

Wisconsin's Solidarity Sing Along

Making Old Labor Songs New

by Michael S. O'Brien

Just after noon on a sunny Friday in late June, forty people gather in Madison, on the lawn of the Wisconsin State Capitol building. Some have come with just their voices, while others carry instruments—a few guitars and ukuleles, a trombone and a concertina—to accompany the day's activities.

"Number two," calls out Daithi Wolfe, a soft-spoken fiddle player in a baseball cap and sunglasses.

He raises his instrument to his chin and kicks off with a [Woody Guthrie](#) classic. Everyone joins in, and the words have a distinctly local flavor: "[This land is your land](#), this land is my land / From Lake Geneva, to Madeline Island / From the rolling prairies / To our lovely dairies / This land is made for you and me." The song continues, mixing Guthrie's original words with updated verses that acknowledge the singers' ongoing conflict with Governor Scott Walker and the Capitol Police: "This House is your House, This House is my House! / From the rotunda to the governor's office! / Scott Walker will never push us out! / This House was made for you and me!"

This is one of over fifty songs currently in the Solidarity Sing Along songbook,¹ including classic protest songs from the labor and civil rights movements, many with updated, Wisconsin-centric lyrics, alongside singers' original tunes.

Solidarity Sing Along is an event that has been taking place for more than eight hundred consecutive weekdays in or around the Wisconsin Capitol building (in compliance with the Capitol's regulations prohibiting musical instruments, the group sings a cappella in the building's rotunda Monday through Thursday, and with instruments on the lawn each Friday). Singers first gathered here in March of 2011, as a part of what has become known as the Wisconsin Uprising, a massive protest movement that sprung up in response to Governor Walker and the Republican legislature's sweeping anti-union legislative agenda.² Steve Burns, a teacher at a Madison community college and activist with the Wisconsin Network for Peace and Justice, organized the first sing-along. He had originally planned to hold an event each day for a week (conveniently corresponding with Burns's spring break). But by the end of the week, the sing-along had gathered so much interest and momentum that it outlasted the contributions of its individual leaders. After Burns returned to teach, his movement continued to grow and eventually came to be known as the Solidarity Sing Along.

In fact, one of the most remarkable things about the Solidarity Sing Along is that its participants have maintained an intense schedule of musical activity despite having no official membership or leaders. Solidarity Sing Along regulars have frequently corrected journalists who have called them the “Solidarity Singers,” explaining that the Solidarity Sing Along is an event, not a group. While there are certainly regular attendees who frequent the sing-along and contribute new songs to their ever-growing songbook, its actual day-to-day attendance varies significantly. There are also always extra copies of the songbook around to welcome newcomers. Many Solidarity Sing Along regulars take turns leading the group in song or contribute new songs or lyrics to existing songs, either by bringing in new material to the gathering or by posting to social media, like the group’s Facebook page.³

This open, flexible style of operation suits the group’s democratic principles and a membership that is surprisingly diverse in terms of its political philosophies. “We’re a horribly disorganized group,” Solidarity Sing Along participant Brian Standing explained to me. “The only thing we have in common is we all get together every week and sing. And we all hate Scott Walker. That’s about it! I learned long ago, if you’re going to get something done, you have to say, ‘this is what I’m going to do, anyone who wishes to join me, please come with me.’”⁴ Though “disorganized,” this leaderless, consensus-driven, and informal style of operation may also be key to the group’s longevity, particularly given the increasing opposition from the governor-appointed Capitol Police force starting in 2012.

The group’s new lyrics to “This Land Is Your Land,” which allude to the governor pushing them out of the Capitol, are not merely metaphor. In fact, in a series of escalating reforms that Solidarity Sing Along participants believe were targeted directly at them, the state’s Department of Administration changed the rules regarding assemblies in the Capitol in late 2011,⁵ requiring all groups of four or more people to acquire a permit. Solidarity Sing Along participants refused to comply with these new rules, believing them to be unconstitutional. As a result, the Capitol Police began to issue citations in 2012 (while many of the resulting citations have not yet been adjudicated, a U.S. District Court judge ruled in the singers’ favor that the rule is unconstitutional for groups smaller than twenty).

All told, the Capitol Police have issued over four hundred citations to Solidarity Sing Along participants and observers (including journalists and legal observers) for singing in the Capitol building. The summer of 2013 marked the most contentious point in the sing-along’s history, when newly appointed police chief David Erwin oversaw a change in policy that included more aggressive police tactics like arresting and restraining singers,⁶ and even deploying a Long Range Acoustic Device (LRAD), an anti-riot device used by police for crowd control, inside the Capitol building. In a field recording by Solidarity Sing Along participant Don Johnson, the sing-along is disrupted by Chief Erwin’s voice played over the LRAD.

What is perhaps most striking about this turn of events is that, despite the drama of having seen its participants arrested and led away in handcuffs, the Solidarity Sing Along remained—and remains—a festive and friendly gathering. If anything, the police crackdown seems to have made it a stronger and more jubilant event. Individual participants were certainly inconvenienced by

the fees and the social costs of police serving them citations at their homes and places of work. Yet the Solidarity Sing Along as a whole was bolstered by the publicity that arrests garnered, drawing support from the ACLU and from as far afield as Russia's agit-punk provocateurs Pussy Riot.⁷

"The Capitol Police did us a huge favor when they started arresting us," Mary Ray Worley, a regular attendee, told me. "We were losing steam, and when they started arresting us, people came in droves."⁸ Sue Breckenridge, another long-time participant, remembered that prior to the largest series of arrests in 2013, participation had dwindled to around fifteen singers on most weekdays, but now—even a year after the crackdown—most days draw between thirty and forty participants.⁹

While the Solidarity Sing Along's primary purpose has always been political, the singers have also, over the course of weeks spent singing together, built up an impressive repertoire of new and old labor and protest songs, and they have polished their musical performances. A typical Solidarity Sing Along is in many ways reminiscent of a [hootenanny the Almanac Singers](#) might have led in the 1940s: a core (although rotating) cast of regulars leading songs that are simple, memorable, and have ample room for improvised harmonies and extra verses. Indeed, while there are always songbooks to go around, many singers no longer need them. Similar to the way that the Almanacs were the genesis of the pop-folk group the Weavers, the Solidarity Sing Along has spawned a variety of related musical activities from its core members, such as a weekly song circle at a local bar and performances of several bands that have appeared at other politically focused engagements in town.

In addition to their musical participation, Solidarity Sing Along members are also knowledgeable about the history of labor music, and they can speak articulately about their relationship to that legacy. Mary Worley, author of several of the most popular Solidarity Sing Along originals, explained that the tradition of repurposing well-known folk melodies with new protest lyrics (contrafacta) is an important strategy that has a long history in the labor movement. Daithi Wolfe agreed, pointing out that "that's what Woody [Guthrie] did; that's what [Pete \[Seeger\]](#) did."¹⁰ For some singers, the parallels even seem a little too close to earlier periods of struggle. Brian Standing observed, "In some ways it's kind of depressing, but you can take a song like '[I Don't Want Your Millions, Mister](#)' and not change a single word, and it could have been written for Occupy [Wall Street], or for us!" While "depressing," the Solidarity Sing Along's clear resonance within a long history of protest musicianship has also offered an opportunity for members to forge important bonds with living folk musicians and others important in the labor and social justice movements. At various times over the last three years, musicians including [Arlo Guthrie](#), [Billy Bragg](#), [John McCutcheon](#), and Dar Williams have all visited and added their voices to the group.

Solidarity Sing Along has been an informal nexus for activists interested in broader progressive and social justice causes. The event's participants are involved in causes including fighting homelessness, advocating for indigenous land rights in northern Wisconsin, and, of course, the ongoing opposition to Governor Scott Walker, who was re-elected this November. Many

participants described the event not as their primary political activity in and of itself, but rather as a source of “rejuvenation,” or a place they go to “recharge” or “get inspired.” Their ongoing participation in the Solidarity Sing Along supports their work for political change in other arenas. The legacy of populist labor songs and the living tradition of gathering in song for social change continue to provide them with a wellspring of inspiration.

“What I think about us,” Mary Worley reflected, “is that we’re the singing activist community that Pete Seeger dreamed about. We’re really what he wanted everybody to have.”

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¹ The **Solidarity Sing Along songbook**

² Michael S O’Brien, “**This Is What Democracy Sounds Like: Live and Mediated Soundscapes of the Wisconsin Uprising,**” *Music & Politics* 7, no. 2 (Summer 2013).

³ Solidarity Sing Along’s **Facebook page**

⁴ Brian Standing, interview by S. O’Brien, June 30, 2014.

⁵ Andrew Averill, “**Solidarity Sing Along to test new Wisconsin Capitol access rules and not apply for permit,**” *Isthmus*, December 14, 2011.

⁶ Judith Davidoff, “**Are Capitol police arresting observers of the Solidarity Sing Along?**,” *Isthmus*, August 22, 2013.

⁷ **A video** in which Pussy Riot voices their support for the Solidarity Sing Along can be viewed on Vimeo.

⁸ Mary Ray Worley, interview by S. O’Brien, July 1, 2014.

⁹ Sue Breckenridge, interview by S. O’Brien, June 30, 2014.

¹⁰ Daithi Wolfe, interview by S. O’Brien, July 2, 2014.