

Rethinking U.S. Labor History Edited by Haverly-Stacke and Walkowitz

RETHINKING U.S. LABOR HISTORY

Essays on the Working-Class
Experience, 1756–2009

Edited by
Donna T. Haverty-Stacke
and
Daniel J. Walkowitz



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Introduction

Donna T. Haverty-Stacke and Daniel J. Walkowitz

This volume, *Rethinking U.S. Labor History*, appears at an auspicious moment in labor history. Approximately 25 years ago a path-breaking edited collection, *Working-Class America, Essays on Labor, Community and American Society* (co-edited by Michael B. Frisch and Daniel J. Walkowitz), introduced 11 young scholars who would help to define the “New” labor history and announce its coming of age.¹ Much good and important work has appeared since, but that 1983 collection still stands as a marker of an important transitional moment in labor history worth examining with a look backward and forward from that juncture.

The present moment is equally auspicious, however, for organized labor and for the working class, which is found both in and outside of union ranks. For the American labor movement stands at a precipice. As the first decade of the New Millennium comes to close, fewer than one in ten workers belong to unions; one in three did so only half a century ago. The reasons for this change are complex and merit asking hard questions, as much about attitudes of workers as about the hostile antilabor climate they have faced in the past quarter century. The 1980s marked the growing hegemony of neoliberalism—state-sponsored privatization of services, industry, and the economy that constituted a frontal attack on labor. President Ronald Reagan’s crushing of the air traffic controllers’ strike in 1981 with the use of nonunion workers announced a new antilabor state regime in the United States. Paralleled by similar policy laid out by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in Britain, Reagan-Thatcherism would dictate a transatlantic state policy and labor-management relations that labor would have to grapple with on a global scale for the next three decades. With the partial exception of the Clinton-era interlude, American workers struggled in the post-1980 era with the consequences of a hostile national political environment that was sustained by conservative courts, a Congress enamored of “free market” open trade, and a conservative, antiunion National Labor Relations Board. The social consequences of this new order would be what the *New York Times* has called a “new Gilded Age”—an era with a widening gap between the “have” and the “have nots.” Corporate salaries and “golden parachutes” rose astronomically in these years, while an expanding service sector that was disproportionately black, Hispanic, Asian,

and female cleaned the offices of those corporate magnates, bused their food at restaurants, tended to their children, and otherwise made the “good life” of the rich possible. Only recently, with the election of a pro-labor president, Barack Obama, has there been any glimmer of change in federal policy, but as we write in the summer of 2009, the change remains more a promise than a new reality.

The labor movement has not been idle in the face of these changes. In the wake of its decline, the union movement has reorganized, striving to rethink strategies that could meet the global restructuring of business, work, and state policies. In the fall of 2008, the fragility of the “gilded” veneer showed cracks and gave new openings to the U.S. labor movement, offering new hope to unions that had recently reorganized. In 2005, powerful new unions like the SEIU and UNITE HERE had formed the “Change to Win Coalition” to confront the challenges wrought by the antiunion climate of the past decades. The new coalition, moving now with a renewed sense of purpose, broke with the craft and industrial unions in the AFL-CIO, which had represented labor for most of its first century, and gave voice to the more socially diverse workforce of the modern era. And workers responded dramatically to the call to action. Coincident with the 2008 election drive, union membership witnessed its largest growth in over 25 years. Unfortunately, division within the labor movement and in-fighting among leaders of rival factions presented new challenges, and the impact of the hemorrhaging of the economy in 2009 on labor is a story yet to be written. While the deepest “recession” since the Great Depression of the 1930s has seen the evisceration of the American auto industry and threatens the future of one of the nation’s leading unions, the United Auto Workers, unions can take hope from some prior experiences: hard times have traditionally fueled worker discontent and labor organizing. This is, then, an uncertain and auspicious moment to reflect on the state of labor and labor history in America.

A century of vital writing by labor historians frames this present historiographical moment. John R. Commons, working with colleagues he had himself trained at the University of Wisconsin, began to publish his seminal four-volume *History of Labor in the United States* in 1918. A pioneering historian of the organized labor movement during the era of the American Federation of Labor, Commons led a distinguished first generation of what were more properly labor economists than historians. In the next decades, Commons et al.’s *History of Labor* (1918–1935) and its ten-volume companion documentary collection established the field of labor history as institutional political history that privileged (and celebrated) the economic policy and leading role of organized labor in the AFL.² This first generation of labor economists actually spanned three careers. Commons’ student at Wisconsin, Selig Perlman, would write the authoritative volume on labor theory, *A Theory of the Labor Movement* (1928), that would track his own rejection of Marxist economics for the more economic functional approach of the AFL, and in turn, Perlman’s student, Philip Taft, would pen what would remain for decades the definitive history of the AFL, *The A.F.L. in the Time of Gompers* (1957). It is comment as much on the hegemonic role the Wisconsin School played as on the patriarchal nature of the

profession that it took the resurgence of feminism in the 1970s to give the extraordinary work of a trio of important women labor economists and historians during this same period its due. The three—Caroline F. Ware, Vera Shlakman, and Hannah Josephson—each penned histories of New England textile workers in the first half of the nineteenth century, an industry dominated, as they note, by women workers. The genealogy of labor history takes a very different tack with their inclusion, as their focus on workers outside the union movement and on women more nearly aligns with the work of the next generation than that of Commons et al.³ Ware's, Shlakman's, and Josephson's attention to textile mills where women labored provided a broader social history than that which had been offered by their male counterparts at Wisconsin, but their contributions remained outside the historiographic canon until the 1970s.

The New Social History of the 1960s represented a conscious break with the "old" Commons historiographic tradition. Reflecting the new population of white ethnics who entered higher education in the 1960s and the social ferment of the decade, a new second generation of labor historians reinvented labor history as the history of labor and the working class. Historian giants in England such as Edward P. Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm, and their American counterparts—most notably the triad of David Brody, Herbert G. Gutman, and David Montgomery—reshaped the historical terrain. In particular, in his magisterial account of the early industrial revolution in Britain, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Thompson gave new meaning to the notion that class, while "largely determined by the productive relations into which men are born—or enter involuntarily," was not a structure but a relationship. In Thompson's widely cited Preface, he noted,

class happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs. . . . Class-consciousness is the way in which these experiences are handled in cultural terms: embodied in traditions, value-systems, ideas, and institutional forms.⁴

In the United States, Gutman and Montgomery took much the same tack in developing the New Social History. Focusing on the workplace and community, they sought to re-explore the past "from the bottom up" by empowering the voices "from below," and labor historians strained to hear the voices of the rank and file, not just those of labor leaders. The new work valorized the study of union and nonunion workers, in the community, on the shopfloor, and in the family in order to tell a fuller story of their struggles. In doing so, these historians of the working class heralded the efflorescence of the New Social History as a remaking of how historians understood the past. Working people, in and outside of unions, in the workplace and in the community, and acting as a class and as ethnic and racial fractions, became vital subjects of and agents in histories of their own making. The social history of black

labor—free and unfree—also flourished as historians uncovered the lives and labor of workers in textile, garment, and shoe industries and in the mines and mills of industrial America.

Brody, Montgomery, and Gutman advanced the new history of labor and the working class as much by writing their own groundbreaking works as by training a generation of new, young scholars who stood on their broad shoulders. Published in 1983, *Working-Class America* was as much a testament to the legacy of this extraordinarily influential transatlantic group of historians as it was to an announcement of future work. Indeed, in retrospect, the volume marked the heyday of this earlier era of labor history. Frisch and Walkowitz offer in their Introduction an impressive review of the state of labor history up until then and gather in their volume a series of cutting-edge essays that showcase the original research of leading scholars in the field at that time. A chief concern of many scholars then was the fragmentation of historical inquiry in general since the 1960's social history turn, with its favoring of local studies of discrete social structures. In their Introduction, Frisch and Walkowitz argue that the contributors to their collection sought to reintegrate the field of *labor* history specifically by "integrat[ing] multiple dimensions of the working-class experience within a framework that reveals their interconnections." These include essays that explore interclass relations, changing forms of working-class culture, a "more precise history of capitalism," and subjects that expose the lived experience of unity between political and social history. The volume, whose ten essays ranged from early textile mill workers before the "golden age" of the Lowell mills to postwar rank-and-file reactions of auto workers to the anticommunist assault on the CIO, demonstrated new approaches in the field. It gave voice to radical workers in the Knights of Labor and communist transit workers; it highlighted the role of ideology, religion, and ritual in working-class organization; and it placed women, the family labor economy, and consumption as equally at the center of labor history as industrial production. In sum, the volume trumpeted the extraordinarily rich potential and breadth of what these then young historians had helped reconceptualize as working-class history.

Historians have enough trouble figuring out the past, much less imagining the future, and so it was difficult for the editors of *Working-Class America* to imagine that labor history in the mid-1980s might be at a crossroads rather than a take-off. Labor history suffered a decline in the academy in the 1980s that paralleled the rise of Reagan-Thatcherism. The reasons are complicated, but in part reflected how members of the 1980s' "me generation" turned away from social activism at a time when new postmodern academic fashions and identity politics championed ethnic, gender, and race identities over those of class and the worker. Both Reagan-Thatcherism and, in turn, the dissolution of the Soviet socialist states coincided with and may have even encouraged this new focus on cultural history and a decentering of class as a central category of scholarly inquisition.

Significant new work in labor history continued to appear in the next decade in both monographs and articles, but these contributions worked largely in the framework established by the New Labor History in the 1970s. A summer 1974 edition

of the *Journal of Social History* published the essays presented at the foundational Anglo-American Labor History Conference held at Rutgers University two years earlier. That landmark event, which brought leading British and American labor historians such as Hobsbawm, Thompson, Gutman, and Montgomery together in the United States for the first time, advanced the transatlantic theoretical tradition that nourished the new work.⁵ A subsequent 1986 conference at Northern Illinois University reflected on the legacy of the New Social History fifteen years later. Like the previous work, the focus remained on industrial workers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but engaging recent concerns Gutman had raised about the tendency of community studies to balkanize labor history, many of the essays addressed "synthesis." The papers from the conference subsequently appeared in a book, *Perspectives on American Labor History* (Northern Illinois University Press, 1989), coauthored by J. Carroll Moody and one of the participants at the earlier Rutgers conference, Alice Kessler-Harris. Notably, in addition to review essays by the coauthors and Brody, two of the other five authors, Sean Wilentz and Leon Fink, had published in *Working-Class America*, and the others were young scholars who had recently authored highly influential monographs on gender and politics and economics of work and worker consciousness in the New Labor History—Alan Dawley, Mari-Jo Buhle, and Michael Reich.⁶

Twelve years after the publication of the Illinois conference collection and 15 years after the publication of *Working-Class America*, three students of David Montgomery, Eric Arnesen, Julie Greene, and Bruce Laurie, edited a volume "to celebrate and reflect upon the influence of . . . Montgomery" on the field. In *Labor Histories: Class, Politics, and the Working-Class Experience*, the editors remarked (in retrospect, perhaps wistfully) on the "renewed ferment" then characterizing both the labor movement and the field of labor history and outlined three main concerns of historians such as Montgomery who considered labor's past through the lens of contemporary issues. In exploring the themes of "politics and the state" and "class and culture," the scholars contributing to this volume reflected increased attention to the state that had increasingly characterized labor history and was a sign of the new centrality of feminist and postcolonial study to labor history. Indeed, even as cultural history began to undercut the social moorings that anchored the new working-class history, one could see in this volume how labor historians were stimulated by new work on the state⁷ and the social construction of race. Thus, examining the extent of racism and misogyny that complicated the history of the working class, these histories took care to uncover as well the "materialist moorings" for these attitudes.

It was a third area, however, gender history, that most dramatically transformed the writing of labor history at the end of the century—and challenged (and threatened may not be too strong a word) male labor historians in particular. Women workers in cotton mills, textile workshops, and as domestic servants had long been the subject of study, but few scholars interrogated how gender "mattered"; how the place of women and their subjectivities shaped the historical experience. Fewer still engaged similar questions of men: how masculinity, patriarchy, or male culture, for instance,

shaped their experiences. In time women's history morphed into gendered history, as it would expand to include men and women, queer and straight. Feminist scholarship, most notably Ava Baron's 1991 collection *Work Engendered*, led the way down this new path, but equally important was the conceptual work done by European historians of gender and labor, including Joan Scott and Judith Walkowitz.⁸ Yet with the emergence of this gendered history during the late 1980s and early 1990s, came the opposition of many male labor historians. Worried that the linguistic turn and post-structuralism undercut the materialist paradigms of class analysis, they rejected the engendered approaches such methods had spawned. Bryan Palmer's *Descent into Discourse* was one of the more full-throated outcries against the cultural turn and its impact on labor history. Arguing that post-structuralism, which had profoundly galvanized feminist labor historians, reified discourse, Palmer believed the central focus on language had obscured structures of oppression and forms of resistance. His opening salvo threw down the gauntlet: "Critical theory is no substitute for historical materialism; language is not life."⁹

Almost two decades later, it is hard to imagine all the furor over the linguistic turn, gendered history, and the hyperbolic caricatures critics drew of one another. Even Palmer, in a monumental 2000 exploration of transgressions and resistance, *Cultures of Darkness*, acknowledges postmodern appreciation of difference (though he warns still of its limits to understanding capitalist particularities).¹⁰ Whether the theoretical battle was won or the opposition simply wilted before seemingly larger threats to a withering organized labor movement is not clear, but the divisive tone of 1990s-era labor panels has given way to a unified new movement of labor and labor historians in the new millennium.

Labor historians' new esprit has had its institutional base in a new organization for the advancement of labor and working-class history, the Labor and Working Class History Association (LAWCHA). In annual meetings and in their writing and organizing on behalf of pro-labor legislation, labor historians have mobilized new explorations of the history of labor in the United States. They have asked new questions about the character and meaning of transformations of work and capital and the impact of those transformations on a potentially revitalized U. S. labor movement. These scholars are eager not only to reconstruct a more sophisticated picture of the past, but also to come to understand better how workers and the labor movement have gotten to where they are today. Transformations of workplaces and labor in United States and Western European countries trouble the older focus on industrial or blue-collar work. Working people, as C. Wright Mills famously observed more than a half century ago, imagine themselves as "middle class" and as an increasingly smaller part of the workforce. Labor historians, building on these new workplace realities, are charting new approaches to and exploring new territory in the history of labor and the working class.¹¹

Much new work in labor history has begun to appear in specialized journals and merits a wider audience. This volume, *Rethinking U.S. Labor History*, seeks to chronicle this rejuvenation and change by showcasing the current research of leading scholars alongside three thought-provoking essays on the future directions of the field. Although one of the coeditors of this volume and the coauthor of one of its essays contributed to *Working-Class America*, this collection blends the work of some senior labor historians who have penned major monographs in the field with young scholars working at the frontiers of what we think will be the field's future. All express a continued interest in questions surrounding the relationship of class and culture, especially the association between the changing experience of class and the broader context of American political culture. Their work also reflects a revived interest in the links between workers' experience and the changing political economy, especially as American workers confront the continued flight of manufacturing jobs and the transformation of the nation's retail sector. As the face of unions has changed to reflect the nation's female and minority working-class populations, historians in this collection continue to grapple with the role that gender and race have played in America's labor history. They are concerned not just with tracing those categories as lived experiences in the past, however, but also with exploring their meanings as cultural, social, legal, and political constructs that had ramifications for the shape and direction of the labor movement. And several of the labor historians in this collection have embraced the transnational turn, some engaging in comparative national studies, others working to break down the epistemological barriers of the nation-state to chart the broader patterns of labor migrations and workers' communities that flowed over such borders throughout history. Finally, some essays also reflect the new concerns of labor history since the 1990s with the state, as some scholars examine how the political apparatuses of local and federal policy shape workers' lives and the fate of unions. In this spirit, while not denying the importance of workers' agency, in the essays that follow we see how some historians have called for a fresh look at just how much the political atmosphere structures agency, something that they (and many workers) became acutely aware of under the hostility of the Bush administration and, now, with the opportunities promised by that of Obama.

The above themes animate the work of the authors whose scholarship is showcased in this volume. The essays that make up the section on "current research" demonstrate the broad chronological, thematic, and methodological range of historians' current work, reflecting the richness of the field's recent renaissance. These chapters are organized, for the most part, chronologically so the reader can appreciate the change over time in terms of the content explored by each author. But there are some interesting thematic links among many of the pieces that also serve to organize this main section of the volume. Such themes include explorations of alternative working-class identities, the experiences of laborers who have not traditionally been considered workers, the significance of the state to the definition of certain work experiences as well as to the fate of unions, and the insights that can be gained by

going beyond the limits of the nation-state to appreciate the lives, expectations, and struggles of workers.

Alternative working-class identities emerge in this volume in a variety of guises. How workers understand themselves as workers—their identity or consciousness—has been something labor historians have attempted to uncover since many of them took the cultural turn. Most of their works have traditionally focused on revealing and reconstructing the experiences of the most militant of laborers and the most politically radical of workers. But what about those folks who were workers but who chose not to strike, who decided to vote against the union, or who vehemently opposed the communist organizers among them? Four chapters in this volume grapple with these kinds of questions.

In her richly detailed narrative of the 1886 Southwest railroad strike, Theresa Case explores both the social and ideological “middle ground” that existed between the strikers and the strikebreakers during the great upheaval along the rails. Moving beyond the tendency of many scholars to denounce strikebreakers, Case seeks to understand them better as laborers of a different stripe by uncovering a community in which traditional divisions of ethnicity, race, and sex did not play a part, but which found itself under stress during the strike nonetheless. Outlining the materialist moorings of her subjects, Case explores the ways in which the personal connections in the community and on the job between skilled and unskilled workers constituted one fault line along which workers took sides as the strike widened and spread. Drawing on the contributions and methods of cultural history, she also explicates how shared ideas and a shared language constituted the other fault line. Specifically, Case finds that the idea of free labor—and the concept of “manhood” that was at the center of the expression of that idea—was employed in different ways and for different ends during the strike. Locating railroad workers along a spectrum of more communal or more individual interpretations of free labor, Case demonstrates how both strikers and strikebreakers created alternative *working-class* identities for themselves even as they stood on opposite sides of the fight.

Like strikebreakers, religiously devoted workers have not always been fully understood or appreciated by those who have written their history. Ken and Liz Fones-Wolf acknowledge the hesitancy of labor historians to consider the role of religion in working-class life, specifically the hesitancy to consider it as something other than a conservative, red- and race-baiting force that has prevented the growth of unions. While not denying this reactionary facet of many faith communities, the Fones-Wolfs delve more deeply into the history of various Protestant sects in the South during the 1930s and 1940s, uncovering the dynamic changes that such popular Christian denominations underwent in the face of the social and economic changes brought about by the depression and war. In so doing they reveal how “social and religious upheaval also created spaces where dissident voices clamored for change.” As the CIO attempted to work within those spaces for change by recognizing the significance of religion to the lives of Southern white workers, its mainstream organizers in the Southern Organizing Committee (SOC) failed to grasp fully the diversity,

locally based nature, and highly valued autonomy of those workers' primitive, rural faith traditions. In a region where there was "no common creed" the work of radical organizers, like Claude Williams, Ward Rodgers, and Don West, who grasped the significance of prophetic gospel teachings, bore greater fruit. In their insightful chapter the Fones-Wolfs demonstrate just how significant religion was to the white working class of the South in these decades and how there was no simple formula for translating that system of beliefs into either a commitment to or rejection of unions. Such a reality, the Fones-Wolfs remind us, was difficult to understand fully, not only for the mainstream organizers of the SOC (like Lucy Mason, John Ramsay, Franz Daniel, and Charles Webber), but also for historians who may continue to try to pigeonhole those workers into one camp or the other too hastily.

In his study of the struggle within Mine-Mill in Connecticut during World War II, Steve Rosswurm also seeks to move away from easy dichotomous categorizations. In this case, Rosswurm rejects the tendency to cast communist organizers as heroes and anticommunist working-class Catholics as villains in the story of the CIO's organizing campaigns in the brass valley. And he also seeks to appreciate the significance of religion in the lives of the workers in that valley in a way that moves beyond the familiar story of faith as merely a force for conservative union opposition and red-baiting. Just as the Fones-Wolfs show the difficulty CIO SOC leaders had in appreciating the meaning of Southern white workers' primitive rural Christianity, so does Rosswurm uncover the failure of the Communist Party to engage or take seriously the culture of workers, which in this case was a deeply conservative, traditional Catholicism. Rosswurm does not ignore the anti-Semitic, racist, and sexist strains of those workers' religiously informed opposition to outsiders and communists, but he also demonstrates how the Catholic workers who, alongside the efforts of Father Donnelly, opposed the communist presence in their union did so, they believed, not to destroy Mine-Mill but to save it.

While the brass workers that Rosswurm investigates fought to build a union free of those they deemed a threat to their white, Catholic working-class world of the 1940s, the blue, pink, and white collared ranks of the post-1968 period that Joseph McCartin studies have found unions not to be worth any effort at all. Although the thrust of McCartin's chapter is an argument for the role that structural factors have played in the decline of unions since the late 1960s, he acknowledges that some of the "solvents of solidarity" were cultural as well. The American worker's embrace of an antiunion position stemmed, in part, from his/her attitudes, beliefs, and values about work and his/her perception of him/herself as a worker. This has been especially true for white-collar workers, whose numbers increase over the time frame McCartin explores. These laborers tended not to see themselves as workers and have not embraced unions, contributing to the other factors McCartin cites as explanation for the decline of organized labor in the latter half of the twentieth century. Although many historians have not focused closely on these workers, their antiunion attitudes—even, antiunion identities, as some historians like Lawrence Richards have argued¹²—form a legitimate subject for study. They too need to be located