for the second time. You might suggest the students write down any thoughts that come to their mind while listening to the songs.

Step 13 Now that the students know more about the context of the song and have listened to the song again, ask them the original questions from Step 9 but add the following questions:
- Does the song do a good job of explaining the event?
- If Seeger didn’t write the lyrics (Florence Reece did), then why did he sing it?
- Do the additional sources change the way you think about the song? Explain your reasoning.

**Paul Robeson and “I Dreamed I Saw Joe Hill Last Night”**

Step 14 [Now follow the same procedure for the next musician and song.] Introduce Paul Robeson to the class. Open up the PowerPoint, scroll to slide six, and show students a picture of Robeson. Ask if students have heard of Robeson, and if so, have them share what they know.

Step 15 To add to any student knowledge, direct students to their Musicians, Songs, and Venues Info Sheet. Have your students read the section on Paul Robeson. If students have difficulty with any of the words, refer them to the Vocabulary Info Sheet handed out earlier.

Step 16 Now that your students have read about Paul Robeson, ask them the following questions:
- What do you think Robeson’s song will sound like?
- Think about Robeson’s background and the title of the song “I Dreamed I Saw Joe Hill Last Night?” What do you think the lyrics will be about?

Step 17 Look at the lyrics to “I Dreamed I Saw Joe Hill Last Night.” Provide your students some background about the song’s release. The song was recorded in 1949 in Edinburgh, Scotland, where Robeson was giving a benefit concert for the Scottish National Union of Mineworkers. Three thousand Scottish mine workers and their families were present to hear him sing.

Washington, D.C. Paul Robeson, baritone [1942]

Step 18 Tell your students that you are about to play the song. Go to the PowerPoint, click the link on slide seven, and play “I Dreamed I Saw Joe Hill Last Night.” Tell your students to follow along with the lyrics as they listen to the song.

Step 19 When your students finish the song, have them partner with a classmate.

Step 20 Direct your students back to their Labor Songs Worksheet. With his/her partner, have each student complete the section of questions titled “I Dreamed I Saw Joe Hill Last Night”—Paul Robeson.”
Step 21 After the students answer the questions with their partners, review the questions and answers as a class. Ask your students the following questions:

- What is the narrator trying to convince Joe Hill of? What are the reasons the narrator uses to try and persuade Joe?
- What is Joe Hill trying to convince the narrator of? What are the reasons Joe uses to try and persuade the narrator?
- Are there two sides in this song? What are they?
- What side do you think Robeson, the narrator, is on? How does this influence the song?
- Is there something more you would like to know?

Step 22 After students talk about their reactions to these lyrics, have them read the section titled “I Dreamed I Saw Joe Hill Last Night” on the Musicians, Songs, and Venues Info Sheet.

Step 23 Open up the PowerPoint to slide eight and show the students the picture of Joe Hill. Ask them to talk with their partners about what they see. Encourage the students to look at his clothes, hair, expression, and the lighting. After the students have brainstormed some ideas, have them share their thoughts with the class.

Step 24 Go to slide nine on the PowerPoint and show the students the document titled “With Drops of Blood.” With their partners from earlier, the students analyze the image. Students will have trouble seeing the words clearly, so after a brief moment, move to slide ten on the PowerPoint for a magnification of the document. After the students have had time to brainstorm with their partners, let them share their ideas with the class. Following student responses, ask them several questions:

- How does the IWW feel about what is happening?
- Some of these attacks violate individuals’ Constitutional rights. Which rights are being violated?
- Why did the United States government ignore these violations of individuals’ Constitutional rights?
- The document was written by an IWW administrator. What was the purpose of this document?

Step 25 Go back the PowerPoint, scroll to slide seven, and play the song “I Dreamed I Saw Joe Hill Last Night” for the second time. You might suggest the students write down any thoughts that come to their mind while listening to the song.

Step 26 Now that the students know more about the context of the song and have listened to the song again, ask them the original questions from Step 21, with the addition of the following questions:

- Does the song do a good job of explaining the event?
- If Robeson didn’t write the lyrics (Joe Hayes did), then why did he sing it?
- Do the additional sources change the way you think about the song? Explain your reasoning.

Step 27 Have students keep their worksheets. As an exit activity, ask your students to answer the investigative question—how can music influence a movement?—based on the day’s activity.

*With drops of blood. The history of the Industrial workers of the world has been written ... Wm. Haywood, Secretary. Chicago 1919. [1919]*
Day 2

Step 1  Ask your students: What is the goal of an activist? What are some methods activists use to achieve their goals? Mention that many activists participate in mass meetings. Ask your students, why do activists participate in mass meetings, protests, and marches? What are there advantages and disadvantages of this participation?

The Peekskill Riots, 1949

Step 2  Tell your students that the two activists discussed the previous day, Pete Seeger and Paul Robeson, participated in mass meetings. Inform your students that they will be learning about one mass meeting that both men attended: a benefit concert in Peekskill, New York in 1949. For more information on Peekskill, take a look at the following article: “The Peekskill Riots, 1949.”

Step 3  Inform your students that they will be listening to Pete Seeger talk about the Peekskill concert. Before you play the recording: Tell your students the oral history interview was recorded in 2011 in Beacon, New York. (Seeger has since passed away.) Have your students take out yesterday’s Labor Songs Worksheet and turn to the section titled “Pete Seeger Oral History—The Peekskill Riots.” Review the questions with the students. Tell them to answer the questions while they watch the interview.

Step 4  Open up the PowerPoint to slide eleven, and open the link. Project the Pete Seeger oral history interview on the screen. Begin the interview at 1:15 and stop the recording at 5:52.

Step 5  After you pause the interview, have each student partner with a classmate and review their answers.

Step 6  After looking at the perspectives of both Pete Seeger and the citizens of Peekskill, ask the students the following questions:
- What are the two sides at the Peekskill Riots?
- What do activists like Seeger and Robeson stand for?
- What do the Peekskill locals and policemen stand for?
- What are your reactions?
- Was this concert just about labor activism?
- Is there something else you want to know?

The Labor Movement’s Impact on the Civil Rights Movement

Step 7  The students should have noticed that the Peekskill Riot was also about civil rights—they should especially remember reading about the Civil Right Congress. Bring this fact to your students’ attention, and ask them the following questions:
- What does the term “civil rights” mean?
- What commonalities do labor and civil rights activists share?
- Why would labor and civil rights activists be at the same meeting?
- What could a civil rights activist learn from a labor activist?

Step 8  After discussion, tell your students that there were training programs for organizing community events, leading nonviolent protests, lobbying for worker’s rights, and forming advocacy groups. One of these training programs was located in Tennessee at the Highlander Folk School. Highlander was originally located in Monteagle, but has since moved to New Market, Tennessee. Stress the fact that Highlander is still around and still located in Tennessee.

Step 9  Direct students to their Musicians, Songs, and Venues Info Sheet from yesterday, and have them read the section titled “Highlander Folk School.” If students have difficulty with any of the words, refer them to the Vocabulary Worksheet. Additionally, feel free to show your students Highlander’s Web site.

Step 10  Tell your students that Highlander trained labor and civil rights activists. Training both at the same time meant ideas could be shared between the two groups. Labor activists shared some of their songs with the civil rights activists. One such song was “We Shall Overcome.” Ask if students have heard of “We Shall Overcome,” and if so, have them share what they know.
Step 11 To supplement student knowledge, refer the students to the section entitled “We Shall Overcome” on the Musicians, Songs, and Venues Info Sheet.

Step 12 Tell your students that they will learn how labor activists shared their songs with civil rights activists. Direct your students’ attention to the Labor Songs Worksheet and the section titled “Pete Seeger Oral History—Highlander and ‘We Shall Overcome.’” Review the questions as a class. Tell your students to answer the questions while they watch a different part of the Pete Seeger oral history.

Step 13 After reviewing the questions, again open up the PowerPoint to slide eleven and open the link. Project the interview on the screen. This time, begin the interview at 16:32 and end at 19:04.

Step 14 After watching the interview, students should pair up with their partners from earlier and review their answers.

Step 15 Following students’ review, discuss the questions as a class.

Step 16 Ask if your students remember hearing the name Guy Carawan in the interview. Tell them they will listen to Guy and his wife Candie talk about their time at Highlander and the song “We Shall Overcome.” The interview was recorded in 2011 in New Market, Tennessee. Both Guy and Candie are still alive.

Step 17 Before you play the interview, direct your students to their Labor Songs Worksheets and the section titled “Candie Carawan—Highlander and the Civil Rights Movement and Guy Carawan—‘We Shall Overcome.’” Review the questions as a class. Remind your students to answer the questions while they watch the oral history.

Step 18 After reviewing the questions, open up the PowerPoint to slide twelve and open the link. Project the Carawan’s oral history interview on the screen. Start the recording at 2:20 and stop it at 4:40. Skip forward in the recording to 23:08 and let the interview play until 24:24 (this last segment is of Guy singing “We Shall Overcome”).

Step 19 After watching the interview, students should review their answers with their partners.

Step 20 Following students’ review, discuss the questions as a class. After the class review, ask your students the following questions:
- How can a labor song be easily transformed into a civil rights song?
- Why would an activist want to use a song?
- Do you think activists need training? What are the advantages of getting trained?
- Why did labor and civil rights activists work together instead of separately?
- Can someone be both a labor activist and a civil rights activist?

Step 21 Collect the students’ Labor Songs Worksheets and redistribute the students’ responses to the previous day’s exit question. Have the students add any new thoughts to their responses based on what they learned today.

Step 22 Decide which of the extension activities you might like to assign as a summative assignment.

The Sing for Freedom festival, Edwards, Mississippi, 1965. From the Alan Lomax Collection (AFC 2004/004) at the Library of Congress. Used courtesy of the Association for Cultural Equity. Photographer unknown. [1965] This event was organized by Highlander.
EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

Activity 1: YouTube the Movement

Project the following videos on the screen; each shows connections between labor and civil right activism:

- Progress Illinois: Chicago Fast-Food Workers Go on Strike
- “We Have to Stop This Inequality”: Fast-Food Worker Strike Spreads to Dozens of Cities
- Chicago Teachers Strike Is Biggest in a Generation

Watch all three videos in class, with students taking notes on each. For homework, have each student choose one of the videos that interested him/her and write a short, page-length summary of the video’s content, his/her personal reaction, and the video’s connection to the lesson. Students should turn in their reflection the next day at the beginning of class.

Activity 2: Examining the Fast-Food Strikes

Take a look at the Web site, Fight for 15, designed by representatives of the recent fast-food strikes. Explore the news stories and tweets in the side-bar columns of the Web site: What are these stories and tweets about? Are they positive? Why would the activists post these news stories? Who do you think tweets or follows this page and why? Take a look at the “About Us” page and look at the photographs of the strikers: What do you observe? Does anything surprise you? What kind of signs are people holding? Have you seen these signs before? Research the signs. You can choose to do this as a class activity or as a take-home activity.

Activity 3: Looking Back at Peekskill, 1997 and 2009

Students should analyze the following New York Times articles: John Curran’s 1997 article “From Peekskill, View of Robeson Unrest” and Peter Applebome’s 2009 article “Giving Back Stature Stolen in Red Scare.”

After reading the articles each student should write a one-page essay answering the following questions:

- How do locals remember the Peekskill Riots?
- How is Paul Robeson remembered today?
- What are your thoughts on whether anything has changed in Peekskill?

EVALUATION

50% Worksheets: Labor Songs Worksheet and Another Perspective Worksheet
25% Participation in Class Discussion
25% Extension Activity (one of the three)

The Moving Hall Star
Singers including Benjamin Bligen (third from left) with Guy Carawan (far right) at the Sing for Freedom Festival and Workshop, 1965. Alan Lomax Collection (AFC 2004/004) [1965]
This event was organized by Highlander.