

10a - I've Been Working in the Workshop

Taken From *The National Federation of the Blind Song Book*, 1991

The National Federation of the Blind (NFB) was founded in 1940 to promote the economic and social welfare of blind Americans.

At the time, "the blind" were considered not just physically disabled, but mentally and emotionally impaired as well.

Blind men and women were often denied entry to restaurants, theaters and hotels, as well as access to public transportation.

Job opportunities were also scarce, and many blind people labored in what were known as "sheltered workshops." Typically, workshop laborers were paid half the minimum wage to weave baskets, cane chairs and make mops.

Social agencies running the workshops defended the low wages on the grounds that the work was therapeutic. But the NFB called the workshops exploitative and organized protests to demand better wages.

At the demonstrations, NFB members sang protest songs that mocked what they considered to be a paternalistic defense of the sheltered workshops. Following is one of the NFB's more popular songs, a spoof of "I've Been Workin' on the Railroad."

*I've been workin' in the workshop, all the live-long day,
And with the wages that they pay me, it's just to pass my time away;
And when I ask about more money, they give me the big lie:
We'd like to give you lots of raises, but you'd lose your SSI.**

*Work is therapy,
They keep telling me,
I've heard it till I've had my fill.*

*'Cause if it's therapy
I wish they'd let me be-
This therapy's a bitter pill.*

*Social Security Insurance

Words by The (Pennsylvania) Liberty Alliance.
