

Aim: Why should workers join unions?

Instructions: Read the lyrics to the song "Talking Union" and write the answers to the questions in your notebook.

Talking Union

by Millard Lampell, Lee Hays, and Pete Seeger

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According to Pete Seeger, this song almost wrote itself while he and the other songwriters were helping to organize labor unions for the Congress of Industrial Organizations in 1941. The song has eight stanzas. Parts of four are included here.

1. If you want higher wages,
Let me tell you what to do:
You got to talk to the workers
In the shop with you;
You got to build you a union,
Got to make it strong,
But if you all stick together,
Now, 'twont be long.
You get shorter hours,
Better working conditions.
Vacations with pay,
Take the kids to the seashore.

2. It ain't quite this simple,
So I better explain
Just why you got to ride
On the union train;
'Cause if you wait for the boss
To raise your pay,
We'll all be waiting
Till Judgment Day;
We'll all be buried -
Gone to Heaven -
Saint Peter'll be
The straw boss then, folks.

3. Now, you know you're underpaid,
But the boss says you ain't;
He speeds up the work
Till you're about to faint.
You may be down and out,
But you ain't beaten,
You can pass out a leaflet
And call a meetin' -
Talk it over-
Speak your mind -
Decide to do something
About it.

4. Suppose they're working you so hard
It's just outrageous,
And they're paying you all
Starvation wages:
You go to the boss,
And the boss would yell,
"Before I raise your pay
I'd see you all in hell."
Well, he's puffing a big cigar
And feeling mighty slick,
He thinks he's got your
Union licked.

Questions

1. According to this song, what are three benefits of belonging to a labor union?
2. How does this song view the relationship between employers and employees?
3. In your opinion, why were songs used in campaigns to organize labor unions?
4. Labor unions might have been necessary for working people in 1941, when this song was written. Do you think they are still necessary today? Why?