

My Master and I

A Union Song of the 1870s
Tune: after "The Muckin of Geordie's Byre"



Says the mas-ter to me "is it true as I'm told Your name's on the book of the un-ion en-rolled? I can



nev-er al-low that a work-man of mine with wick-ed dis-turb-ers of peace should com-bine. I



give you fair warn-ing mind what you're a bout. I shall put my foot down and tramp-le it out. On which



side your bread's but-tered now sure you can choose. So de-cide now at once for the un-ion or me." Said



I to the mast-er "it's per-fect-ly true That I'm in the Un-ion and I'll stick to it too And



if be-tween Un-ion and you I must choose I've plen-ty to win and lit-tle to lose. For



twen-ty years most-ly my bread has been dry And to but-ter it now I will cert-ain-ly try And



with due re-spect sir, re-mem-ber I'm free No mas-ter in Eng-land shall tramp-le on me'.

My Master and I

Says the master to me "*Is it true as I'm told
Your name's on the book of the union enrolled?
I can never allow that a workman of mine
With wicked disturbers of peace should combine.
I give you fair warning, mind what your're about.
I shall put my foot down and trample it out.
On which side your bread's buttered now sure you can choose.
So decide now at once for the union or me.*"

Said I to the master "*It's perfectly true
That I'm in the Union and I'll stick to it too
And if between Union and you I must choose
I've plenty to win and little to lose.
For twenty years mostly my bread has been dry
And to butter it now I will certainly try.
And with due respect sir, remember I'm free.
No master in England shall trample on me*".

Source:

Union Songs, A Selection, by Mark Gregory, <http://unionsong.com/u093.html>

This song was published in *Sharpen The Sickle! The History of the Farm Workers' Union* by Reg Groves with the note: "*A Union Song of the 1870's*". A verse not given here, refers to Henry Taylor, who was appointed Secretary of The Warwickshire Agricultural Labourers' Union in 1872.

Gregory suggested a "*Derry Down*" tune like that used by *The Coal Owner and the Poor Pitman's Wife*. Instead of using its tune, I have included the whole song in this collection and have arranged another tune: *The Mucking of Geordies Byre*, to fit this song.

Like the *Song of Freedom*, this song was sung to infuse rural workers with the courage to stand together and insist upon their rights. An intense struggle to establish fair pay and conditions for workers in rural England was fought in the latter half of the 19th century. The masters used vicious tactics. Many rural workers were laid-off. Funds gathered from unionists and supporters across the country sustained the rural unemployed and assisted many to migrate to other lands. The right of male rural worker to vote was not won until 1884. At the start of the 20th century, rural wages were still low and eviction from tied cottages remained a stringent threat. Politicians and unions gradually formed alliances. It was not until 1920 that the National Union of Rural Workers attained its modern form.¹

At the beginning of the 21st century in Australia, new industrial relations laws were framed to marginalize unions and encourage workers to establish one-on-one agreements with employers. The imbalance of power between the negotiating parties is immense. There is now a danger that workers will lose hard-won rights. Until we reach that state where everyone acts on principle and no one is at a disadvantage, the underprivileged must be protected and their every gain must be guarded unceasingly.

1. Joyce Marlow, *The Tolpuddle Martyrs*, History Book Club Edition by arrangement with Andrew Deutch, London, 1971