“Which Side Are You On?” the life and travels of a working-class song

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Why do certain songs get under our skin? How is it that they seem to express the way we are feeling or speak to the times we are living in? The old labor anthem “Which Side Are You On?” has been such a song for me. I’ve been playing it, singing it, and listening for new versions, ever since I first heard Florence Reese perform it at a union rally in Barbara Kopple’s documentary film Harlan County USA (1976).

According to John Steinbeck, in his introduction to Hard Hitting Songs for Hard Hit People, “The songs of the working people have always been their sharpest statement and the one statement which cannot be destroyed. You can burn books, buy newspapers, you can guard against handbills and pamphlets, but you cannot prevent singing. . . . You can learn more about people by listening to their songs than in any other way, for into the songs go all the hopes and hurts, the angers, fears, the wants and aspirations.”

Florence Reese, a thirty-year-old miner’s wife and organizer in Eastern Kentucky, wrote “Which Side Are You On?” in the midst of the coal wars of the early 1930s. Sung to the traditional tune of “Lay the Lily Low,” it spoke of the “good news” of the union, the violence of the “gun thugs,” the hardships for workers and children, and the necessity of deciding “which side are you on.” Since then the song has traveled, as good struggle songs will, from one place and time to another, picking up new verses, vocal accents, and musical styles, while the basic challenge posed in the chorus has remained unchanged.

According to George Ella Lyon’s beautiful picture book “Which Side Are You On? The Story of a Song” (2011) these are Reese’s original verses:

Come all of you poor workers
Good news to you I’ll tell
Of how that good old union
Has come in here to dwell
Which side are you on?

We’re starting our good battle
We know we’re bound to win
Because we’ve got the gun thugs
A-looking very thin.
Chorus
If you go to Harlan County
There is no neutral there
You'll either be a union man
Or a thug for J.H. Blair
Chorus

They say they have to guard us
To educate their child
Their children live in luxury
Our children almost wild
Chorus

Gentlemen, can you stand it?
Oh, tell me how you can
Will you be a lousy scab
Or will you be a man?
Chorus

My daddy was a miner
He’s now in the air and sun
He’ll be with you fellow workers
Till every battle’s won
Chorus

The verse which evokes extreme class division in the image of the children indicates that Reese writes as a mother as well as a union supporter, while the verse about her father indicates she writes also as a daughter, within a family tradition. (To be “in the air and sun” implied to be blacklisted and therefore unable to work underground.)

The story goes that Reese wrote her now-famous song on the back of a wall calendar in her Harlan County cabin while her husband Sam, an organizer for the National Miners Union (NMU) was on the run from Sheriff Blair’s deputies. Of her motivation for it, she has said: “Some people say, ‘I don’t take sides—I’m neutral.’ There’s no such thing as neutral. You have to be on one side or the other. In Harlan Country there wasn’t no neutral. If you wasn’t a gun thug, you was a union man. You had to be.”

With its message of defiance and hope, the song quickly became a picket-line anthem. As Jim Garland, another songwriter-organizer from that 1931-32 strike and lockout in “Bloody Harlan,” explains: “In the course of such fights, songs expressed people’s feelings in a manner that allowed them to stand together. . . . Rather than walking up to a gun thug and saying, ‘You’re a bastard,’ which might have resulted in a shooting, we could express our anger much more easily in unison with song lyrics.”
“Which Side Are You On?” began its travels out of Kentucky when Garland and his cousin Aunt Molly Jackson took the song to New York City where they held concerts to raise funds for the striking miners and their starving families. Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie learned it and included it in performances of the Almanac Singers in the early 1940s, singing Reese’s original lyrics.

The first rewriting of the song I have discovered occurred when Pete Seeger adapted it as a recruiting tool for another “NMU,” the National Maritime Union, which was supported in 1947 by the Peoples’ Music collective. Seeger’s version adds some critical humor to the call for solidarity:

The men who hate our union’
They say we dodged the draft
Not one of those damn liars
Knows his forward from his aft.
Chorus

While we were out in convoy
They sat there pickin’ bones
And for every lie a union man
Has gone to Davey Jones
Chorus

So all nonunion seamen
Who listen to my song
Unite with us, fight side by side
And make our union strong.
Chorus

Like Reese, Seeger includes verses that point to a family legacy of work and struggle:

My daddy was a seaman
And I’m a seaman too
But poor old daddy sailed the seas
Without the NMU
Chorus

In days before the union
I heard my daddy say
’Twas hardtack for your breakfast
And peanuts for your pay.
Chorus

In the 1960s, the song was picked up and again repurposed for the Civil Rights movement. The Freedom Singers, formed in 1962 by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, rewrote everything but the chorus to address the local
struggle in Fulton County, Georgia. In gospel style, with preacher-like lead vocals and choral responses, they sang:

Oh tell me Mayor Allen  
Where is your heart?  
We are children of  
The same almighty God.  
Chorus

Come all you negro people  
Lift up your voices and sing  
Will you join the Ku Klux Klan  
Or Martin Luther King?  
Chorus

Reese herself, now in her 70s, took the song to the Brookside (KY) strike of 1972 – 73, where she was filmed for the first time singing it in Kopples’s award-winning film. After listening to the multi-voiced versions of the Almanac Singers and Freedom Singers, Reese’s quavering acapella rendering at a hushed union rally is extraordinarily powerful. Whereas in 1932 — before New Deal legislation secured the right to organize — the miners lost their fight and the union was driven from the coalfields, the Brookside strike ended in a victory in which local women played a leading role.

Meanwhile, across the pond, Londoner Billy Bragg and Glasgow-born Dick Gaughan each rewrote the song to apply to the British Miners’ Strike of the mid-1980s and Margaret Thatcher’s attack on labor rights. Bragg performed his version at rallies and on picket lines, in punk-folk style with jagged electric guitar accompanying his broad cockney vocals:

It's hard to explain to a crying child  
Why her Daddy can't go back  
So the family suffer, but it hurts me more  
To hear a scab say “Sod you, Jack”  
Chorus

I'm bound to follow my conscience  
And do whatever I can  
But it'll take much more than the union law  
To knock the fight out of a working man  
Chorus

Dick Gaughan’s version is designed less for the picket line than the concert hall where a mixed audience is urged to see where their interests lie and to take a stand. Several of his verses were added to Reese’s when the song was published in the 2005 IWW centenary edition of The Little Red Songbook:
Come all of you good people
You women and you men
Once more our backs are to the wall
We’re being attacked again
Which side are you on?

We’ve fought a million battles
To defend our hard-won rights
We’re going to have to fight again
And I ask you here tonight
Chorus

By bully boys in uniforms
And thugs with riot shields
Our comrades’ blood is being shed
But still they will not yield
Chorus

It’s time for a decision
And you really have to choose
Support the miners’ struggle
Or the next in line is you
Chorus

Many other performers have used Reese’s original lyrics while reinterpreting the song by shifting tonalities and tempos: Jamestown (NY)-raised Natalie Merchant has produced an elegiac soft-folk version and Boston’s the Dropkick Murphy’s an angry post-punk version, while Tom Morello of Rage Against the Machine sings a version with elements of Merchant’s pacing and the Murphy’s intensity. There’s even a karaoke version by the PPK Band!

The most recent and, to my ears, compelling revisioning of ”Which Side Are You On?” comes from Ani DiFranco on her 2012 CD of the same name. She records a version first performed in 2009 at Pete Seeger’s 90th birthday concert at Madison Square Garden. The six-minute track opens with a Seeger banjo solo, but after that homage to the song’s origins, it quickly gathers momentum, including Occupy-style drumming, as it addresses the current fight-back against corporate greed, political corruption, environmental destruction, and endless war. If the song lacks the sharp class-consciousness of Reese’s original verses, it certainly gains in breadth of political critique and rousing energy. And, in another sense, it re-genders the song, citing a different family legacy:

my mother was a feminist
she taught me to see
that the road to ruin is paved
with patriarchy

so, let the way of the women
guide democracy
from plunder and pollution
let mother earth be free

feminism ain’t about women
no, that’s not who it is for
it’s about a shifting consciousness
that’ll bring an end to war

There is no time here to trace more of the song’s musical and political border-crossings — a friend heard it recently on an NPR report from rallies against the Greek Government’s austerity measures. Most of the versions mentioned above can be heard on iTunes and/or YouTube. So what do you think? What is it about the words and tune of “Which Side Are You On?” — written in a Kentucky coal camp at a time of mass poverty and class violence—that allows it to speak in so many different accents and contexts about the key contradictions of our time?

(See attached complete song lyrics and references.)