

**TEACHING CLASS:
LABOR AND WORKING-CLASS HISTORY IN THE U.S. SURVEY**

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When I think back on my undergraduate courses, I cannot recall one instance when a professor or instructor uttered the words “class conflict,” “labor movement,” or “union struggle.” Growing up in a working-class neighborhood as a daughter of a union electrician, I took it for granted that history in general and United States history in particular were not about me, my family or my neighbors, but instead about people with power who controlled and shaped the important events that occurred in our nation’s past.

What a surprise, upon entering graduate school, to find that U.S. labor and working-class history was an actual course being offered. It seemed as though I had entered some parallel universe where one’s reality is turned upside down. In this case, working-class people, ideology, politics, and movements were at the center of the historical narrative. Students discussed how differently American history looked when examined from the perspective of working people. From the first day of class, I was hooked.

Through my graduate training, I learned of new trends in history. There was social history, the “new” social history, and the “new” political history. It was not just one course on labor history, but an entire generation of historians trained in the 1960s and 1970s who had conceptualized an entirely different way of doing history.¹ Yet despite all the time passed, books written, songs sung, websites created, and films produced, the predominately working-class students who enter my classes still do not have an inkling that labor and working-class history is a dynamic field of interest and study, and even more sadly, these students lack an understanding of the role that working-class people play in American history.

Perhaps these observations are not surprising. Most young people in college today do not identify with the working class or as working class. My students even feel uncomfortable with the term working class and reveal their biases when they choose to write and speak the term “low class” instead. It is not that they cannot connect to the history of the working class, but they would rather see themselves as upwardly mobile members of an amorphous middle-class. Upon first glance, they cannot see how steel workers’ struggles in the 1930s have anything to do with their lives or future in the computer age. In addition, there are few working-class institutions such as unions, clubs, musical groups, or mutual aid societies clamoring for their attention. Shopping at Wal-Mart, for example, is much closer to their experience than picketing at one. And

¹For examples of these trends see articles in Eric Foner, *The New American History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990).

classes in high school and college, for the most part, do not bother to connect workers' struggles of the past with students' concerns of today.

In spite of this situation, maybe even because of it, historians can engage their students through the themes of labor and working-class history. These themes—working-class formation and fragmentation, the changing composition of the U.S. working class, working-class agency and protest, working-class ideologies, working-class organization, the relationship of the working class to the state, and the changing nature of capitalism—encourage students to rethink our country's past from a different vantage point. Seeing U.S. history through the lens of class promotes critical thinking and awareness of alternative voices in our history, including those of race, ethnicity, and gender. Sharing this new perspective with students creates an opportunity to connect the conflicts and drama of the past with major questions of today.

Fortunately the themes and issues related to labor and working class history do not need to be taught exclusively in upper-level and graduate courses of the same name. In fact, there are many ways for historians to incorporate them into history courses covering broader topics. The U.S. survey, for example, comprises the bulk of historians' work at many community and four-year colleges and offers unlimited opportunities to include labor and working-class topics in our nation's narrative. Through songs, novels, the Internet, published primary sources, and films, the themes, issues, and events related to labor and working-class history can be brought easily into any historian's course.²

Within the space of a semester, U.S. historians need to do justice somehow not only to the meta-narrative of U.S. history but also the most current research on any of the various events, issues, and problems of the period. At the same time, the survey is usually full of first-year college students with various backgrounds, majors, experiences, and interests. With such a wide scope of material to cover and a generalist audience to whom to appeal, topics from labor and working-class history punctuated throughout the semester can help show how dynamic the discipline of history truly is. What follows are just a few examples of topics and methods that suggest ways to infuse labor and working-class history throughout the second half of the U.S. survey.

Whether the semester begins at 1865 or 1877, Reconstruction can set up some of the initial tension of the course. In addition to discussing Reconstruction in a general way as a political battle between advocates of state's rights versus federal power, historians can focus on the question of work that lays at the heart of the conflict between North and South. One way to do this is to have students read from one state's

²Tom Zaniello, *Working Stiffs, Union Maids, Reds, and Riffraff: An Organized Guide to Films About Labor* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996) is a rich source on film. There are several collections that deal with labor and working class music, such as Philip Foner, *Labor Songs of the Nineteenth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), and *Songs of the Workers: To Fan the Flames of Discontent* (Chicago: Industrial Workers of the World, 1973).

black codes (Mississippi's codes work quite well in this case) and discuss what white southerners wanted freedom to look like. Students can also look at petitions from freed blacks for land and dignity. Ask students to consider what blacks wanted freedom to mean. This exercise introduces work as a contested ground. How would it be done, who would control it, and what it would mean were all up for grabs in the 1860s and 70s. Once students understand what was at stake, they are more engaged with the outcome and vocal with their own views concerning state's rights.³

As the nation's concerns moved from the struggle in the South to the industrial project of the North, machinery began to encroach on those who manufactured goods by hand. One way to introduce this conflict is to play songs from the period dealing with this tension. One that has worked well in my classes is "The Legend of John Henry."⁴ Created in the 1870s, "The Legend of John Henry" describes the momentous battle between John Henry, an African-American "steel drivin' man," and a new machine designed to do the same job. John Henry ultimately defeats the machine, but the struggle kills him. The song allows for a discussion of the meaning of new technology to working people (then and today), of the work ethic of African Americans in relation to racist views at the time, and of the importance of oral tradition in African American and labor history.⁵

In addition to primary documents and songs, historical novels can allow historians to explore major topics in American history while dealing with questions of class. Novels such as Anzia Yezierska's *Bread Givers*, Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*,

³Black codes can be found at a number of websites. A handy one is *Mississippi Black Codes*, <<http://www.toptags.com/aama/docs/bcodes.htm>> (January 3, 2004). Louisiana's can be located at *Louisiana Black Codes*, <<http://www.toptags.com/aama/docs/bcodesla.htm>> (January 3, 2004). Documents written by freed blacks are harder to find, but one example is "An address to the Loyal Citizens and Congress of the United States of America Adopted by a Convention of Negroes Held in Alexandria Virginia from August 2 to 5 1865," <<http://odur.let.rug.nl/~usa?D/1851-1875/slavery/addr.htm>> (January 4, 2004). Another example is "We Demand Land": Petition by Southern Freemen, 1865," printed in Eileen Boris and Nelson Lichtenstein, eds., *Major Problems in the History of American Workers* (Boston: D.C. Heath and Co., 1991), 137-139.

⁴There are many different versions available. Two good ones are Woody Guthrie's from *Woody Guthrie Sings Folk Songs* (Smithsonian Folkways, recorded 1940, released 1962), and Johnny Cash, *Blood, Sweat and Tears* (Columbia/Legacy, 1995).

⁵Other songs about the economic and social changes of the period can be found in Foner's, *Labor Songs of the Nineteenth Century*. A good exercise involves having students examine the two different renditions of "America" included in the volume. One was written when the Knights of Labor were a strong voice among workers, and one was sung during the period of the American Federation of Labor's founding (151 and 183, respectively). They both speak to changes in the work process, politics, and economics of the periods. The collection also includes songs written about the Homestead and Pullman strikes and reproduces the sheet music and lyrics to I.G. Blanchard's famous song, "Eight Hours," (224) that clearly states why workers in the late nineteenth century wanted their workday shortened.

and Thomas Bell's *Out of This Furnace* touch on themes emphasized by labor and working-class historians.⁶ Students enjoy following, for example, Yeziarska's main character out of a Jewish working-class ghetto to college where she struggles to fit in and succeed. A central theme of the book is the tension between Old World relationships and values and New World ones. One question my students enjoy debating is whether one can ever completely leave their past behind them as they move through different stages of their lives. What parts will they take with them?

This line of questioning is particularly poignant for students experiencing a number of social transitions during their first year of college. Although many of them have some general thoughts about their transition, discussion of this novel encourages them to consider differences that increasingly exist between themselves and the friends and family they have left home working at local malls and groceries, for example. While these students might have had a hard time fitting into an academic climate that they do not fully understand, they know that they are different from those they left at home. Books such as this one force students to vocalize these transitions and identify the different cultural expectations that exist in the various worlds they occupy while better understanding the challenges faced by certain groups of immigrants and working-class women as they struggled to become professionals at the turn of the century. Class differences naturally shape this discussion of immigration, mobility, values, and gender expectation.

Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* focuses more on working-class struggle than mobility, but does an equally good job in getting students to think about immigration, capitalism, socialism, and reform. Set in Chicago's immigrant neighborhood known as the Back of the Yards, *The Jungle* beckons students to look for representations of this neighborhood on the web.⁷ Historic images of the neighborhood encourage students to think about places where Sinclair was exaggerating and to realize descriptions that were historically accurate. The University of Illinois edition of this book, with an introduction by James R. Barrett, does an excellent job of outlining these points of convergence and divergence.

This novel also works well in raising the distinction between revolution and reform. Sinclair hoped his expose of capitalist excess would turn workers toward socialism. Readers, however, could not get past his vivid descriptions of unsanitary workplace conditions. The result, the Meat Inspection Act of 1906, was championed as a victory of progressive reform, but in many ways it was a defeat for Sinclair and his

⁶Anzia Yeziarska, *Bread Givers: A Struggle Between a Father of the Old World and a Daughter of the New* (New York: Persea Books, 1975); Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle*, with an introduction by James R. Barrett (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988); Thomas Bell, *Out of This Furnace* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1991).

⁷A good example is located on the Chicago Historical Society's web page, <<http://www.chicagohs.org/history/stock/html>> (January 3, 2004).

revolutionary ambition. Students can discuss ways that they think the novel was a success and failure. They can also read the Socialist Party platform of 1912 as a way to understand the motivations of Sinclair and the desires of the Socialist Party and as a comparison to the way political issues are framed today. How much of the Socialists' 1912 agenda is commonplace today? How much of it is still relevant or radical and why?⁸

Thomas Bell's *Out of This Furnace* traces three generations of a working-class Slovak immigrant family in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, from the late nineteenth century through the formation of the CIO in the mid 1930s. The structure of the novel lends itself to comparison and contrast across the generations. Students can follow questions relating to family relationships, work life, politics, class identity, gender roles, and union efforts across time. Part three of the book, named after its main character Dobie, is particularly good on detailing workers' frustrations with the American Federation of Labor, company unions, and employer harassment. By contrasting Dobie's struggle to bring the CIO to steel with his father's inability to effect change during the early 1900s and his grandfather's lack of interest in working people's politics in the late nineteenth century, students can see clearly how the historical context shapes workers' ability and desire to organize and act. With such insights, students can begin to think critically about the weak position of the labor movement today and examine the obstacles that exist, such as laws, technology, union structures, and demographics that create challenges to it once again becoming a powerful force in the nation.⁹

Labor and working-class history can also inform teaching on the Progressive era when middle-class reformers often take center stage. One good exercise incorporates primary sources put on the web by researchers at SUNY Binghamton. These sources are organized by topic, many of which deal directly with questions of class, and include an introduction and bibliography¹⁰ One project asks students to analyze the relationship between workers and their wealthy allies during the New York City shirtwaist strike of 1909-1910 and to determine the extent to which the perceived threat of socialism shaped the relationship. If there is no time for students to complete the entire project, they can read perspectives on the strike from various newspapers on-line and discuss the class bias of the different publications. They can also use the strike to discuss an example of cross-class alliance and its limits. Another assignment that will help connect their concerns with those of the strikers from the period is to have them

⁸A general web search will turn up a copy of this platform. One example is, "Socialist Party Platform, 1912," <<http://www.nv.cc.va.us/home/nvsageh/Hist122/Part2/SOCP1912.HTM>> (January 3, 2004).

⁹A good short reading to get students thinking about labor relations today is Thomas Geoghegan's "No Love Lost for Labor," *The Nation*, 271 (October 9, 2000): 35-36.

¹⁰*Women and Social Movements in the United States, 1775-2000*, <<http://womhist.Binghamton.edu>> (January 3, 2004).

research a more recent industrial conflict, such as the Pacific Maritime Association's lockout of unionized dock workers on the West coast, or a strike, such as that in 1997 of UPS workers, and discuss how it was reported in different kinds of publications. They can then discuss what is similar and different about labor reporting today.¹¹

Projects, such as the one on the shirtwaist strike, touch on issues of the Progressive era as well as on those of labor and working-class history. They allow students to see a major event, in this case a strike of more than 20,000 shirtwaist workers, from various perspectives. It also allows them to begin to think like historians by having them interpret documents and question the ways that narratives are constructed. By encouraging them to look for current reports of labor conflicts, they begin to realize that these struggles for coverage and spin are not simply historical but inform politics today.

The 1930s provide ample opportunity to discuss labor and the working-class whether through New Deal programs, the newly created Congress of Industrial Organizations, or communist-inspired unemployment demonstrations. As a backdrop to such events and organizations, *The Grapes of Wrath* appeals to students.¹² The film touches on the themes of farmers' suffering and oppression, a hollow American dream, social and economic justice, the centrality of family and the strength of women, and the persistence of solidarity in the face of adversity. The film helps them visualize the plight of Dust Bowl farmers struggling to maintain their dignity as landlords and bankers force them from their homes and livelihoods into an uncertain future. It also allows students to discuss the nature of the public versus private migrant camps as they consider the role of the New Deal and the federal government in the lives of working people. Students can also use examples from the film to debunk the myth that in America hard work always leads to success, and they can consider why Tom Joad posed such a threat to land owners. A related assignment might be to have students consider the plight of migrant workers today. What has changed and what remains the same?¹³

¹¹*Labor Notes* is a union and worker friendly monthly publication out of Detroit, Michigan, that would provide a counter point to the *Wall Street Journal*, *US News and World Report*, and the *New York Times*, for example.

¹²John Steinbeck, *Grapes of Wrath* (New York: Viking Press, 1967), and John Ford, *The Grapes of Wrath*, Twentieth Century Fox, 129 minutes, video, 1940. This video is widely available for rental and Amazon.com lists it for purchase.

¹³New Day Films, 22-D Hollywood Avenue, Ho-Ho-Kus, NJ 07423, distributes Heather Courtney's *Los Trabajadores/The Workers* on contemporary migrant workers. The United Farm Workers web page at <<http://www.ufw.org>> has links to current pieces of legislation being considered related to migrant workers, to reports on migrant work, and to the United Farm Workers' history and press releases.

An alternative depression-era film that raises themes of labor and working-class history is *Union Maids*.¹⁴ The film intersperses film clips and video through talking-head style commentary of three CIO union activists, Stella Nowicki, Kate Hyndman, and Sylvia Woods. All of these women were communists, but there is only one veiled reference to Hyndman's party involvement in a newspaper headline shown briefly. Students can discuss differences between the way that society viewed women in general in the 1930s and the activities open to women in the Communist party and the CIO. They can explain the origins of these women's working-class radicalism and they can decipher between race, gender, and class as distinct and interrelated experiences and identities. Finally, they can begin to question why a film directed by those of the New Left would be interested in disguising the political loyalties of these Old Left women.

In the post-1945 section of the U.S. survey, primary source analysis and films can continue to bring labor and working-class issues and themes to students. One way to accomplish this is to incorporate the 1947 Taft-Hartley Act into a more general discussion of the period of McCarthyism. Looking at the actual documents, students can compare the Wagner Act of the New Deal to the provisions of the Taft-Hartley Act.¹⁵ They will see the federal government turn around on its labor policy and can question why labor leaders had to sign non-communist affidavits if they wanted their unions protected by federal machinery. They can also question the motivations of this provision and speculate on its effects.

For a later period, *Roger and Me*, a 1989 documentary film that depicts the closing of General Motor's auto plants in Flint, Michigan, opens students' eyes to the local effects of globalization and to class differences between GM's executives and its workers.¹⁶ The film also does a great job in raising the question of corporate responsibility to America and Americans. Many students can relate to the effects of corporate closings. In a town such as Cortland, New York, where I teach, the urban mythology is that unions were responsible for the closing of the four or five major plants in town. *Roger and Me* presents a very different picture and pushes students to think critically about the meaning of globalization.

¹⁴Julia Reichert, Jim Klein, and Miles Mogulesco, *Union Maids*, New Day Films, 48 minutes, 1976. Other examples of films that look at women and labor in the 1930s and 1940s include Connie Field's *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter*, Direct Cinema Limited, P.O. Box 10003, Santa Monica, CA 90410, 1987, about women and work during World War II, and Lorraine Gray's *With Babies and Banners*, New Day Films, 45 minutes, about women's support during the 1937 GM sit-down strike in Flint, Michigan.

¹⁵These documents can be found with a general on-line search. Examples include the "Wagner Act" and "National Labor Relations Act," <<http://home.earthlink.net/~local1613/nlra.html>>, and "Taft Hartley," <<http://www.multied.com/documents/tafthartley.html>> (both January 3, 2004).

¹⁶Michael Moore, *Roger and Me*, Warner Home Video, 1800-700-888, 87 minutes, 1989, is also widely available in rental stores.

Outside of the factory, Barbara Ehrenrich's book, *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*—or her shorter *Harper's* article by the same name—provides wonderful snapshots on the difficulties of living in modern America making minimum wage in one of our many service industries.¹⁷ Students can relate to the degrading circumstances working people are put in and can examine modern discourse on welfare to work programs in a new light. Through their own experiences working these kinds of jobs, students can make comparisons to Ehrenreich's work and conclusions about the feasibility of welfare reform.

Each period of U.S. history provides an opportunity to think about the history of working people. At the same time, labor and working-class history offers history courses a number of tools, sources, and questions to enhance our general survey courses and to provoke discussion and debate among our students. From the perspective of working people, generalizations break down and abstract historical problems become infused with drama. The potential to promote critical thinking among our students is endless. Most rewarding, however, is students' engagement with today's problems and thoughtfulness about the world that awaits them after college. In some ways, these are the best experiences an historian can offer.

Other Resources

Selected Recent Overviews of the Field of Labor History

Eric Arneson, Julie Green, and Bruce Laurie, eds., *Labor Histories: Class, Politics, and the Working-Class Experience* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998).

Steve Babson, *The Unfinished Struggle: Turning Points in American Labor, 1877-Present* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999).

Melvyn Dubofsky, *Hard Work: The Making of Labor History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000).

Leon Fink, ed., *In Search of the Working Class: Essays in American Labor History and Political Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

Julie Greene, "Working Gender: Recent Scholarship in American Labor History," *Frontiers*, 14, no. 3 (1994): 181–190.

Nelson Lichtenstein, *State of the Union: A Century of American Labor* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

Pricilla Murolo, *From the Folks Who Brought You the Weekend: A Short Illustrated History of Labor in the United States* (New York: New York Press, 2001).

¹⁷Barbara Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* (New York: Henry Holt, 2002), and "Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America," *Harper's* (January 1999): 37–53.

Selected Web Resources

Illinois Labor History Society Web Page

<http://www.kentlaw.edu/ilhs>

Voices from the Dust Bowl

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/afctshmt/tshome.html>

American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936–1940

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/wpaintro/wpahome.html>

America from the Great Depression to World War II: Photos from the FSA-OWI, 1935–1945

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/fsowhome.html>

America at Work, America at Leisure: Motion Pictures from 1894–1915

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/awlhtml/awlhome.html>

The Haymarket Affair Digital Collection

<http://www.chicagohs.org/hadc/>

Documenting the American South

<http://docsouth.unc.edu/>

Studs Terkel: Conversation with America

<http://studsterkel.org>

Global Communities: Chicago's Immigrants and Refugees

<http://www.chicagohistory.org/immigration.html>

American Social History Project

<http://www.ashp.cuny.edu/>