

The Labor Monument: Philadelphia's Tribute to the American Worker by artist John Kindness

INTRODUCTION

The Labor Monument: Philadelphia's Tribute to the American Worker by artist John Kindness was developed for Elmwood Park in Philadelphia with the Friends of Elmwood Park in cooperation with the City of Philadelphia's Department of Parks & Recreation. *The Labor Monument* memorializes the contributions of organized labor nationwide and Philadelphia's working class history. Celebrating Philadelphia's pivotal and unique role in the American labor movement, the artwork transforms Elmwood Park into a community gathering space and an outdoor history lesson. The project was commissioned through the Association for Public Art's program *New-Land-Marks: public art, community, and the meaning of place* and was completed and donated in 2010 to the City of Philadelphia.

THE LABOR MONUMENT

Many of the Friends of Elmwood Park are second or third generation laborers. The community wanted to celebrate the working class of Southwest Philadelphia. John Kindness, the artist and son of a shipyard worker, was raised in Belfast, an industrial town in Northern Ireland. When Kindness began working on the project, he searched for a symbol that could represent laborers from all industries and discovered old metal work buttons. Regardless of trade or skill, early generations of laborers often wore the same denim uniforms; hence the term "blue-collar worker." These uniforms were fastened with metal buttons, which bore a variety of images and slogans. Inspired by these buttons, John Kindness created a series of seven *Work Button Tables*. The top of each table is a bronze relief sculpture that commemorates an important person or event in labor history. Located in the center of Elmwood Park, the *Work Button Tables* are arranged in a circle with benches along the perimeter providing seating. Blue paving and brick detailing around the benches allude to the denim and stitching on workers' clothing. Project supporters' names are inscribed in a granite band around the perimeter of the artwork. There is a pathway connecting the central seating area with a small circular court displaying the park's flagpole. Five paths fan off from *The Labor Monument's* location—creating the potential to "draw in people from all parts of the neighborhood to the middle of the park," says Kindness.



ELMWOOD PARK

Elmwood Park is a seven-acre city park in Southwest Philadelphia, located at 71st and 72nd streets between Buist and Dicks Avenues. From the late nineteenth through much of the twentieth century, Southwest Philadelphia prided itself on its thriving working class neighborhoods. Many thousands of Philadelphians raised their families in this area while working for major industries, such as the Hog Island Shipyard, Fels Naptha, General Electric, and Westinghouse. Elmwood Park was originally developed as a gathering place for workers and their families to relax, socialize, and enjoy the park's natural resources. Unfortunately, as business and industry departed from the area, so did many of the residents, and Elmwood Park suffered a long period of neglect. Today, the park has undergone revitalization with the help of the Friends of Elmwood Park, a community organization chartered in 1995 to secure and beautify the park.



Top: *The Labor Monument: Philadelphia's Tribute to the American Worker* by artist John Kindness (b. 1951), Elmwood Park, 71st Street and Buist Avenue, Southwest Philadelphia, Central Circular Seating Area is 56' in diameter.
Photography: Greg Benson

Above: Hog Island Shipyard in 1919. Courtesy of the Philadelphia History Museum

Left: Metal buttons from work clothing, c. 1900-1920

PROJECT SUPPORTERS

The Labor Monument: Philadelphia's Tribute to the American Worker was made possible through the generous support of the Association for Public Art; William Penn Foundation; Claneil Foundation; Samuel S. Fels Fund; Greater Philadelphia Urban Affairs Coalition; Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development; Service Employees International Union (SEIU); International Association of Bridge, Structural, Ornamental and Reinforcing Iron Workers; American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME); International Union of Painters and Allied Trades (IUPAT-PATCH); Sheet Metal Workers International Association; United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW); and the United Steel Workers (USW) among others.

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ABOUT THE ARTIST

John Kindness was born in Belfast, Ireland and currently lives and works in London, England. Kindness' father worked in the shipyards of Belfast, and his working class roots were a source of inspiration as he worked with the Friends of Elmwood Park to create this unique tribute in Philadelphia to the American worker. Kindness has completed a number of major public art projects in his native Ireland. He has exhibited extensively in Europe and the United States and his artworks are included in the collections of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Irish Museum of Modern Art; National Gallery of Ireland; and the Victoria & Albert Museum among others. *Photography: Greg Benson*

Eugene V. Debs. – Labor and a Campaign for Politics



In 1893, Eugene V. Debs organized the American Railway Union (ARU), the first industrial union in the United States. Debs, an activist for social justice, understood the need for the working class to be heard in the political arena. He was a leading campaigner for progressive social ideas, including women's suffrage, restriction of child labor, worker safety, and the right of workers to form unions.

¡Sí, Se Puede! – Farm Workers Organize



The United Farm Workers (UFW) formed in 1966, under the leadership of Cesar E. Chavez. With the rallying cry of "¡Sí, Se Puede!" (Yes, We Can!), the UFW organized thousands of immigrant farm workers to raise awareness of their poor working conditions. The symbol of the United Farm Workers is a stylized eagle with wings crafted at right angles, so it could be easily drawn and reproduced by farm workers (Black Aztec Eagle and ¡Sí, Se Puede! used with permission of the United Farm Workers of America, AFL-CIO.)

Child Labor Reform – Stealing the Playtime of Children



The struggle to reform child labor laws was fought over many decades by numerous crusaders, including Bill Haywood who said, "The worst thief is he who steals the playtime of children." In 1903, labor leader Mother Jones led a march of children workers from Philadelphia to Theodore Roosevelt's summer home on Long Island, New York, to protest the exploitation of underage workers. Finally, in 1938, the Fair Labor Standards Act was enacted, which ended child labor in factories and mines. Today, child labor remains a concern in the United States and abroad.

I AM A MAN – Labor Joins the Civil Rights Movement



In February 1968, 1,300 African-American sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee went on strike carrying signs that read, "I AM A MAN." The plea of the striking members of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) union resonated with workers and African Americans throughout the country seeking equality. The strike caught the attention of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who went to Memphis in support of the workers. King delivered his "I've Been to the Mountaintop" address to the striking workers the day before he was shot.

The Wobblies – "Don't Mourn, Organize!"



The Continental Congress of the Working Class convened in 1905 to establish an organization that would represent all working people. Thus, the Industrial Workers of the World—also known as I.W.W. or "The Wobblies"—was born. The I.W.W. used songs to spread their ideas. Folk hero and labor martyr Joe Hill became a symbol of the quest for economic and social justice for all workers. Hill's slogan, "Don't waste time mourning, organize!" is still a labor rallying cry today.

Karen Silkwood – Worker and Occupational Safety



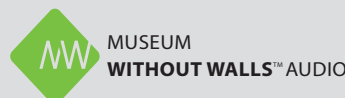
Karen Gay Silkwood was an employee at a nuclear fuel processing plant in Oklahoma when she discovered evidence of unexplained leaks and spills that posed threats to the workers' health. She was killed in 1974 in a suspicious car accident on her way to discuss her findings with a reporter and an Atomic Energy Commission official. Silkwood's courageous life and untimely death stimulated reforms for safety in the workplace and protection for whistleblowers.

Bread & Roses – Labor & the Women's Rights Movement



In 1912, thousands of textile mill workers in Lawrence, Massachusetts, went on strike after owners made substantial pay cuts. The workers, most of them women, linked arms and formed a human chain around the mills. Their slogan, "We want bread and roses, too," symbolized their fight for economic security and a better quality of life. The campaign brought attention to the significance of the role of women in the workplace and made labor another component in the struggle for women's rights.

USE YOUR MOBILE phone to learn more about *The Labor Monument* and the seven *Work Button Tables*. Dial *Museum without Walls™*: AUDIO at 215-399-9000 and press stop #100 to begin.



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