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The Labor and Working-Class History Association



NEWSLETTER
2021-22

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Cover photo: Protesting layoffs and austerity measures at Rutgers University, September 26, 2020. Photo by Mark Hopkins



LAWCHA President, Will Jones
Photo by Lisa Miller

President's Perspective

William P. Jones,
University of Minnesota

2021 BEGAN with Donald Trump's supporters storming the nation's capital in a violent attempt to overturn a democratic election. As I write eight months later the Delta variant and continued resistance to masking and vaccination are prolonging a pandemic that many of us hoped would have ended long ago. Despite the election of the most vocally pro-labor President in decades and of Democratic majorities in both houses of Congress, we have seen the passage of historic investments in infrastructure and pandemic relief but little progress on much needed proposals to protect the rights to vote, join unions, and to live, work and study without fear of deportation or abuse by immigration agents or the police.

In times like these, the scholarship, teaching, and activism of labor historians is particularly essential. This was abundantly evident in our 2021 conference, "Workers on the Front Lines," which we had hoped to convene at the University of Illinois at Chicago but shifted to a remote format after it became clear that travel and a face-to-face meeting would not be safe a full year after COVID-19 spread around the globe. Led by Peter Cole and Keona Ervin, the conference organizing committee put together an outstanding program including three plenaries, two film screenings, and sixty-four panels. The conference kicked off with an invigorating plenary, co-sponsored by Scholars for a New Deal in Higher Education, on "College for All and a National Agenda for Labor in

Higher Education." Other plenaries addressed organizing by food service workers during the pandemic and the renewal of labor journalism, while panels ranged from visual culture and struggle in Latin and Latinx America to the challenges and benefits of doing global labor history and working-class responses to police brutality and Apartheid. Our membership meeting opened with a report on the ongoing campaign to organize Amazon warehouse workers in Alabama, and announcements of the Herbert Gutman, Philip Taft, and David Montgomery Prizes as well as the Distinguished Service to Labor and Working-Class History Award. We were particularly grateful that this year's Distinguished Service award-winner Julia Reichert joined us for a screening and panel discussion of her latest film, *9to5: The Story of a Movement*.

The 2021 conference saw the implementation of two important policies adopted over the previous year. Under the leadership of Sophia Lee, Shennette Garrett-Scott, Claire Goldstene, Manu Karuku, and Jon Shelton formed an investigative team that trained to hear and respond to reports of harassment that arose during the conference. Thankfully, none arose. The composition of the LAWCHA Board of Directors also reflected a Constitutional Amendment adopted unanimously by LAWCHA members in 2020, which requires that at least one seat on the Board be held by a contingent faculty member and one seat be held by an independent scholar.

— President's Perspective —

The Board of Directors met during the conference, and welcomed new members Lauren Braun-Strumfels, Toni Gilpin, Sergio M. González, Colleen O'Neill, and Jon Shelton. In a marathon Zoom meeting we received updates on committee work, discussed potential locations for the 2023 conference, and broke into working groups to address the need to raise funds to pay an executive assistant, outreach to faculty and students at community colleges, and support for scholarship and organizing by graduate students. Work in these areas will be continued by, respectively, LAWCHA's executive committee and committees headed by Paul Ortiz and Sergio González.

During the pandemic, LAWCHA has sustained our work and sense of community by increasing our presence online. Under the leadership of John Enyeart, the communications committee has expanded our audience through social media, LaborOnLine, and email, and helped spread the word about events and publications by LAWCHA members. The program committee, which is headed by Vice President Cindy Hahamovitch, organized LAWCHA-sponsored panels at the OAH, AHA and several other conferences, and Mac Marquis continued the tremendously successful "Pandemic Book Talks" highlighting new books related to labor and working-class history. In July, Toni Gilpin, Rick Halpern and Anne Balay initiated LABOR OnScreen to discuss feature films about labor and working people. All of this work has been critical to keeping us engaged and connected in a year of social distancing and remote work.

Despite the persistence of COVID-19, we are cautiously optimistic that some of us will be able to gather face-to-face at the Organization of American Historians' hybrid meeting in Boston, March 31–April 3. Whether you are there in-person or remotely, please plan to attend LAWCHA's membership meeting and check the program for LAWCHA-sponsored sessions on Intimate Labor and Racial Capitalism, the State of the Field on Native American Workers, Histories of Farm Workers Across Generations, and Refugee Workers in the 1970s and 1980s. Nick Juravich and Steve Striffler are also arranging a Working People's History Tour of Boston in honor of LAWCHA's third President, Jim Green. I will deliver a Presidential Address, "The Essential Worker: A History from the Progressive Era to COVID-19," with responses from Emma Amador, Keona Ervin, Jennifer Klein, and Gabriel Winant. This is scheduled for Friday, April 1 at 1:30pm EST, and will be followed by a reception. Please join us!

LABOR

The official journal for LAWCHA

A subscription to *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History* is available through membership in LAWCHA.

The labor question—who will do the work and under what economic and political terms?—beckons today with renewed global urgency. Offering both historical research and commentary, *Labor* provides a scaffolding for understanding the roots of continuing social dilemmas. While still engaging social movements and institutions based on industrial work—classic sites of inquiry in our field—*Labor* gives equal attention to other critical contexts, including slavery, unpaid and domestic labor, agricultural work, the informal sector, and the professions. The interaction of workers with the state, institutions of civil society, and sources of cultural formation also constitute important arenas of discussion. We look not only to historians but also to other scholars, journalists, labor educators, poets, and writer activists for submissions.

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www.dukeupress.edu/labor

2021 ANNUAL MEETING: **WORKERS** on the **FRONT LINES**

Emma Amador, Eric Fure-Slocum, Greta de Jong, Sophia Lee, and David Zonderman
LAWCHA Board Members

LAWCHA'S 2021 ANNUAL MEETING was held in a virtual format because of the global COVID-19 pandemic. From May 20–28, conference participants enjoyed a rich variety of panel presentations, plenary sessions, and cultural events put together by an outstanding committee co-chaired by Peter Cole and Keona Ervin. Although we could not meet together in person in Chicago as planned, the virtual sessions were packed with inspiring scholarship, activism, and solidarity. The theme of the conference, *Workers on the Front Lines*, featured dialogue about workers and working-class politics in the face of disaster. Among the central questions of the conference was: how have “essential” and “front line” workers organized in moments of crisis and led movements for social transformation? Responses to this question were voiced in panels on precarious and marginalized workers and on the ways that race, ethnicity, gender, disability, colonialism, citizenship, and sexuality have shaped working-class history. Specific themes included labor organizing in higher education, domestic work as essential work, critical approaches to the history of racial capitalism, prisoners' rights and labor struggles, movements to end police brutality, migration and immigration, essential workers in the food and health industries, histories of community organizing, and workers navigating imperialism and empire. Taken together, these presentations and conversations spoke to the urgency of working-class historical perspectives and the need to support labor organizing in our contemporary moment.

COLLEGE FOR ALL AND HIGHER EDUCATION REFORM

The opening night plenary brought together eight doctoral students and faculty, many active in [Scholars for a New Deal for Higher Education](#) (SFNDHE), for a discussion of the College for All Act of 2021. Lane Windham of the Kalmanovitz Initiative at Georgetown University moderated the discussion. Speakers emphasized that the proposed legislation would not only relieve millions from crushing student debt, but also increase tenure-track faculty hiring and improve wages and working conditions for other university employees. Several faculty—active in unions such as AAUP, AFT, CWA, and



Colena Sesanker at the opening night plenary on College for All

SEIU—urged colleagues to organize across employment categories, campuses, and geographic regions to support the Act and academic labor as a whole.

Colena Sesanker of the Congress of Connecticut Community Colleges SEIU Local 1973 argued that the College for All Act could prompt a nationwide rethinking of public funding for higher education that challenges the “business models” of most universities. Eleni Schirmer, a doctoral student in Educational Policy Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, explored how the Act might stop the growing financialization of higher education where not only students but also universities themselves carry huge debt loads and banks see the presence of tenure and unions as red flags for good credit ratings. Aimee Loiselle, a postdoctoral fellow at Smith College and co-facilitator for SFNDHE, saw the Act as a piece of civil rights legislation that opens the door to further labor and legal activism for all campus workers. During the Q&A period, panelists highlighted projects such as [Bargaining for the Common Good in Higher Education](#), [Tenure for the Common Good](#), and [New Faculty Majority](#), emphasizing that faculty must understand that they are workers who need to organize for themselves and their students to improve academic working conditions, preserve and expand tenure, and restore the financial health and affordability of public higher education.



Mohamed Attia describing his work with the Street Vendor Project

PANDEMIC LABOR ORGANIZING

On May 22 a plenary on “Organizing Restaurant and Food Workers During the Pandemic” featured several organizers who, as moderator Manu Karuka observed, have been “at the forefront of worker militancy” during this time. Mohamed Attia of New York’s [Street Vendor Project](#), Ryan Coffel of café workers’ union [Colectivo Workers Unite](#), Ben Wilkens of Fight for \$15 and a Union’s [NC Raise Up](#), and Carlos Enriquez of the Democratic Socialists of America’s [Restaurant Organizing Project](#) discussed how the pandemic impacted their organizing work. Dorothy Sue Cobble, whose book *Dishing It Out* showed how women restaurant workers challenged the “factory paradigm” dominant in labor history, provided historical context.

One theme was that the pandemic highlighted the precarity of restaurant work. Panelists argued that addressing that precarity collectively had strengthened their organizing. Coffel and Wilkens described successful campaigns for paid sick time and discussed how addressing sexual harassment and workplace diversity were central to their organizing work. Enriquez shared ways food service workers addressed food insecurity through mutual aid, campaigns against employers’ food waste, and mobilizing to extend unemployment insurance. Attia described the unique challenges faced by street vendors and their struggles against unfair regulations and overpolicing. Both Attia and Enriquez discussed how restaurant workers and street vendors have connected their organizing to movements for immigrant rights and against police violence.

Cobble noted that rates of unionization in the food service sector were higher in the mid-twentieth century than today. Back then, waitresses’ unions served as critical mutual aid societies for their low-wage, often head-of-household members. Women restaurant workers were leaders in immigrant as well as labor struggles, pushing the AFL-CIO to rethink its immigration policy. Their history proves that precarity does not make unionizing impossible. Like the workers

she studied, the panelists were engaged in exciting forms of organizing outside of traditional collective bargaining, and that is work we should all encourage.

ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP MEETING

Our annual membership meeting on May 26 blended labor activism, scholarship, and organizational business. Drawing over fifty participants, the meeting was convened by LAWCHA president Will Jones and began with brief reports about the conference and the recently instituted anti-harassment policy. This was followed by a session with Adam Obernauer, an organizer with the [Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union](#) (RWDSU), who discussed the unionization effort by Amazon workers in Bessemer, Alabama. Obernauer stressed the challenges that COVID presented for organizers and union leaders, adding to the already substantial roadblocks thrown up by Amazon’s union busting tactics. While the union gained substantial support from workers over 35-years-old, Amazon’s hiring binge of younger workers gave the company an extra edge leading up to the vote. National media proved to be a mixed blessing for the union vote, drawing attention to working conditions and to Amazon’s anti-union behavior, but often distracting from essential on-the-ground organizing work.

Following the presentation of awards for service and scholarship and gracious thanks offered by each recipient (*see pp. 13-15 for more details*), LAWCHA vice president Cindy Hahamovitch closed out this year’s meeting with a conversation about the organization’s future, generating ideas about expanding membership to include more union leaders, labor educators, contingent historians, community college faculty, independent scholars, and public historians, while also addressing wider audiences through writing and teaching materials about labor and working-class history.

JOURNALISTS AND HISTORIANS

Conference participants enjoyed another excellent plenary session, “The New Labor Journalist and the First Draft of Working-



Freelance journalist Kim Kelly at the plenary on the new labor journalism

2021 Annual Meeting: Workers on the Front Lines

Class History,” on May 27. Peter Cole of Western Illinois University asked five labor journalists to reflect on whether there is a new labor journalism and a new working class in the twenty-first century United States. Several panelists—such as Michelle Chen who writes for *Dissent* and Kim Kelley who writes for *Teen Vogue*—explained that new labor journalists were often young writers of color who were less focused on unions and more on community activism, and the broader struggles against worker exploitation. When Cole asked if labor journalism was now chronicling a narrative of declension where a weaker labor movement gets less news coverage, Steven Greenhouse—former labor reporter at the *New York Times*—responded that labor journalists still cover a range of issues surrounding labor conditions, organizing, labor law, government and politics.

Other panelists noted that the growing presence of online journalists at a range of outlets allowed some of those correspondents to advocate more and take sides in the conflicts that they covered. Increasing organizational activity in the industry means that many emerging labor journalists might also be labor activists in their own right. Not only do they report on unions, but they also support and even organize unions in their newsrooms, raising complications regarding fairness, objectivity, and balance. Regardless of where they published and what specific labor topics they covered, all the journalists agreed that it was crucial to examine current labor events for their context, patterns, and perspectives. They noted important synergies between journalism and history, and believed that part of their jobs was to ask if the labor movement has been in similar circumstances before, and what might workers learn from those past struggles.

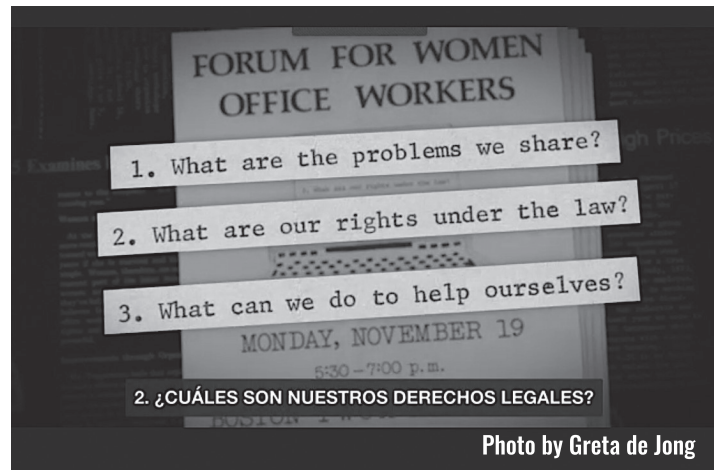
CULTURAL EVENTS

Several sessions highlighted the ways art, music, and film can be sites of labor activism and scholarship. LAWCHA members joined the United Association for Labor Education (UALE) on May 24 for a virtual tour of the [Maxo Vanka](#) murals at St. Nicholas Croatian Catholic Church in Pittsburgh. Anna Doering, managing director of the Society to Preserve the Millvale Murals of Maxo Vanka, guided us through these beautiful, social justice-themed paintings depicting scenes of working-class life and condemning the violence of industrial capitalism. That was followed by an inspiring trio of performances by hip hop artist Jendog Lonewolf, spoken word artist Blaq Ice, and singer/songwriter Tom Juravich. Their music and poetry drew on both the historical and contemporary injustices that link the struggles for racial and economic equality.

A second joint session with UALE on May 25 treated members to a screening of *9to5: The Story of a Movement*, followed by a conversation with film makers Julia Reichert and

Steven Bognar and a panel of labor historians and activists (Lane Windham, Kim Cook of [Cornell Worker Institute](#), and Ciara Fox of [Fight for \\$15 Organize](#)). The film’s account of the ways 9to5’s workplace feminism changed the perceptions and treatment of office workers in the 1970s led into a lively discussion of the legacies of these organizing efforts and how they are shaping the activism of a new generation of workers in service industries today.

The final session of the conference featured a screening of Adrian Prawica’s documentary film *Haymarket: The Bomb, the Anarchists, the Labor Struggle*. After the screening, labor and migration historian Kenyon Zimmer led a Q&A session with the film maker that revealed the complexities of telling historical stories for which there may be competing interpretations of evidence that is contradictory or incomplete. Despite the unknowns surrounding who was responsible for the bombing, participants agreed that the film’s exploration of the conditions that drove some workers to advocate armed struggle against capitalism and the impact of this on the labor movement is a valuable contribution to the field.



Scene from Julia Reichert and Steven Bognar’s film *9to5: The Story of a Movement*

THANKS, LAWCHA!

Many thanks to all the LAWCHA members who helped to organize or present panels at this outstanding virtual conference. Special thanks to conference co-chairs Peter Cole and Keona Ervin; Program Committee members Emma Amador, Shennette Garrett-Scott, Toni Gilpin, Sergio González, Robert Johnston, Manu Karuka, Sarah McNamara, Tejasvi Ngaraja, Colleen O’Neill, Paul Ortiz, Sarah Rose, Marcia Walker McWilliams, Lane Windham, and David Zonderman; Anti-Harassment Investigating Team members Shennette Garrett-Scott, Claire Goldstene, Manu Karuka, Sophia Lee (chair), and Jon Shelton; and LAWCHA Executive Assistant James McElroy. Thanks also to Duke University Press for sponsoring the conference.

Organizing Contingent Workers in Higher Education

Maria Consuelo Maisto and Claire Goldstene
New Faculty Majority

TODAY, A MAJORITY OF COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY FACULTY (upwards of 75 percent) are low-wage workers, generally without access to health, unemployment, or retirement benefits, often with as little as 15-weeks of job security, and frequently with few opportunities for upward advancement. This transition in the ratio of tenured to contingent faculty, many of whom are women, people of color, and first-generation academics from immigrant and working-class backgrounds, has taken place over several decades and speaks to the deteriorating labor conditions among growing numbers of precarious gig workers generally, as well as among academic workers specifically. The creation of a contingent faculty majority has generated ongoing resistance, advocacy, and organizing and has emerged as an important contemporary labor story.

New Faculty Majority is a national advocacy organization focused on improving working conditions for contingent faculty. Founded and led by precariously employed faculty in 2009, the group's name highlighted the growing phenomenon of contingency, in all of its guises—adjunct, term faculty, lecturer, postdoctoral fellow, visiting professor, etc.

As part of its activism, NFM produced a 2012 report, in collaboration with the Campaign for the Future of Higher Education, on back-to-school working conditions (particularly the astonishing lack of time, resources, and compensation given to faculty preparing to teach each term) for contingent faculty. “Who is Professor Staff and How Can This Person Teach so Many Classes?” was intended to raise public awareness of these conditions. This work, along with relentless efforts to keep higher ed and national media attention focused on the issue, led to an invitation for the president to testify before the House Committee on Education and the Workforce. While the core of that testimony centered on higher education's response to the Affordable Care Act, she framed the institutional decision to limit adjunct course assignments to avoid providing healthcare under the law's provisions as simply the latest in a long history of exploitative practices directed toward contingent faculty. Following that hearing, then-Representative George Miller initiated a national survey of contingent faculty, which resulted in the report “The Just-in-Time Professor” and a 2017 GAO report on the contingent academic workforce.

Organizing with and for contingent faculty is notoriously difficult. Key to NFM's modest successes has been engagement with various unions that have dedicated resources to organizing

contingent faculty. NFM coordinated a coalition of unions to address the longstanding problem of access to unemployment insurance for contingent faculty, resulting in a major revision of federal unemployment guidance that is even now catalyzing local, state, and national organizing efforts.

At a time of declining union density nationally, organizing among contingent faculty has been steadily growing. According to recent data from the National Center for the Study of Collective Bargaining in Higher Education and the Professions, between 2013 and 2019, 118 new faculty collective bargaining units formed, representing over 36,000 members. In addition to the major education unions, AFT, NEA, and AAUP, this includes SEIU and their Faculty Forward campaign, the United Steelworkers, the UAW among graduate students, and United Campus Workers through Communications Workers of America. These efforts include an array of approaches, from contingent faculty-only units to mixed contingent and tenure-track/tenured units to a more industrial model of all campus workers. And, these campaigns are happening across the country, including in right-to-work states.

Other organizations are paying attention to this issue as well. LAWCHA has made a number of changes to make the organization more accessible to low-paid contingent faculty and include them in its work. Most recently, Scholars for a New Deal for Higher Education has made improved conditions for contingent faculty central to their understanding of the value of higher education. What all these efforts share is outrage about the worsening working conditions for a majority of faculty, a concern about the effect of these conditions on both teachers and students, and a commitment to resistance as part of a broader vision of education as a public good.

The response of many colleges and universities to the challenges presented by COVID has been to double down on historical practices, where the lowest paid and most vulnerable workers—including contingent faculty—bear the brunt of the burden. The continued advocacy of organizations like NFM and others offers important resistance to this administrative impulse and provides a space in which to study and organize around the intersectionality of labor, gender, race, and class.

To join New Faculty Majority, visit newfacultymajority.org

To join the LAWCHA Committee on Contingent Faculty please email: cgoldstene@yahoo.com

Be like these workers and Renew Your Membership



“Paying dues at agricultural workers union at Tabor, Oklahoma.” February 1940. Library of Congress.
Photo by Russell Lee

Want to continue contributing to the work of hundreds of scholars and activists across the country? Renew your membership to the Labor and Working-Class History Association and continue to receive a subscription to *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History*, our yearly newsletter, access to teaching resources and activist news, and connections to labor scholars from around the world.

LAWCHA.org/Join



Unemployment for the Collective Good

The Union-Led Work Share Program at Rutgers University

Andy Urban and Naomi R Williams
Rutgers University

ON APRIL 7, 2021, CWA Local 1031, HPAE Locals 5089 and 5094, Rutgers AAUP-AFT, and URA-AFT announced that members from each of these five unions, representing over 10,000 administrative, faculty, medical, and professional workers at Rutgers University's three campuses, had ratified a work share [program](#). The wages workers forfeited would be made whole by state unemployment funds and the federal unemployment supplement included in the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021. With the money saved on salaries, management agreed to: 1) halt staff layoffs until at least January 2022; 2) extend additional funding to doctoral students whose dissertation research and progress was disrupted by COVID, to last through the spring 2022; 3) restore Part-Time Lecturers lines, which were reduced by 20% in April 2020; and, 4) institute a schedule for when contractual raises, canceled by management's declaration of a fiscal emergency, would be paid.

When the pandemic spread to the U.S. in early March 2020, Rutgers' unions formed a coalition representing more than 20,000 employees. Coming together to find joint solutions has

proved beneficial for Rutgers and the communities it serves. There is the opportunity to center the most vulnerable employees as happened around dining hall workers as campuses closed. This coalition has sought to work with Rutgers administrators to keep everyone safe, provide some stability, and reduce economic uncertainty. The coalition has really expanded our position and allowed faculty to work more closely with other employees. Faculty are also learning the value of centering the voices of the most vulnerable to bring people-centered recommendations and demands to the administration.

Coming as it did, after Rutgers AAUP-AFT successfully negotiated a historic bargaining agreement in 2019 that promised to bring racial and gender, as well as campus pay equity, to all three campuses, the coalition of Rutgers unions and our joint efforts have mobilized faculty into action. The coalition that helped institute the work share program has also collaborated in broad-based racial and social justice efforts across New Jersey. For example, we hosted a racial justice webinar and signed an agreement with other unions across

the nation around supporting the Movement for Black Lives. Working with the community and parents who are fighting against the closure of the Lincoln Annex School, which primarily serves Latinx students in downtown New Brunswick, coalition members and students stood in solidarity with Lincoln Annex School students. Third, the coalition has worked closely with administration around health and safety issues, making sure employees have safety equipment and that processes are clear and resources are available as people return to campus.

The 2019 Rutgers AAUP-AFT contract agreement that we signed with the university instituted the historic pay equity program and expanded job security and pay raises for non-tenure track faculty. For the first time ever, non-tenure track faculty have a grievance procedure that empowers them to challenge non-reappointments and decisions not to promote. Together with raises for graduate student employees, the equity raises, and academic freedom including social media, the Rutgers AAUP-AFT has a powerful faculty union agreement. The organizing campaign leading up to this agreement really galvanized faculty to become more aware and involved in union negotiations and initiatives. Part-time Lecturers (PTL), or adjuncts, are in a different bargaining unit here at Rutgers. While the PTL faculty contract fell short of their goals in 2019, especially concerning raising salaries for the lowest-paid faculty and providing affordable health insurance, it did provide across-the-board raises and more job security for those faculty. The coalition provides an opportunity for all faculty to work more closely together in future collaborations. And the work share program is just a start.

The work share program was a hard-fought victory for union members, and, from a neutral standpoint, a victory for common sense. Even though management eventually saw the logic of a program that was a win-win situation for all involved, it arrived at this conclusion after significant and pernicious delay. The [coalition](#) of Rutgers unions, as early as May 2020, proposed a work share program that would have taken advantage of the first federal CARES Act prior to its expiration at the end of July. Management, in response, demonstrated that it would rather lay off more than a thousand workers and cut teaching lines of its most economically vulnerable instructors, than admit the point that workers and the coalition unions had the best plan for how to govern the university in a crisis.

Even though historian Jonathan Holloway assumed office as Rutgers' first Black President on July 1, 2020 with promises to forge a "beloved community" rooted in principles such as equity and social justice, he studiously avoided taking up the work share program during his first month with dexterity that will undoubtedly impress some future Ivy League employer. The dining hall and custodial workers who bore the

brunt of layoffs, which could have been avoided, were primarily women of color.

Since the belated work share program's ratification in April 2021, workers at Rutgers have demonstrated remarkable patience navigating New Jersey's convoluted unemployment system. The unions' staff adopted an all-hands-on-deck approach to fielding myriad questions about everything from eligibility to partake in the program to how to resolve online and by phone unemployment application quirks. A mutual aid fund was established for union members who encountered delays and needed money to pay rent, mortgage, or other immediate expense.

In contrast, management recently announced that the raises it promised to honor on July 1, 2021—already delayed a year—would not be ready until August because Human Resources was "[too busy](#)." Vivian Fernández, Senior Vice President for Human Resources and Organizational Effectiveness, who earns more than \$320,000 a year, communicated this and then went on a vacation.



Protesting layoffs and austerity measures at Rutgers University, September 26, 2020

Despite setbacks, like the university's failure to fulfill its commitment on pay raises and the faculty equity program, the coalition offers an exciting path to building greater collaboration between full and part-time faculty, even though we are in separate bargaining units. It has also opened the door for greater employee involvement in shaping bargaining demands. For example, the pay equity program went to the bargaining table because over 2,000 faculty members said that it was a major concern. The coalition's efforts over the last year have expanded the base of employees, among the 19 different coalition-member unions, who actively participate in bringing key issues to administration. More voices provide strength and help determine a shared vision. Our involvement in nationwide coalitions to expand access to higher education, improve working and learning conditions on college campuses, and to disrupt the neoliberal corporatization of higher education offer a path to saving the public good functions of Rutgers University and other college campuses.

Nurses on Strike: Organizing Health Care Workers during COVID-19

Gabriel Winant
University of Chicago

AT SAINT VINCENT HOSPITAL in Worcester, Massachusetts, nurses have been on strike for nearly five months. At the heart of the dispute is the question of staffing, sharply exacerbated by the onset of the pandemic. As Katie Murphy, the president of the Massachusetts Nurses Association (MNA), [describes the issue](#) in an interview with Alex Bruns-Smith and Matthew Erlich, “All of a sudden, we were inundated with incredibly sick patients, and we didn’t have enough nurses. At Saint Vincent, the nurses themselves organized the recovery room into an intensive care unit so all the COVID patients who needed critical care nursing could go to the ICU. We were all stretched thin. I was in a COVID ICU on the night shift for thirteen months.”

But the staffing question did not originate with the pandemic. The MNA had raised it in negotiations in 2019, and in 2018, the union had fought an unsuccessful statewide campaign for a ballot initiative mandating higher nurse staffing levels in hospitals. Enjoying only uneven and ambivalent support from the labor movement, the MNA’s efforts were [swamped by the hospital association’s campaign](#), which spent over \$30 million.

The nurses’ strike at Saint Vincent, while remarkable for its duration, exemplifies the possibilities of broader militancy among health care workers that may emerge from the pandemic—and the intense challenges that emerge in their struggles. As Sarah Jaffe and C. M. Lewis [wrote this spring in *The Nation*](#), half of the major strikes of 2020 involved nurses—including last year’s largest strike, the stoppage of 7,800 nurses at Swedish Medical Centers in Washington. Major organizing campaigns also succeeded at Mission Hospital in Asheville, North Carolina in September 2020, and at Maine Medical Center in April 2021.

Numerous major walkouts over the last eighteen months have been averted at the last minute, including this spring a major statewide nursing home strike in Connecticut, potentially implicating thousands of workers. The agreement that SEIU

NURSES SAY YES ON 1 SAFE PATIENT LIMITS

The Truth About the Patient Safety Act - Question 1:
There Are Plenty of Nurses in Mass. to Comply with the Law

Despite false claims made by hospital executives, there are more than enough nurses in Mass. to meet the staffing standards called for under the Patient Safety Act - Ballot Question 1. For example:

- We have a surplus of nurses. Massachusetts ranks near the top nationally for nurses per capita and a recent report found Massachusetts to be one of only two states with NO nursing shortage (American Journal of Medical Quality, 2012).
- Massachusetts has the highest percentage of nurses working per diem or part time in the nation. We have surveyed those nurses and most say they would increase their hours if limits were in place, which would be equivalent to more than 2,000 RN positions.
- There are several thousand nurses who have left bedside nursing precisely because staffing conditions are so bad. Many of those nurses say they will return if limits are in place.
- In the last five years, Mass. nursing schools graduated more than 18,000 nurses, with an average of 3,500 graduates per year. Those nurses are now leaving our state because hospital executives refuse to hire them. (Mass Board of Registration in Nursing).
- In California following implementation of their limits law, more than 100,000 nurses flocked to the state to work under safer conditions.

There is no shortage of nurses in Massachusetts, there is only a shortage of nurses willing to work under the current conditions.

Vote YES on Question 1
If we build it, they will come.

For more information about the Patient Safety Act, visit www.safepatientlimits.org.

[f](#) /SafePatientLimits [@](#)safepatientlimits [@](#)PatientSafetyMA www.SafePatientLimits.org

Flyer urging Massachusetts voters to support the Patient Safety Act, September 2018

1199 New England [reached on the verge of a strike](#) included a \$20 minimum wage for nursing assistants; \$30 for licensed practical nurses; new public health standards for nursing homes including mandated infection prevention staff and dispersal of concentrated residents; and state child care funds for nursing home workers. A month later, the [state legislature passed measures](#) requiring nursing homes to maintain two-month supplies of PPE, raising from \$60 to \$75 the monthly allotment for resident personal needs, and increasing mandatory direct care per resident from 1.9 to three. This development should be understood as the political consequence of the workplace organization of SEIU members. And as I write this, 2,700 members of SEIU Local 73 and the National Nurses Union have recently settled strikes against the administration of Cook County, Illinois—[bargaining units overwhelmingly concentrated in the county health system](#).

But as Jaffe and Lewis observe,

There's even more happening below the surface. Important strikes like the one at St. Vincent often go unnoticed, in part because the Bureau of Labor Statistics tracks only strikes involving 1,000 or more workers. That misses a lot of what's happening, making invisible the fights of many care workers deemed essential during the pandemic. Even though the BLS tracked only four nursing strikes in 2020, nurses struck at Santa Rosa Memorial Hospital, Riverside Community Hospital, Montefiore New Rochelle, Backus Hospital, St. Mary's Medical Center, Albany Medical Center, and AMITA St. Joseph Medical Center—all strikes involving hundreds of nurses.

Although health care workers now mainly hate the phrase “essential worker,” examining it allows us to see something important about the class politics of COVID-19. The phrase is insulting, of course, because of the widespread individual experience shared by so-called “frontline workers” of disrespect and endangerment at the hands of management, compensated in cloying sentiment rather than improved wages or working conditions. Yet these workers are essential, and they were before the pandemic. Health care has grown to become the largest category of the labor market because we use the health care system to manage our social problems, and indeed to hold our society together. In effect, we dump problems onto care workers for them to manage for the rest of us—a practice decades older than COVID-19.

This essential quality creates the possibility of social and political leverage and leadership—as witnessed recently in figures like Cori Bush and India Walton, activist nurses elected to high office in Rust Belt cities. But it is also accompanied by serious political challenges. Health care employers typically find their margins by holding down labor costs as much as possible, which is the source of the perennial staffing problem and imposes limits on what workers can win through industrial as opposed to political action.

But at the level of political action, health care workers have difficulty speaking with one voice. Workers' organization is patchy—nationwide only [7 percent](#) of health care and social assistance workers are union members. And even among the organized, there is significant fragmentation both by occupation and skill on one hand, and union affiliation on the other. SEIU's choice to stay out of the MNA's ballot initiative campaign in Massachusetts in 2018—a decision fraught with tensions of race, skill, and status—is only one example of the many challenges that issue from such fragmentation.

The potential for health care workers to lead a larger working-class movement for a just and humane society is tremendous. But as recent, modest victories in places like Connecticut suggest, success will require political, not just industrial struggle; and that in turn depends on workers' organizations' capacity to represent the needs and mobilize the strength of the millions who depend on them for care.

LABORonline

LaborOnline features commentary on a host of issues, contemporary and historical, as well as “instant” dialogue and debate among readers and authors.

Recent posts

- Nikki Mandell, *Teaching Labor's Story: Writing Workshop*
- John Logan, *The Legacy of Bessemer: The Amazon Campaign is a Gift to the Labor Movement*
- Michael Goldfield, *Postmortem on Bessemer Amazon Defeat*
- John Logan, *How Amazon's Anti-Union Consultants Are Trying to Crush the Labor Movement*

[LAWCHA.org/laboronline](https://www.lawcha.org/laboronline)

Distinguished Service Award: JULIA REICHERT

Julie Greene, University of Maryland
Immediate Past President, LAWCHA

LAWCHA gives its Distinguished Service Award periodically to individuals who have made a distinctive contribution to the study of working-class people.

OVER A SUSTAINED CAREER of fifty years, filmmaker Julia Reichert has brilliantly encouraged a better and deeper understanding of the working-class experience. With twelve documentary films to her credit as of 2021, she has explored a wide range of challenges faced by working-class men and women. Many of her films are used as resources in the classes labor historians teach, and they provide an eloquent way to bring students into the world of workers. Her films have become central to scholars' and students' understanding of labor history. Among them are the classic *Union Maids* (1976), which focused on three women labor activists from Staughton and Alice Lynd's book *Rank and File; Seeing Red* (1983), which tells the story of American communism through the eyes of grassroots activists and powerfully expresses both the hopes of activists and the impact of government repression; and *A Lion in the House* (2006), a pathbreaking film on childhood cancer. Two of her recent films examine the impact of global economic developments on workers: *The Last Truck* (2009) on the closing of an assembly plant in Ohio and *American Factory* (2019) on the takeover of that same Ohio factory by a Chinese company. Reichert's latest film, *9to5: The Story of a Movement* (2020) examines the amazing labor organization for clerical workers created in the 1970s.

Much of Reichert's work has focused on working-class women. In 1971 she co-founded New Day Films to support the feminist movement by distributing films directly to schools and community groups. In a 2020 interview, Reichert noted her early commitment to exploring gender equality, saying, "I remember thinking that just depicting the lives of regular women would be a radical act because it had not been done." Her cinematic style has focused attention on her subjects, empowering them to tell their own stories and avoiding a voiceover narration. Her cinematic strategies, brilliant storytelling, political interventions, and sustained interest in the lives of working men and women together have highlighted the importance of labor history and made a gigantic impact on the ways Americans understand working-class struggles over the last fifty years.

Reichert's films have received numerous major nominations and several awards, including an Academy Award for *American Factory* and an Emmy Award for *A Lion in the House*. In her acceptance speech for the Academy Award in 2020, Reichert declared: "Working people have it harder and harder these days and we believe that things will get better when workers of the world unite!"

For all these reasons, LAWCHA is honored to present its Distinguished Service Award to Julia Reichert.



Photo by Yannis Pal

Julia Reichert during a masterclass at the 9th Thessaloniki Documentary Festival, 2007. Photo has been cropped.
Creative Commons license: creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/legalcode

Prizes & Awards

Taft Prize

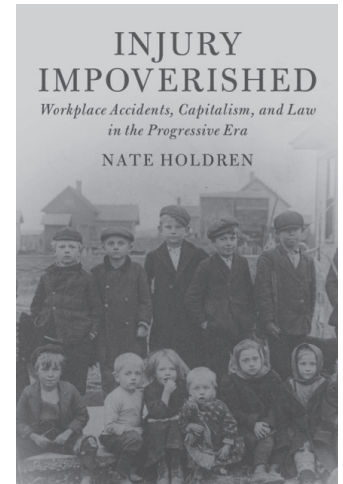
Injury Impoverished: Workplace Accidents, Capitalism, and Law in the Progressive Era

by Nate Holdren

Cambridge University Press

NATE HOLDREN'S elegantly and elegiacally written book lays out the ways in which the early twentieth-century capitalistic legal system commodified workers' body parts in what he terms two different types of tyrannies: "the tyranny of the table" and the "tyranny of the trial." Unlike those who manufactured these tyrannies, Holdren never loses sight of the very real humanity of those who experienced workplace accidents. During this pandemic year, it seems fitting that we celebrate a work which so deftly reverberates beyond historical understandings of injury and harm and considers those of obligation, dignity and justice.

Prize Committee: Ileen DeVault (Chair), Josh Freeman, Louis Hyman, Kimberly Phillips-Boehm, and Paul Ortiz



David Montgomery Award

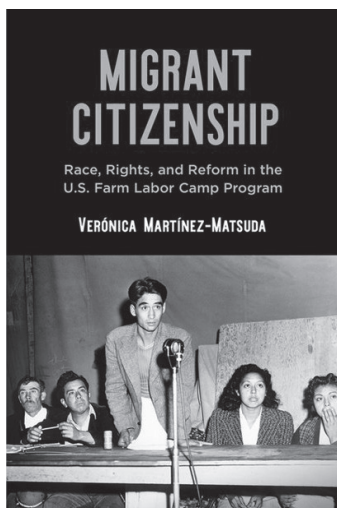
Migrant Citizenship: Race, Rights, and Reform in the U.S. Farm Labor Camp Program

by Verónica Martínez-Matsuda

University of Pennsylvania Press

MIGRANT CITIZENSHIP IS A STUNNINGLY ORIGINAL STUDY of the history of working people that offers intimate stories of life inside farm labor camps that spread across the United States. Verónica Martínez-Matsuda recovers the demands for full citizenship voiced by the Japanese, Mexican, and African-American migrant families. She uses oral histories, camp blueprints and maps, photos, medical records, song books, and newsletters to read the community of the camps that workers sought and created. Her meticulous research reveals the limits of Farm Security Administration policy and describes conservative efforts opposing this New Deal experiment. Martínez-Matsuda analyzes the role of the state fully in this masterful blending of labor, cultural, and political history. *Migrant Citizenship* consistently attends to how race and nationality shaped activism and aspirations and uses gender in provocative ways while underscoring the centrality of the family economy. We see workers as intellectuals and community leaders, learning how they conceived governance and rights. Martínez-Matsuda upends conventional views of the New Deal, finding progressive reform stretching into the 1940s in a continuing, if uphill, battle for the flourishing of migrant families.

Prize Committee: David Roediger (Chair), Dorothy Sue Cobble, and Laurie Green



Herbert G. Gutman Prize

Work and Sexuality in the Sunbelt: Homophobic Workplace Discrimination in the U.S. South and Southwest, 1970 to the Present

by Joshua Hollands, University College London

Advisors: Jonathan Bell and Nick Witham

JOSHUA HOLLANDS'S DISSERTATION "Work and Sexuality in the Sunbelt" focuses on the fight to secure employment rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals across the U.S. South, a very important battleground. As he put it, "Workers across the South and Southwest can be married to someone of the same sex on a Sunday but be legally fired on a Monday for being gay." Many states, particularly those in the South, allowed discrimination based on sexual orientation. Hollands examines mobilization efforts focused on specific cities and corporations to win employment rights. To analyze the costs and benefits of this approach, he explores six case studies (looking for example at Apple Computer, Cracker Barrel, and Duke University as well as cities such as Houston) and shows that a key result has been a mish-mash across the South, with many victories but only patchwork coverage for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender individuals. In the context of declining labor movement power and the rise of Christian morality across the South, winning employment rights regardless of sexuality has been challenging. These battles over employment rights in both the public and private spheres shaped conservatism in the Sunbelt as well as its opposition to, or acceptance of, LGBT rights. This dissertation is beautifully written and innovatively connects labor and working class history to the history of sexuality, conservatism, capitalism, and the Sunbelt.

Prize Committee: Julie Greene (Chair), Touré Reed, and Jessica Wilkerson



Joshua Hollands

2022 Annual Meeting

In even years, LAWCHA sponsors panels and holds its board and membership meetings at the annual meeting of the Organization of American Historians.

Join us in Boston in 2022!

www.oah.org/meetings-events/oah22/

A promotional banner for the OAH Conference on American History & 2022 Annual Meeting. The banner features a photograph of a historical site with a statue and horses. Text on the banner includes: "A HYBRID EVENT", "OAH CONFERENCE ON AMERICAN HISTORY & 2022 ANNUAL MEETING", "Indigenous/American Pasts and Futures", "March 31-April 3, 2022", "oah.org | #oah22", and "BOSTON" written vertically on the right side.

Labor History Bibliography, 2020

Compiled by Rosemary Feurer, Northern Illinois University

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