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Major: Business
Year: Junior

Labor Movements Then and Now: Times Change but the Struggle Doesn't

Foreword:

My exhibition is on art relating to Labor Movements in the United States after the industrial revolution. The installations display art made for unionization efforts from the 20th and 21st century. The art shown includes cartoon drawings, oil on canvas, pictures, and clip art. The background of the images is a light but muted blue and the art is framed in contrasting ways. The depictions in the first four installations from the 21st century is in gold painted decadent wooden frames that are normally seen on great works of genius artist that are celebrated today. The 20th century art is in minimal black painted wooden frames which is more common with modern art. Both the side-by-side depictions and the frames hope to highlight the fact that, even though we live in a different world than people from the 20th century, the working class continues to be exploited. The monetary value derived from labor is not reflected in wages and profits are pocketed by shareholders in large companies. I tried to highlight the message through means outside of the text in the tombstones by using frames as well as picking which pieces would be displayed together. I want the connection to be organically made by the viewer instead of spoon feeding to them through text as is common in history museums. That is why I took inspiration from the Ackland's minimal descriptions of the art and included information that I thought was relevant because I felt it allowed me more room to come to my own interpretations.

My idea for this exhibit came from the conversations we had about museums not being neutral. The purpose of creating this exhibit is to highlight the people who contributed to better working conditions and tell the story of working-class people organizing in hopes of a higher

standard of living. I know the exhibit will not change the material conditions of the average person. What I hope to accomplish however is highlighting the similarities in the art from different time periods in how they convey an anti-capitalist message. The frames also were used to ground the exhibit in an art historian setting where the art would normally be deemed as 'artistic' history and not 'art.' I feel that telling the stories of people who are not commonly 'invited' to museum will help to democratize the institution. Representation alone is a baby step, yet it does a lot to highlight and encourage people. For installations 1, 3, and 4 I paired art from the two centuries that had similar messages to connect them more easily. For installation 2 I paired photographs of people at protests with their sign with the intention of showing the faces of the movement. The 5th installation compares 20th century cartoons comedically depicting capital owners abuse with 21st century memes supporting unionization efforts. I hope people who take some time to look at the installations will come away pensive of why we are still fighting the same fight a century later.

Installation 1:

Left: Image taken from the @sbworkersunited Instagram. Posted on May 19th, 2022, congratulating the 5 new Starbucks stores winning their union vote. The post also celebrates the growing total of unionized stores reaching 80.

Right: Oil on Canvas poster made by Ben Shahn in the late 1930s. The artist is a prominent left-wing social realist formerly based in Brooklyn. Shahn immigrated to New York from present-day Lithuania and made a lot of his art during the great depression and World War 2 eras.

Installation 2:



Left: Photograph depicting non-professional hospital workers striking in front of Mount Sinai Hospital in New York. The photograph is from the 1959 strike that targeted 7 private hospitals for predominantly black and Puerto Rican workers to receive better pay.

Top Right: Photograph of protesters in Philadelphia supporting the unionization effort of Amazon locations in Alabama. The depiction of Bezos as the ‘Union Buster in-Chief’ is common with other Amazon Labor Union protests.

Bottom Right: Photograph from the early 1970s depicting one of the strikes organized by the United Federation of College Teachers in New York. Image taken by union photographer Dan Miller.

Installation 3:



Left: Photo posted on @sbworkersunited's Instagram page on June 19th, 2022. Depicted are workers from the Memphis 7 store showing up with their sign to the Poor Peoples' Campaign march.

Right: Cartoon drawing by John Lynch from June 1925. This image is part of the 'Solidarity Forever: A Look at Wobbly Culture' exhibit on LaborArts.org.

Installation 4:



Left: Red and black rendition of Ralph Chaplin’s ‘The Hand That Will Rule the World.’ This version has the words ‘Solidarity Forever’ written above the fist. The original from June 1917 has the text ‘The Hand That Will Rule the World – One Big Union’ written below the drawing.

Right: Post on @sbworkersunited with the following caption: “If @starbucks thought firing Memphis union leaders would silence us they—they are very much mistaken. Our movement is only getting stronger, and we know that we will win our jobs back, our union, and our fundamental human and civil right to organize!” Art done by @adriennedanielle_arts.

Installation 5:



Top Left: Cartoon from February 1910 called 'They Go Wild Over Me.'

Top Right: Image cross posted on @sbuxwillowlawn and @sbworkersunited with the caption 'One venti latte plz, hold the Union busting.'

Bottom Left: Image posted without a caption on @cwaunion. CWA is the Communication Workers of America Union.

Bottom Middle: Second image in the post on Amazon Labor Union's Instagram celebrating President Chris Small's birthday. 'hbd to comrade/labor legend, Chris Smalls!'

Bottom Right: Cartoon by Art Young from June 1913 called 'Uncle Sam Ruled Out.'