

A LAWCHA Forum

Labor and Politics

by Bob Bussel (bussel@uoregon.edu)
and Joe McCartin (jam6@georgetown.edu)

Almost from its inception the American labor movement has engaged in political action to advance the interests of workers. Politics, however, has been a challenging, often frustrating enterprise for unions, raising a host of questions that still remain relevant. Should labor's political participation focus on issues of direct concern to workers or aim at broader social transformation? How possible is it for unions with different interests, priorities, and cultures to agree on a unified political strategy? Should labor align itself more closely with existing political parties or seek to develop a more independent political voice? And how does labor address the recurring tendency of workers to be guided politically by ethnic, racial, cultural, or religious considerations rather than class identity or union affiliation?

Over the past 15 years, unions have invested considerable financial resources in political action, grown much more technologically sophisticated, and committed themselves to more direct, personal communication with their members, particularly during election cycles. These efforts have led to much greater turnout among members of union households and a renewed respect for labor's political capabilities. Union political activity especially heightens during presidential election years, and 2008 will be no exception. The Bush administration has been implacably hostile to union interests, and the opportunity to elect a more worker-friendly president will doubtless spur a massive labor effort.

With so much at stake in an election that has already attracted widespread attention and excitement, the editors have asked a diverse set of commentators, including several historians, a union political director, and a state legislator with strong union roots, to reflect on labor's political role, its strategic options, and its future prospects. We invite LAWCHA readers to respond and will endeavor to keep the conversation going as the drama of the 2008 campaign and labor's role continue to unfold.

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Letter from the PresidentLabor History and
The Politics of Hope

by Michael Honey (mhoney@u.washington.edu)

In 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr., called on us to "shift from a 'thing-oriented' society to a 'person-oriented' society." He sought to create a multi-racial Poor People's Campaign to demand that money for war be spent for human needs. In Memphis, he fought for the right of all workers to unionize, and declared, "all labor has dignity."

At LAWCHA's roundtable and reception this March 29 at the Organization of American Historians convention in New York City, we will honor and remember Martin and Coretta King and renew our own commitments to social justice. In the coming months we will sponsor other sessions at the OAH and all the major historical conferences. In Vancouver, B.C., June 6-8, we will gather with friends in Canada and the Pacific Northwest to connect the battles of immigrant and indigenous workers to the global labor movement, to compare histories and debate how we can support the right to organize on all sides of all borders. [See Ross Rieder's article on the conference in this issue, page 11.]

LAWCHA is rolling. Under Alice Kessler-Harris's leadership, we strengthened our organization's finances and tightened our structure. We now give out the Herbert Gutman Prize for the best dissertation in labor history and help to judge the Philip Taft labor history prize. We are strengthening regional labor history organizations, especially in the South and the Midwest (including the annual labor history conference in Detroit). On May 27-31, 2009, we will hold a Chicago conference titled "Race, Labor and the City: Crises Old and New." Save the dates!

Forty years since King, we are here to tell labor's story. Who can better explain the politics of rich and poor than the labor historians? The need for workers of all lands to reject racial and religious hatred, imperialism, and war, and to create a more just distribution of wealth? Who better to explain how racism and male supremacy intertwine with class and economic exploitation? Who better to teach the value of solidarity and

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Report from the Secretary's Desk

by Cecelia Bucki (cbucki@mail.fairfiled.edu)

Robert Korstad, chair of the Elections Committee, reports the LAWCHA election results, from Fall 2007 as follows:

172 ballots were received (a turnout of about 35%).

The officers' slate was uncontested.

The officers this term are: President Michael Honey, University of Washington-Tacoma (mhoney@u.washington.edu); Vice-President Kimberley L. Phillips, College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Va. (klphil@wm.edu); Secretary Cecelia Bucki, Fairfield University, Fairfield, Conn. (cbucki@mail.fairfield.edu); and Treasurer Thomas Klug, Marygrove College, Detroit (tklug@marygrove.edu). Immediate past president Alice Kessler-Harris, Columbia University, New York (akh571@columbia.edu) remains on the executive committee.

Their new two-year term ends in Spring 2010.

The top five vote-getters for Board of Directors were Nancy MacLean, Northwestern University, Evanston, Ill. (nkm050@northwestern.edu); Annelise Orleck, Dartmouth College, Hanover, N.H. (annelise.orleck@dartmouth.edu); Gilbert G. Gonzalez, University of California-Irvine (gggonzal@uci.edu); Steve Meyer, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (stemey@umw.edu); and Colleen O'Neill, Utah State University, Logan, Utah (colleen.oneill@usu.edu).

Their new three-year term ends in Spring 2011.

Congratulations to them all. Their new terms began January 1, 2008.

Also, the ratified revised LAWCHA constitution is posted to the LAWCHA web-site, www.lawcha.org.

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President's Letter

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civic engagement?

Today, people from all walks of life once again hope that another world is possible. Teaching and researching obviously are not enough. Through civic engagement, we can help decide whether we move forward to a better world or remain captive to the past. "Telling Labor's Story" means writing op-ed columns, holding workshops, producing web sites, films and blogs, giving speeches, demonstrating, getting involved politically to advance a labor rights agenda.

We need to break out of any notion of labor history as mainly an academic discipline. Labor history is a calling, and LAWCHA provides us with a vehicle. The next time you find yourself bogged down in academic life, remember that we have equally important things to do off campus. Change the laws. Donate money. Organize programs. Write op-eds. Take political action. In this extraordinary year, our country and the world are standing at a crossroads, as in 1968. There will never be a better time to for us to advance the politics of hope.

LERC Celebrates 3rd Decade, Starts New Fund

by Bob Bussel (bussel@uoregon.edu)

The Labor Education and Research Center (LERC) at the University of Oregon celebrated its 30th anniversary on March 7, 2008 at an event in Portland attended by over 500 people. The event featured a symposium on prospects for forging stronger labor-community alliances and speeches by Oregon governor Ted Kulongoski, University of Oregon president Dave Frohnmayer, and a keynote address by Ruth Milkman, director of the UCLA Institute for Labor and Employment.

In addition to celebrating LERC's achievements in developing union leadership, conducting vital applied research, and helping shape public policy on work and employment issues, the event also raised money to help launch LERC's new Strategic Training and Action Research (STAR) Fund. The STAR Fund will support special projects designed to encourage fresh thinking and promote new initiatives aimed at addressing the needs and interests of workers in Oregon. The STAR Fund's first project will send a delegation of trade unionists to California to study union efforts to create jobs in emerging renewable energy industries. The delegation will then share its new knowledge with other unionists in Oregon and work to help the union movement participate more effectively in developing public policy on global warming, alternative energy sources, and creating green jobs.

The event highlighted the strong support LERC has historically received from the union movement, the university, political leaders, and other community supporters. One theme was repeatedly expressed throughout the evening: the recognition that university-based workers education programs must continue to have broad support in order to ensure that the needs of workers and the union movement are effectively addressed within the higher education system.

Telling Labor's Story: Exposing the Anti-Union NLRB

by Joseph Hower (jeh67@georgetown.edu), project coordinator, Telling Labor's Story

Nearly one year ago, LAWCHA launched Telling Labor's Story, a network to bring together scholars of labor history interested in publicly presenting the present struggle for workers' rights in light of the history of that same struggle. This past summer, our efforts focused on explaining and publicizing the Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA), a bill that would make it easier for workers to organize themselves. The legislation passed in the House by a large margin, but was blocked from a vote by its opponents in the Senate.

Since the defeat of EFCA a series of decisions by the National Labor Relations Board in September further underscored the need for a major overhaul of American labor law and opened up a new opportunity for labor historians to intervene in the public debate about the right to organize.

The NLRB was created to protect workers' rights to form unions and to engage in collective bargaining, but the recent decisions—which overturned long-standing Board precedents—pose a fundamental threat to the right to organize, making it harder for workers to form unions and secure collective bargaining contracts, while, at the same time, strengthening the hand of hostile employers anxious to remove existing unions and weakening the legal remedies available to employees who are illegally discriminated against for supporting a union.

The most damaging decision came in *Dana Corp.*, 351 NLRB No. 28, in which the Board stripped voluntary recognition of long-standing legal protections. Overruling forty years of its own precedents, the Board's 3-2 decision held that a minority of employees, a mere thirty percent, could contest a voluntarily recognized union by forcing a NLRB election. The decision forces any employer who voluntarily recognized a union to post a government-issued notice laying out the "right" of the minority to force an election by—a provision which the Board's two dissenters charged as "cutting volun-

tary recognition off at the knees." It is worth noting that the same Board declined to consider a petition that would have required all employers to post notices informing employees of their NLRA rights. It also held that authorization cards were sufficient to withdraw recognition from a union if a majority of employees signed a petition, due to the delay involved in conducting a new election (*Wurtland Nursing & Rehabilitation Center*, 351 NLRB No. 50).

Two other decisions released in September 2007 make it much harder for illegally terminated employees to collect back pay. In *St. George Warehouse*, 351 NLRB No. 42, the Board ruled that two leaders of an organizing drive who were fired for distributing union authorization cards at a warehouse in Kearney, New Jersey, were obligated to prove that they had sought alternate employment after being fired before they could receive back wages. Similarly, the Board ruled in *Grosvenor Resort*, 350 NLRB No. 86, that illegally fired workers who wait "an unreasonably long time before initially seeking interim work"—defined as more than two weeks—were ineligible for compensation for that period, lest the Board "reward idleness." In this case, forty-four workers at a Florida resort hotel were penalized for continuing to picket for several weeks after being illegally fired in the hope of getting their jobs back.

These decisions underscore the fundamental problems in American labor law, yet they have received relatively little attention in the public sphere. In the coming months, Telling Labor's Story will begin work on a pamphlet on the history of the right to organize that will be accessible to a non-academic audience. If you are interested in more information about the recent NLRB decisions or in getting involved in Telling Labor's Story, please contact me at jeh67@georgetown.edu.

Join the Labor and Working-Class History Association
at the

OAH Annual Meeting

for a reception honoring
activism for peace, justice, and equality
in the tradition of Martin Luther King and Coretta Scott King

Saturday, April 29, 2008, at 4:30 pm.
New York Hilton, West Ballroom Foyer

Those not registered for the OAH meeting are welcome!

Sponsored by the Labor and Working-Class History Association (LAWCHA), with support from the AFL-CIO, the Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute, the University of California Press, and W.W. Norton Publishers.

A LAWCHA Forum on Politics and Labor

Hope vs. Experience: Democrats, Labor, and the 2008 Election

by Robert Zieger

In this year's presidential election, I will vote for either Barack Obama or Hillary Clinton, just as I have voted for every Democratic candidate since I cast my first ballot, for John Kennedy, in 1960. As a supporter of organized labor, as a union member, and as a reader of Mike Davis's *Prisoners of the American Dream*, I am well aware of the barrenness of the marriage of labor to the Democratic Party. Even so, it is the words of Mike Harrington, when asked in the spring of 1976 about his choice of candidates in the forthcoming presidential election, that best express my political stance: "Any Democrat," Harrington told a group of students in my Manhattan, Kansas, living room that spring evening—"except George Wallace, but including, if he were running, Mickey Mouse." As a socialist, Harrington regretted the narrowness of the political options on offer; as a realist, he understood that, all things considered, the frayed and battered Democracy represented "the left wing of the possible."

For years now it has been my hope that the men and women



Barack Obama at a Culinary Workers' rally, January 11, 2008.

Photo courtesy of the Obama campaign, under a BY-NC-SA Creative Commons license (creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.0/deed.en)

who, in various permutations, dominate the Democratic Party's jerry-built organization, will at last realize the political and electoral necessity for a strong and vigorous labor movement. But, alas, every year the story is pretty much the same. As Robert Kuttner observed during the 2000 presidential contest, "Once again, the labor movement will do the heavy lifting for the Democratic Party" and "once again, it will be the caboose at the end of the train." Recent Democratic presidencies give little grounds for believing that things will soon change. Labor support for Jimmy Carter in 1976 was an important factor in his gaining the nomination, but Carter did little while in office to further labor's agenda, at the head of which were national health insurance and meaningful labor law reform. With Bill Clinton labor did get a rare progressive majority on the NLRB and family leave legislation but instead of labor law reform it got the Dunlop Commission on the Future of Worker-Management Relations report and NAFTA.

Why then my dogged loyalty? Why this perennial triumph of hope over experience?

LAWCHA members hardly need reminding that, however lukewarm Democratic aspirants may have been, the alternative was invariably worse. The administration of George W. Bush may be particularly egregious in its anti-labor initiatives—stripping thousands of federal employees of collective bargaining rights; a union-wrecking NLRB; grotesquely skewed tax and fiscal policies—but Republican ascendancy from Nixon through the current administration has been bad news for working men and women, who have watched their living standards erode and their unions become marginalized.

Moreover, as Taylor Dark¹ reminds us, it could have been worse. Even during the dismal Reagan-George H. W. Bush years, Democratic Congressional majorities, achieved in part through labor's large-scale financial and organizational efforts, produced some surprising pro-worker legislation. To be sure, as PATCO strikers would be the first to attest, the Eighties were not good years for unionists. But Dark points to trade legislation, plant closing legislation and civil rights and fair housing laws, along with the rejection of Reagan's Supreme Court nominee Robert Bork, as evidences of the fruitfulness of the labor-Democratic nexus. These were small victories, to be sure, hardly in the same league as the Wagner Act, John Kennedy's Executive Order 10988, or LBJ's Great Society. Still, we need only observe the absence of any sort of liberal advance during the 2000's to appreciate the importance of having a Democratic presence in Washington.

Even so, "It Could Be Worse" is hardly an inspiring battle cry. The early departure of the most openly pro-union aspirant, John Edwards, does not bode well. Yes, the AFT has endorsed Hillary and SEIU Barack. But is either candidate foregrounding the issues most relevant to the embattled labor movement? True, both voted in the Senate for the Employee Free Choice Act, but neither has made a robust commitment to use public policy to rebuild the labor movement, and thus to revitalize the "labor" part of the liberal-labor coalition. Indeed, *American Prospect* editor Kuttner reminds us, "The last Democratic president to openly celebrate the labor movement was Franklin Roosevelt." The conventional wisdom, I guess, is that the political negatives associated with forthright advocacy outweigh the positives, thus precluding open and energetic identification with labor's cause. Still, even the most centrist Democratic candidate should heed Kuttner's call to "identify a new administration with the resurgence of unionism" because "The trade union movement is not only the instrument of worker voice and of better wages and working conditions, but it remains the most potent civic counterweight to the political power of organized business."²

Alas, it is doubtful that anyone near the levers of power is actually listening. Yet if labor supporters lose hope, they concede the game before it starts. Not expecting a miracle, I venture only to recommend that the two aspirants—or more likely, their policy and program advisors—crack open Paul Krugman's recently published *The Conscience of a Liberal*

and heed the words of this born-again critic of recent Republican ascendancy. As Krugman observes, from the 1930s into the 1960s, a strong labor movement counteracted powerful corporate interests in both the economic and political arenas. A “middle-class” society, characterized by expanded home ownership, mass access to higher education, and a relatively egalitarian income-distribution structure emerged. Clearly, “Unions were . . . an important factor limiting income inequality. . . .”

But labor power meant more than fairer income distribution and moderation of disparities of income. It had a critical political dimension as well, one that the Democratic aspirants, their handlers, and the men and women who inhabit the party’s shadowy decision-making apparatus would do well to contemplate. Thus, in the 1950s, Krugman notes, “The strength of the union movement . . . greatly benefitted the Democrats . . ., [since] a powerful union movement had the effect of mobilizing lower-income voters.”³

Will 2008’s Democrats recognize at long last the critical importance of a vibrant labor movement to their electoral and programmatic fortunes? Even if they did, would a crippled and all-too-often-sclerotic labor movement have the vision and energy to rebuild and regroup? Don’t bet on it.

But another question merits a more positive response, to wit: Will Democratic majorities and Democratic occupation of the White House be good for wage-earners? And what about this one: Can labor’s friends harbor even a long-shot hope that a new Democratic administration’s agenda might include union-building initiatives? To be sure, the odds are long but, in the words of Judy Tenuta, “It could happen.” Meanwhile, since Mickey isn’t running this year, I’m for Hillary or Barack.

1. Taylor E. Dark, *The Unions and the Democrats: An Enduring Alliance* (Ithaca: ILR Press-Cornell University Press, 1999), 152-57

2. Robert Kuttner, “Good Jobs in a Global Economy,” *American Prospect*, Jan.-Feb. 2008, 24.

3. Paul Krugman, *Conscience of a Liberal* (New York: Norton, 2007), 48-51, 70-71.

Why Obama, Why Now

by Nikhil Pal Singh

At the risk of sounding naïve after these years of catastrophe and season upon season of electoral disappointment, I admit that I am swept up in the excitement of the Obama campaign for the Presidency. It is not exaggeration to say that since the late 1970s our domestic political life has been in a continuous, seemingly unstoppable rightward drift, characterized by (among other things) largely bi-partisan commitments to neo-liberal economic “restructuring,” resurgent militarism, and mass incarceration. Despite important efforts to nurture and sustain movements for peace and non-intervention, economic, social and cultural justice, I cannot remember a moment in which these exhibited real potential to breakthrough the reactionary fog, let alone to constitute an electoral majority. Obama’s persona, his voice, and his message, and above

all the seeming popularity of his persona, voice and message, inspires me to think that perhaps the wheel of American politics is finally turning again.

On what do I base this sense and feeling of hope? Despite some populist tones, Obama has done little to suggest that he is more than a political centrist and pragmatist. His call for “change” is still something of an empty signifier – one that resonates on frequencies that are not necessarily manifest in specifically stated policy positions. The profound evocation of inclusiveness that girds his popularity depends upon a fluctuating and unstable racial/national fantasy that also yields a characteristic political elusiveness. Analysts from across the political spectrum thus alternatively decry and celebrate Obama for his post-partisan, post-grievance political style. For some his worldly autobiography decisively crosses the threshold of the slave and settler narratives that has interminably cleaved the national imagination. While for others the same aspect represents the unhappy fulfillment of a vacuous, apolitical multiculturalism, the difference that no longer makes any difference at all.

In many of these accounts, Obama has come to embody what might be called *post-racial blackness*, a paradoxical subjectivity that appears to finally solve the riddle of “race,” by conforming to the rule that affirms his (and America’s) exceptionalism: in the US anyone – and especially any black person – can rise to the top (even when relatively few actually do). It seems undoubtedly true that Obama is appealing to many whites because he asks for little in return. At the same time, over the past three decades, the triumph of a civil rights civic mythology – augmented by a palliative and therapeutic culture industry – has prepared US publics for precisely this kind of figure. The scene of his triumph in this sense is already scripted in the stock repertoire of the military-media-sports complex: (mostly) whites bearing witness to black triumph over adversity as the measure of a new found racial and national innocence.

Yet, I suspect this is still less than half of the story. Cutting

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Diane Rosenbaum (repdiane@teleport.com) is a 30-year member of the Communications Workers of America and has been a state legislator in Oregon since 1999. She is the Speaker Pro Tempore of the Oregon House of Representatives and also served as president of the National Labor Caucus of State Legislators.

against the grain of Obama's success has been an unusually obsessive focus on the racialized cast of the Democratic primaries and caucuses. As each state election is broken down, Obama's ability to capture the votes of all manner of white folks – and particularly white working-class voters – has gradually legitimated him, even as it elicits a giddy surprise – even elation among the pundits who pronounce on these contests: perhaps nothing is the matter with Kansas after all. But make no mistake: *every single one of these bets is being hedged*. As normatively fulfilling as it may appear, Obama's rise contradicts secretly held wisdom that demography is in fact destiny – that racial partisanship – not to mention the violent specter of white supremacy – is alive and well in the United States. Indeed, such rumination, often on the margins of conversation and *sotto voce*, is just as integral to the political drama now unfolding.

This insight begins to move us closer to what I consider to be the more essential point: the *violently interrupted* political trajectory of the black freedom movement still constellates the politics of the present. At its most profound and far-reaching the black freedom movement augured a general social transformation of the United States, one rooted in collective, coalitional opposition to what King in his final hour called America's interrelated flaws: "racism, materialism and militarism." The conventionally bifurcated history of the movement we now inherit – with one part simply annexed to a teleology of liberal-democracy and its clichés of progress, and the other told as a tale of inner city decline and sectarian racialism – fails utterly to reckon with its transformative and aborted political promise.

We might go further and suggest that it has been the organized far right – whose modal importance to U.S. political culture is consistently underestimated by consensus and revisionist historians alike – that most fully grasped the promise and contingency of politics at the end of the 1960s. This is paradoxical since the right largely conceptualized and sustained its long march through mainstream institutions as acts of historical restoration, including recoding white supremacy through calls for law and order, the launching of a second cold war, judicial rollback, culture wars, and attacks on the social legacy of the New Deal. The accumulated wreckage of

this period, increasingly visible to larger and larger numbers of people, includes the constitution of new subjects without rights, rising class apartheid, the persistence of racially differentiated vulnerabilities to disease, disaster and death, a predatory capitalism of extraction and dispossession, and the reanimation of imperial fever dreams.

So after more than thirty years of creative rearguard actions (including the work of labor and community organizers like Obama, as well as the prodigious contributions of many university based scholars and activists), one of the most exciting and satisfying aspects of his campaign is its revisionary pedagogy – the way it consciously seeks to define the narrative arc of an alternative "story of American freedom." In contrast to those who blithely emphasize his lack of connection to the social heritage of slavery, Obama has clearly and repeatedly articulated Emancipation as the ground of an unfinished and ongoing project of substantive democratic revision, one linked to a series of progressive "enfranchisements" – of workers, African Americans, women and sexual minorities from the New Deal to the Civil Rights Eras. To recognize, as many have, that Obama draws upon an aspirational notion of freedom is to recognize the converse as well, that Americans, least of all, can afford a complacent ethic of freedom as achieved condition.

It may well be that the scale of the economic and social crisis of the empire that does not speak its name is greater than we think and is likely to worsen. A single favorable election (something that is by no means a foregone conclusion) will not begin to repair the damage that has been done. An increasingly explicit part of Obama's argument – that buttresses the conviction that he is more than an ordinary politician – is the idea that meaningful and durable social change in the US will necessitate a renewal of the double movement between governance and progressive political mobilization. This much seems clear: this is a *critical election*, one that could augur, in Walter Dean Burnham's terms, a fundamental realignment in the "mass coalitional bases of major parties" and a short-circuiting of major issue and ideological divides of the past decades. Whether it can lead to a more fundamental resolution of the truly "substantive issues" of war, immigration and wealth polarization remains to be seen, and will depend on how and whether the forces of progressive labor and social justice now gathering around Obama can begin to drive a new political agenda for the country.

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Check www.lawcha.org for updates!

The Paradoxical Situation of Organized Labor in American Politics

by Taylor E. Dark III

Any student of organized labor in recent American history has become familiar, perhaps more so than ever desired, with *the chart*. The line on the x-axis starts its downward slope in the mid-1950s and continues its trajectory unabated to the present, raising the question of whether it can ever reverse course. The quantity being measured is, of course, the per-

centage of the workforce unionized. It peaks in 1954 at about 35 percent of the workforce, and then commences a virtually linear declension, finally hitting its contemporary low of 12 percent. By 2007, union density in the private sector was a mere 7.5 percent (although the public sector rate remained considerably more robust at 36 percent). On the basis of such numbers, many assumptions have been made. Most notably, a corresponding decline in union political influence is often perceived, with a seriously adverse impact on the health of the left in American politics.

What, then, is one to make of a *Wall Street Journal* article in January 2008 with a headline declaring that “Labor Makes Big Comeback in ’08 Races”? The article asserts that “by deploying new strategies to use their money, unions have regained their position as the single-strongest force in elections, outside of the presidential candidates and the national parties.”¹ Likewise, *Washington Post* columnist E.J. Dionne concludes in a September 2007 article headlined “Labor in Fighting Trim” that “the nation’s unions are more politically influential today than they were in the movement’s heyday in the 1950s.” One measure of labor’s power, Dionne suggests, is “a Democratic presidential race in which every candidate is seeking labor’s blessing. No Democrat is criticizing unions as ‘a special interest,’ a common line of attack from moderate and neoliberal Democrats in the 1980s.”² If unions have continued to decline as a force in the workplace, what could possibly explain such proclamations of their political success?

The best explanation for this apparent anomaly can be found in an appreciation for the changing coalitional bases of the two parties. For most of the twentieth century, organized labor found itself in an unfortunate situation in the American party system. An electoral system for the legislative branch based on single-member districts (either states or congressional districts) with members elected by simple pluralities (i.e., no runoffs between the top two vote-getters) made the formation of a labor party on the European model extremely difficult. The peculiar “Electoral College” system for choosing presidents only reinforced the existing duopoly in the party system. In addition to institutional barriers, the peculiarities of American political development, economics, and culture all made the formation of a labor or socialist party hard to imagine, and serious efforts to do so were never really pursued (despite considerable commentary and agitating by labor party advocates of various stripes). Unions were thus forced to make their way in a party system with deep roots in America’s pre-industrial past. Beginning in the early 1900s, labor largely chose the Democratic Party, with its strong support in the urban North, as the partisan vehicle through which they could best advance their interests.

In embracing the Democratic Party, however, unions were enmeshed in a coalition structure they could not fully control. Also serving as the party of the “solid South,” the Democrats were deeply penetrated by conservatives who had little affection for organized labor, and in some cases were strongly opposed to it. The consequences of this arrangement were felt most strongly in Congress, where southern Democrats accumulated decades of seniority and the institutional pow-

er that went with it (Committee chairs and other leadership positions). Even when Democrats were the majority in both House and Senate, united party support for labor’s legislative agenda was rarely forthcoming. The problem, union leaders perceived, was a peculiar party system that was not really organized along ideological lines. The presence of southern conservatism in the Democratic party, and the persistence of liberalism among Republicans in the northeast and parts of the west, resulted in a set of jumbled-up alignments that placed labor in a party where it had to share power with some of its most vicious opponents.

Union leaders of the mid-twentieth century were well aware of what needed to be done. Asked in the early 1960s to describe the political strategy of organized labor, United



Hillary Clinton speaks to the SEIU executive board, January 26, 2007. Photo courtesy SEIU under a BY Creative Commons license (creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/deed.en)

Auto Workers president Walter Reuther said: “The American labor movement is essentially trying to work within the two-party structure, but to bring about a basic realignment so that the two parties really stand for distinct points of view.”³ Andrew Biemiller, the AFL-CIO’s Director of Legislation during the 1960s, explained the deeper political logic behind the federation’s support for civil rights reforms: “The 1964 Civil Rights Act and 1965 Voting Rights bill will greatly increase the voting strength of Negroes in some of the previously uncontested, conservative districts in the South, bringing new forces into play in this long dormant area.”⁴ He continued: “We would have no objection to seeing a strong Republican party appear in the South. It might turn Southern Democrats into a more liberal group.”⁵

Despite the many adverse developments for unions over the last four decades, it is worth noting that the current set of party coalitions in American politics closely approximates *what unionists have long sought*. The slow realignment of southern politics that began after the passage of civil rights legislation in the 1960s has resulted in the elimination of southern conservatives as a vital force in the Democratic party. Simultaneously, liberals (and even moderates) have been largely expunged from the ranks of Republicans in Congress and elsewhere. The result is a party system that does indeed provide a choice between “distinct points of view.” Hence, the lack of any candidates for the Democratic nomination who

are attacking unions, or even letting much light emerge between their own policy positions and those of organized labor. Hence, an extraordinary degree of party unity in the United States Congress, which has seen almost unanimous support among Democrats in the 110th Congress in support of labor law reform. Hence, a recognition among journalists that labor's position in the Democratic party, despite declining union density, is surprisingly good.

A closer look at the issue of labor law reform illustrates the improvements in labor's position, as well as the serious limitations that remain. Since the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947, unions have made repeated efforts to reform the nation's labor laws, and have failed every time. In the current Congress, union allies introduced the Employee Freedom of Choice Act (EFCA), which would require employers to accept the "card-check" procedure for union recognition, increase fines on employers who fire union organizers, and mandate the negotiation of first-time labor contracts. Although the bill did not spur a large public controversy comparable to earlier labor law efforts, it clearly had the potential to enhance the effectiveness of labor's organizing efforts. Despite strong business opposition, the bill passed the House of Representatives in March 2007 by a vote of 241 to 185, and garnered the support of *all but two Democratic members* (both from the South). In the Senate, however, the bill experienced the same problem that has bedeviled previous efforts at labor law reform: the use of the filibuster by labor's opponents to require a super-majority of 60 votes. On June 26, 2007, an effort to defeat a Republican-led filibuster failed, with only 51 votes in favor. While labor had lost again, the degree of unity among Democrats was nonetheless remarkable: *for the first time ever, unions secured the unanimous support of the Senate Demo-*

cratic caucus for a labor law reform bill.

The case of EFCA shows that unions have been remarkably successful in securing united Democratic Party support for a significant pro-union revision in labor law. Moreover, all of the candidates for the party's presidential nomination in 2008 have pledged their support for this bill. Yet, the votes to ensure passage still elude organized labor as long as Democrats possess only a narrow majority in the Senate. In this sense, the project of party purification, now largely successful, has yet to provide labor with the tools needed to overcome the anti-majoritarian features of the American political system. Unions fully intend, therefore, to increase yet further their financial and organizational investments in electoral politics as they approach the November 2008 general election. The goal: to ensure that Democrats gain not only the presidency, but also expand their representation in the Senate and House. Should unionists succeed, there is the potential that a forceful Democratic president, working with a united congressional party, may finally achieve the pro-labor legislative changes that have eluded generations of union supporters. With such a success, the irony of declining union density alongside increased union political power would, finally, be complete.

1. Brody Mullins, "Labor Makes Big Comeback in '08 Races," *Wall Street Journal*, January 18, 2008.
2. E.J. Dionne, "Labor in Fighting Trim," *Washington Post*, September 3, 2007.
3. Quoted in B.J. Widick, *Labor Today: The Triumphs and Failures of Unionism in the United States* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1964), p. 116.
4. Speech by Andrew Biemiller, no date, Andrew Biemiller Papers, Box 1/85/54, George Meany Memorial Archives, Silver Spring, Maryland.
5. AFL-CIO News Release, January 6, 1964, "Congress, 88th" folder, AFL-CIO Library, Washington, D.C.

Uncomfortable Truths: The Union Movement's Elusive Quest for Political Influence

by Paul Filson

There are some very uncomfortable truths that need to be confronted when examining the relationship between organized labor and politics. The first truth is that organized labor in its current configuration very much needs political friends in high places. The second truth is that for over 50 years labor has been engaged in politics but has been in decline. The third truth is that even though unions very much need politicians, the opposite is much less true. The role of government in the success and failures of unions is integral.

Political forces that emerged during the Depression and World War II initiated two decades where the interests of working people created the atmosphere, the opportunity, and the conditions that led to the twentieth century's most dynamic and sustained period of growth for organized labor. It was the birth of the modern labor movement ushered in by Presidents Roosevelt and Truman. The Federal government allowed and even encouraged workers to organize into officially recognized unions so that by 1953 over one-third of all

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See page 17 for more details.

workers in the United States were represented by unions. Today organized labor membership represents only 12.1 percent of workers overall and only 7.5 percent of all workers in the private sector.

Since the mid 1950s the percentage of union membership in the work force has steadily declined. This decline has continued during both Republican and Democratic administrations and during periods when Democrats have controlled the House, the Senate and the presidency, and on occasions when Republicans have controlled only the presidency. In fact, some of the most precipitous union membership decreases have occurred during Democratic administrations. Yet, with unfailing predictability, the labor movement endorses and works to elect Democrats. These endorsements are not surprising since the main alternatives are almost always worse. Consequently, the labor movement is a victim of declining expectations as well as being forced to choose between the lesser of two evils. I would contend that this situation is partly due to both current and historical failures within the labor movement as well as the way politics are structured in the United States.

The two-party system leaves union members with limited choices. Elections are incredibly expensive and, since the Supreme Court has essentially ruled that the spending of money is tantamount to free speech, elections are controlled more and more by moneyed interests. For years the labor movement has tried to play the money game. Even the wealthiest unions, however, cannot compete with corporate financial power. The law circumscribes how unions can spend money, limiting SEIU's PAC (the largest in the nation) to contributing only the same amount of money as a wealthy couple: \$10,000 per election cycle per congressional candidate. Of course, unions continue to play the money game and have contributed much money to funds that are less restricted, such as "527" organizations. Yet labor remains a minority voice both numerically and financially and must compete with other constituencies, especially corporate donors, in attempting to influence the Democratic Party.

Labor undertook a serious reexamination of its political efforts in John Sweeney's election as AFL-CIO president in 1995. Sweeney refocused the labor federation's political strategy to take advantage of its major asset, the activation and mobilization of its 15 million members. While the Federation and its unions continued to try and play the money game, they developed a program that would encourage greater voter turnout among unionists, encourage union members to run for office, and to contribute more generously to political PACs. The Federation also realized that its diminished influence was due in part to declining numbers, so that it began to urge its member unions to focus more resources on organizing. There were some real advances. Union member households made up more than 25 percent of total turnout in elections starting in 1996. And for several years in the 1990s, the decline in union membership slowed.

The failure of the union movement to organize in the southern and western parts of the United States has seriously limited labor's political influence. Internally, the union movement's focus on representing workplaces rather than industries means

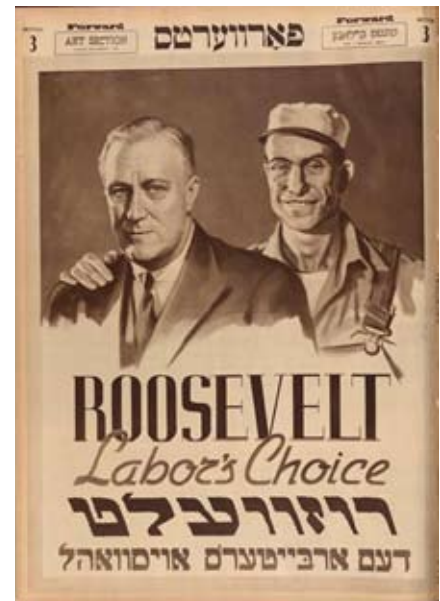
that energy and resources go towards localized collective bargaining (grievances and contract negotiations), thereby reducing the urgency and desire to invest in organizing or political action. An additional structural problem stems from the existence of dozens of different unions, each of which has its own priorities and distinctive approaches to conducting organizing and politics. Even with its restructuring, the AFL-CIO could not find a way to hold individual unions accountable – this is true on the national level and even more so on the regional and local levels.

SEIU, which represents health care workers, janitors and public sector workers, has doubled in size over the last decade to total nearly two million members. Much of that growth is directly linked to politics on the state level. The union has invested millions of dollars and mobilized massive numbers of members to help elect governors and state legislators who have facilitated the organization of new groups of workers, most notably those caring for children, the sick, and the elderly.

Janitors have organized thousands of new members by concentrating on cities and regional markets. Many local elected officials are eager to help workers gain entry to decent paying jobs with benefits, lowering their reliance on public welfare programs and gaining the loyalty of thousands of voters for future political campaigns. Other unions with a preponderance of public sector or

service sector workers have held their own or grown in terms of membership. The AFT, AFSCME, NEA, the Teamsters and UNITE HERE are spending more and more money on local politics. In Connecticut, unions are trying to work together regardless of which federation they belong to. Unions representing more than 100,000 members were successful in determining which Democrat would run for governor in 2006. In a bruising primary the union choice, John DeStefano, beat out a more corporate-oriented candidate by only 4,000 votes. The win was accomplished by massive phone banking that produced a large union turnout on Election Day.

Recognizing the critical role politics plays in organizing success, SEIU remains frustrated by the political process. With only two parties the union has begun to examine new ways to hold elected officials accountable. There is nothing more frustrating than seeing an elected official that the union aggressively supported turn around and vote against the interests of working people. In close elections the union can



Forverzt, Nov. 1, 1936, courtesy the Library of Congress.

withhold endorsements or endorse primary opponents in the future. This has some effect. Another useful strategy is to apply stricter standards in choosing which candidates unions will endorse. Unions have also encouraged members to run for office and when they are elected, their accountability to the movement is considerably higher than that of politicians from outside of labor. Unfortunately, most union members are not multi-millionaires and lack the resources to run competitively for higher offices. More recently, SEIU began a program of asking candidates to "Walk a Day" in our shoes. This would require candidates who wanted an endorsement to spend a day or some hours working alongside a member as she/he performed their daily duties.

Labor's political participation cannot be limited to election cycles, and unions must repeatedly insist on accountability from the politicians they help to elect. Elected officials need to hear consistently from union members and must frequently be asked to do things. Unions must also do more than pay lip service to accountability. Endorsements really must be withheld, and politicians must feel pressure regularly. In several states unions are looking at fusion or cross endorsement politics. So far, this strategy has only worked in New York and Connecticut, both of which allow relatively easy cross endorsements. Essentially, politicians may be endorsed by another party and appear on a ballot twice. Presumably the extra line garners sufficient votes that sometimes can make the difference between victory and defeat. The third party may also withhold its cross endorsement in the next election if the politician

votes or acts inappropriately during their terms.

Ultimately, the future success of the labor movement is contingent on winning political victories and holding politicians accountable on the national front. For example, unions are pushing hard for Congress to implement the Employee Free Choice Act, which would diminish the ability of employers to determine whether or not workers are represented by unions. After winning political elections unions will have to work just as hard or harder to organize workers in states like Florida or Texas or Arizona. Those states are increasingly deciding the political tenor of our country. Thus a classic chicken and egg dilemma faces the labor movement. Unions must increase their numbers in the South and the West, but they can't do so without winning political victories in those same areas. That is why the window for success is closing. Unions may still influence close national elections, but as their numbers and percentages decrease, this becomes harder. Passing national legislation, however, may make it easier for unions to increase their numbers in the South and West, as well as other areas of the country.

Another key to success would be increased and sustained militancy. A key failure of the labor movement since its early successes in the 1930s and 1940s has been timidity. Unions will need to invest more time energy and resources towards educating and activating its membership. Workers taking to the streets to protest bad public policy would surely move the needs of working families more to the forefront. As Cesar Forum continues on page 18

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This Year's LAWCHA Conference Is the 40th Annual Pacific Northwest Labor History Association Conference: Indigenous, Immigrant, Migrant Labour and Globalization

Ross K. Rieder, president of PNLHA (pnlha1@aol.com)

From June 6-June 8, 2008, the Pacific Northwest Labor History Association (PNLHA) will conduct its 40th Annual Labor History Conference at Harbour Centre Downtown Campus of Simon Fraser University, 515 West Hastings Street, Vancouver, British Columbia. This year we are pleased to collaborate with the Labor and Working Class History Association (LAWCHA) in hosting this conference. We proudly note that the 2008 LAWCHA president is Professor Michael Honey, University of Washington-Tacoma, a long time trustee of PNLHA. We look forward to a conference rich in content and context because of the presence of LAWCHA in planning and development of the 2008 40th Annual PNLHA Conference.

We believe one of the best aspects of PNLHA has been its truly international flavor. We are the only such labor history organization that conducts a third of its annual conferences outside of the U.S. That means that every three years, we get to be reminded, in spite of our labor movement's (and our society's) insular ailments, there is a labor movement just across our northern border. And, for reasons we learn about at least once every three years, it survives a little better than ours in the states.

In recent years, our British Columbia conference has offered the opportunity to merge our conference goals and ideals with like-minded organizations. Our 2005 conference commemorated the centenary of the Industrial Workers of the

World and involved cooperation with representatives of that organization in program development. As a result registrants were able to have access to both the PNLHA and the "Thinking Through Action: 20th Century Social Movements and Their Legacy" conferences.

We wish to thank the British Columbia members of the PNLHA Executive Board who are part of the larger planning committee for this year's conference. We especially acknowledge the efforts of Pat Bertrand and Colleen Jones of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers, David Yorke, retired legal Council for the British Columbia Teachers' Federation, Mark Leier, Simon Fraser University, and Mary McDonald (retired). We must give particular thanks to the team of Joey Hartman, Health Employees' Union and PNLHA Vice President for British Columbia, and Jim Gorman, Canadian Union of Public Employees and PNLHA Treasurer, for their constant and faithful endeavors to organize and find the resources for putting on wonderful labor history conferences. Joey and Jim consistently coordinate provocative, stimulating conferences, and the 2008 gathering in Vancouver promises to follow in that tradition.

Come join us in Vancouver! Early registration rates apply until May 5. To find out how to register or to look at the conference program, visit <http://www.pnlha.org>.

For information on accommodations, visit www3.telus.net/robbgibbs/PNLHA/attachments/08_accommodation.pdf

We look forward to seeing you at this historic event.

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The Labor and Working-Class History Association needs your continued financial support to continue our many and growing programs. By sending us your next honorarium check (or any other contribution, large or small) you'll be supporting our essay, dissertation, and book prizes; you'll be working to make sure that graduate students continue to receive travel grants to attend our conferences; and you'll be help us expand our reach to organize new members. And it's tax-deductible.

Send your next honorarium to LAWCHA treasurer Tom Klug, Marygrove College, 8425 W. McNichols, Detroit, MI 48221.

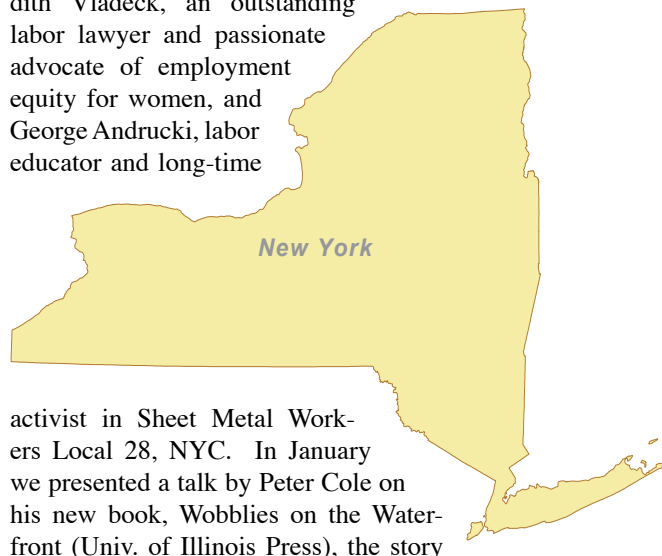
Reports from the Grassroots

The following reports from LAWCHA activists detail our members' activities in different parts of the country. We encourage submissions from all members. Send them to Joe McCartin (jam6@georgetown.edu).

New York City

From Gail Malmgren (gail.malmgreen@nyu.edu)

In October the New York Labor History Association (NYLHA) hosted its annual fundraiser, honoring the late Judith Vladeck, an outstanding labor lawyer and passionate advocate of employment equity for women, and George Andrucki, labor educator and long-time



activist in Sheet Metal Workers Local 28, NYC. In January we presented a talk by Peter Cole on his new book, *Wobblies on the Waterfront* (Univ. of Illinois Press), the story of IWW Local 8 on the Philadelphia docks. On March 12, in celebration of Women's History Month, the Women's Rights Committee of the United Federation of Teachers is offering a presentation by NYLHA board member Dr. K. Kevyne Baar, entitled "We Were There, Too! The Un-American Activities Committee and the McCarthy Era Blacklist of Women in the Entertainment Industry." Our annual conference, May 22nd at the Wagner Labor Archives, NYU, will be an in-depth examination of "Splits in the Labor Movement: Then and Now," moderated by Steven Greenhouse of the New York Times; panelists include Melvyn Dubofsky (SUNY Binghamton), Patricia Murolo (Sarah Lawrence) and Bob Master (CWA District 1). Coming up in September is a gala celebration of the publication of Jane Latour's long-awaited book on women in the blue-collar trades (Macmillan, August 2008). For details check our web site, www.ilr.cornell.edu/NYLHA, or email gail.malmgreen@nyu.edu.

Alberta

From Alvin Finkel (alvinf@athabascau.ca)

The Alberta Labour History Institute (ALHI), which includes both labour activists and labour academics, is planning a variety of activities under the rubric Project 2012 to commemorate the centennial of the Alberta Federation of Labour in 2012. Among other things, Project 2012 will be producing a book on the history of working people in Alberta (to be coordinated by Alvin Finkel of Athabasca University), several DVDs on major labour events, pamphlets, and posters. Winston Gereluk of Athabasca University is the overall coordi-

nator for Project 2012. ALHI, which has been in operation since 1999, has conducted over 200 interviews with Alberta labour leaders and rank-and-file workers, and has produced a website, labourhistory.ca. Its most recent project is a DVD on the closure of the Celanese plant in Edmonton, with funding from a project called "Voices Less Heard," a program jointly sponsored by the federal and municipal governments within the Cultural Capital Collaboration rubric.

"The West and Beyond: Historians, Past, Present, Future," a conference at the University of Alberta, in Edmonton, from June 19 to June 21, 2008, features several labour sessions, including sessions on "Women and Work in the West," and a semi-plenary on "Social Class and the Study of the Canadian and American Wests." The full program can be seen fairly soon on the website for the conference at www.events.ualberta.ca

Greater Chicago

From Bob Bruno, Erik Gellman, and Liesl Orenic (lorenic@dom.edu)

On November 30, 2007 the Chicago Center for Working-Class Studies held a community forum on the "*Politics of the New Chicago Labor Movement: The Future of the New Chicago Labor/Community Coalition*." The session was co-sponsored by the Roosevelt University Mansfield Institute for Social Justice and the Murray-Green Library of Roosevelt University. The program consisted of two panels. The first focused on local issues impacting the city's working class and featured Hank Scheff, AFSCME Director of Research & Employee Benefits, on privatization; John Bartlet, executive director of the Metropolitan Tenants Organization, on housing; and Alejandra Ibanez from the Pilsen Alliance on housing and public transportation. The second panel addressed the creation of labor-community group coalitions which resulted in critical victories in the aldermanic races in the 2007 city elections. This panel featured Jorge Ramirez (Secretary-Treasurer CFL), Genie Kastrup (SEIU State Council Political Director), and William McNary (Co-Director Citizen Action Illinois).

In December, a Chicago steering committee was formed for the 2009 LAWCHA annual conference titled, "Race, Labor and the City: Crises Old and New." Co-sponsored by the Fund for Labor Culture and History and supported by unions and other local organi-



zations, the conference at Roosevelt University promises to bring together a diverse group of scholars, academics, and activists. The steering committee includes Liesl Orenic (Dominican) and Erik Gellman (Roosevelt) as co-chairs as well as Leon Fink (UIC), Jim Wolfinger (DePaul), Ron Cohen (Indiana Northwest Emeritus and Fund for Labor and Culture), James Thwinda (Workers Rights Board and Jobs with Justice), and Lou Weeks (UNITE HERE). This committee encourages participation from any member of LAWCHA in the Midwest. If you're interested, please contact Lisa Phillips (Indiana State), LAWCHA's midwest coordinator at lphillips7@isugw.indstate.edu. In the meantime, keep an eye out for the upcoming call and save the dates of May 27-31, 2009 for travel to Chicago.

New Haven

From David Montgomery (david.montgomery@yale.edu)

News of labor struggles in New Haven was dominated during 2007 and 2006 by the efforts of Local 1199-SEIU to win recognition at Yale-New Haven Hospital. In this city, as in many others, the closing of manufacturing firms has left the university and the hospital the major employers of the region. In 2006 the administrators of the hospital won the support of the city government to build a new cancer center on the condition that they allow their workers to hold a collective bargaining election without interference or anti-union campaigning, in a process to be supervised by an independent arbitrator. In December 2006 the arbitrator, Margaret Kern, ruled that hospital supervisors had violated the terms of the neutrality agreement consistently and flagrantly, and she subsequently ordered the hospital to pay a total of \$4.5 million in damages to hundreds of individual employees for actions supervisors had taken against them and to the union (to compensate for its organizing expenses). In response the hospital agreed to pay the compensation to individuals, but refused to pay the union. Realizing that there was no possibility of voting in a free and open atmosphere, the union called off the scheduled election for this season.

The union of graduate employees at Yale, GESO, held a large "teach-out" on April 24, 2007, to discuss and organize against the rising tide of casualization in academic employment at Yale and around the land. The gathering was constructed like an outdoor class room and took place on a sunny street passing through the campus. It was supported by other unions from the area and featured addresses by GESO members and strikers from NYU, as well as Cary Nelson, president of the American Association of University Professors.

On Saturday, February 2, 2008, a lively and very informative Immigrant Workers Rights Conference was held at Southern Connecticut State University. Between 75 and 100 people attended, with immigrant workers and representatives of legal aid groups about evenly mixed, and also featuring several Catholic priests and Pentecostal ministers from various parts of the state. The morning was devoted to presentations by well informed speakers on such questions as workers compensa-

tion, what anti-discrimination legislation did and did not encompass, how to use state agencies to enforce labor laws and obtain unpaid wages, and dealing with raids by federal immigration service and by local police. The afternoon was devoted primarily to creating local rapid response groups to deal with workplace raids, such as New Haven has experienced, and to organizing community groups and services. Only a few



GESO's "teach-out" on casualization, April 24, 2007.

Courtesy Flickr user ragesoss, under a BY-SA Creative Commons license (creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/deed.en)

unions lent official support: the UE, SEIU, UNITE HERE, and the Carpenters (who have a very progressive leadership in New England).

The Greater New Haven Labor History Association has been successful in archiving the records of many local unions. It created an effective exhibit about the city's garment workers, based on photographs, many interviews, and texts it had gathered over recent decades. The exhibit opened at the Ethnic History center at Southern Connecticut State in 2006, then moved to City Hall for several months of 2007. The Association also sponsored publication of a collection of articles published over the years by Neil Hogan, longtime columnist for the *New Haven Register*, under the title *Moments in New Haven Labor History*.

Detroit

From Beth T. Bates (justbethbates@gmail.com)

The Detroit we see and hear about in the media is often very different from the Detroit that exists at the local level. That has been increasingly the case during the past several months as Detroiters have rallied on several fronts to take charge of what is by any measure a bleak urban situation, a city abandoned by the auto industry, whose department store and supermarkets moved to the suburbs along with white and middle-class residents, leaving behind a decaying infrastructure, low tax base, and increasing poverty. What has not been lost is the resiliency of Detroiters to rise to the occasion. Two examples should serve to illustrate. One is "Detroit: A City of Hope," an organization that aims to "seize the opportunity" to trans-

form how Detroiters live and work, according to Grace Lee Boggs, long-time resident and internationally known social activist and philosopher. "Do we continue to look on helplessly as 30-50% of our children drop out of schools? Or do we recognize that our schools are now dysfunctional because they were structured a hundred years ago for the industrial age which has come to an end? Now it is up to us to begin creating schools that engage ... children from K-12 in community-building...."

Detroit: A City of Hope [DCOH] is a metropolis-wide effort to support and expand a network of individuals and organizations already engaged in activities to rebuild Detroit from the ground up. On October 5-6, 2007, DCOH held a conference which was organized by the Boggs Center and Detroit members of Harry Belafonte's "Gathering for Justice." The event launched DCOH by bringing people from all backgrounds together – city and suburban, young and old, black, Latino, and white – to address some of the questions all who reside in the metropolis of Detroit must resolve for the city to rise from the present situation. Hope for transforming Detroit is tethered to a new economic vision fueled by a self-sustaining grassroots economy. As a starter, for example, the Community Business Plan that is in the planning stage is exploring how cities like Havana, Cuba, Minneapolis, Minn., Oakland, Calif., and Curitiba, Brazil reinvented themselves. This effort is in its infancy, year one of a proposed five-year campaign.

The second example comes from Marian Kramer's herculean efforts to challenge the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department over the issue that clean, affordable drinking water is a basic human right. Five years ago, Kramer, co-director of the National Welfare Rights Union, found out that the Detroit water department was shutting off running water to thousands of Detroit-area residents who were behind on their bills, without giving low-income citizens help or the opportunity to appeal. Kramer, Maureen Taylor, director of Michigan Welfare Rights, and other colleagues at Detroit Welfare Rights began a five-plus year long challenge to the practices and policies of the water department. A Water Affordability Plan was born out of the struggle, a legal document that argues the right to running water, which was approved by the Detroit City Council. The struggle goes on because the water department has

been playing bureaucratic and legal games to postpone implementation. In the meantime, Marian Kramer was recognized for her efforts when she was awarded a Purpose Prize in 2007 for bringing about social change.

Twin Cities

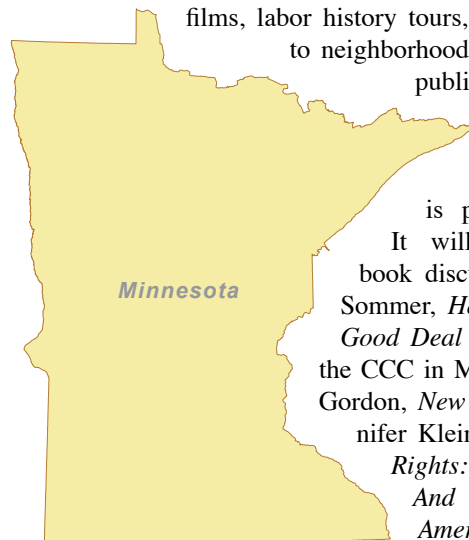
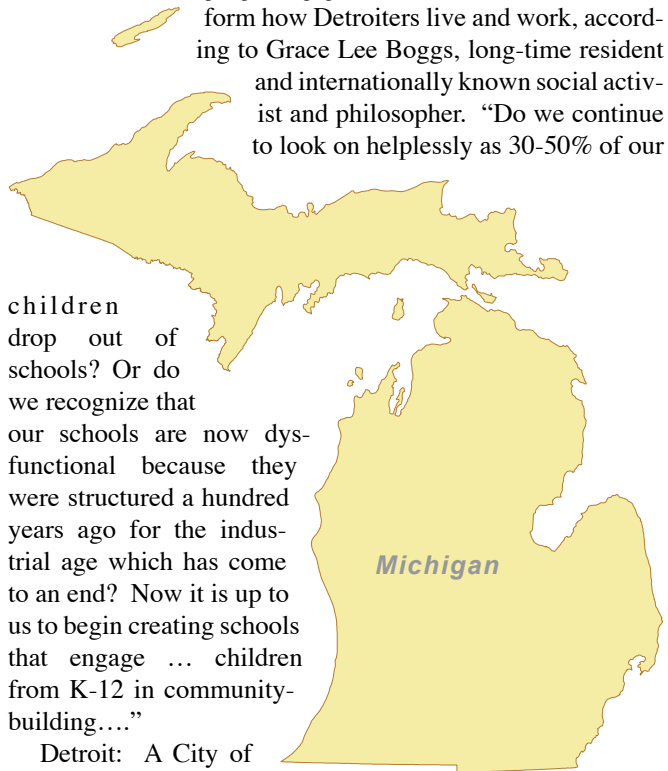
From Peter Rachleff (rachleff@macalester.edu)

The big news is that, with the help of Twin Cities LAWCHA members, the St. Paul Labor History Mural has been completed and unveiled. Painted collaboratively by two local artists, Keith Christenson and Tacumba Aiken, with the support of the St. Paul Trades and Labor Assembly (see their website for images), dozens of local unions and individual activists, the mural spans eight feet by seventy feet, using the Mississippi River as a metaphor of historical labor struggle. It is mounted at the St. Paul Labor Center, 411 Main Street.

St. Paul teachers, with the assistance of LAWCHA members, are preparing a curriculum for use at all levels. We have also been participating in the University of Minnesota's Labor Education Service film series. Beginning in September 2007 and proceeding monthly, the series has screened, at various union halls, colleges, and community settings, the following: "Waging a Living," "Maquilapolis," "When the Levees Broke," "Made in LA," "Miles of Smiles," "Red Tail," and "Cradle Will Rock." LAWCHA members are helping to build audiences and participating in post-show panel discussions.

LAWCHA members have also been participating in the planning of the April-May 2008 series "Untold Stories," sponsored by the Friends of the St. Paul Public Library (see their website for more details). This will be the 10th annual program, which brings readings, plays, films, labor history tours, and discussions to neighborhood branches of the public library system and other venues. This year's program is particularly rich. It will include three book discussions: Barbara Sommer, *Hard Work And A Good Deal* (a new book on the CCC in Minnesota), Colin Gordon, *New Deals*, and Jennifer Klein, *For All These Rights: Business, Labor, And The Shaping Of America's Public-Private Welfare State*. I

will deliver the annual David Noble Lecture, co-sponsored by the University of Minnesota's American Studies Department and the Minnesota Historical Society on the topic "Hard-Pressed in the Heartland: The Past, Present, and Future of Minnesota's Labor Movement." The "Untold Stories" series will also include attendance at two professional plays with



post-show discussions: “The Triangle Shirtwaist Fire” at the Minnesota Jewish Theater and “These Shining Lives” (about women painting watch-faces with glow-in-the-dark radium in 1920s Chicago) at the Great American History Theater. There will also be a staged reading of “Beakers,” a play-in-progress about the 1989 Boise Cascade/BE&K strike in International Falls, by the Lex-Ham Community Theater. There will also be a gallery talk and tour of a new show of WPA visual art mounted by the Minnesota Historical Society at the James J. Hill House. LAWCHA member Dave Riehle will lead a labor history tour of White Bear Lake, Minnesota, and historians Hy Berman, Mary Wingerd, and Annette Atkins will discuss labor’s place in the 150th anniversary of the state of Minnesota, which is being celebrated in 2008.

Southeastern Pennsylvania

From Francis Ryan (ryan@moravian.edu)

LAWCHA members have been active in the on-going efforts to preserve and interpret the remains of the Bethlehem Steel Plant in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. After over ten years of uncertainty, a redevelopment program has been initiated by site owners, government officials and the broader public which envisions a collaborative retail, residential and public use space for the old industrial grounds. In December 2006, Bethlehem Works Now and the Las Vegas Sands Casino received a license from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to build a slots casino as part of the construction plan. In response, local historians, former Bethlehem Steel workers and community activists doubled their efforts in a push to preserve the site’s blast furnaces



The Bethlehem Steel Plant.
Courtesy Flickr user -by-, under a BY-NC-SA license (creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.0/deed.en)

priorities of Lehigh Valley residents in how to present the region’s industrial history. Funded by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the workshop was attended by almost two hundred visiting labor historians, anthropologists, business leaders, local residents and city officials, workers and their families.

From the June 2007 workshops, participants highlighted the need for increased historical research—and preservation of archival materials—as central to the successes of making historical interpretation a key aspect of the Steel Plant sites function in the area’s future cultural and economic life. In June 2008, MARCH will sponsor a program to discuss new research agendas in industrial history, both at the Bethlehem Steel Plant and beyond. Modeled after the work done at the McNeil Center for Early American Studies in the 1980s and early 1990s, an intellectual project which funded post-docs and dissertation students to study in Philadelphia and energized the field toward new types of priorities and understandings of national history from 1750 to 1850, the MARCH symposium will lay out the beginnings of a similar exercise to coordinate uncharted areas of twentieth century industrial and labor history. LAWCHA members will be well represented at this initial gathering, with formal presentations scheduled by Donna Gabaccia, Eric Arneson, Stephen Meyer, Judith Stein and Philip Scranton. The results of this historic conference will have important implications for the future of

I Want You



To Submit Photos to the *LAWCHA Newsletter*

Next time you’re with with colleagues at a conference or demonstration, take a picture and send it in to lawcha@duke.edu.

labor history and will be covered in subsequent issues of the *LAWCHA Newsletter*.

The Pennsylvania Labor History Society will hold its 2008 conference in Philadelphia and will highlight the eightieth anniversary of the founding of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) in the City of Brotherly Love. As part of the planned activities, the PLHS is planning to establish a historic marker to commemorate the 1938 sanitation workers strike which established the city as the first major U.S. metropolis to formally acknowledge AFSCME as collective bargaining agent for its blue-collar work force.

Santa Barbara

From Eileen Boris (boris@womst.ucsb.edu)

In October 2007, the Center for Research on Women and Social Justice at University of California, Santa Barbara brought together over fifty scholars—including researchers from Canada, Britain, Korea, and South Africa—for a three day conference on “Intimate Labor” co-organized by Eileen Boris (Women’s Studies Chair and Hull Professor, UCSB) and Rhacel Parreñas (Professor of Asian-American Studies, UC Davis). Both established and emerging historians participated, including Dorothy Sue Cobble (Rutgers), Premilla Nadasen (Queens), Jennifer Klein (Yale), Laura Briggs (Arizona), Tracey Deutsch (Minnesota), Stephanie Gilmore (Trinity College), Benjamin Lawrence (UC Davis), Mireille Miller-Young (UCSB), Andy Urban (Minnesota), and Lara Vapnek (St. Johns).

They historicized the conversations on domestic, care, and sex work. Intimate labor is work that entails bodily or emotional closeness or personal familiarity, such as sexual intercourse and toileting another, or intimate observation and knowledge of personal information, such as childcare or housekeeping. In addressing intimate labor in terms of large economic shifts in “From Patient Advocate to Social Advocate: The Work of Nursing,” Jill Furillo of the California Nurses Association began the conference with a reminder of the activist roots and impact of these deliberations. Other trade unionists attended the sessions.

The gathering advanced the debate among feminist theorists

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over the relationship between “care” and economy. Panels addressed “The Political Economy of Intimate Labor: States, Markets, and Families;” examined “Globalization ‘From Below’ through Intimate Labor Practices;” explored “Work Process and the Cultures of Intimacy: Beyond the Binary of Paid and Unpaid Labor;” and discussed “The Politics of Space and Labor Organizing.” For abstracts of papers, go to: www.ihc.ucsb.edu/intimatelabors/intimate_papers.html. Many of the papers will see publication in the book that Eileen and Rhacel are co-editing or in special issues of journals.

Northern California

From Don Watson (dwlabor@earthlink.net)

The annual meeting of the Labor Archives and Research Center of San Francisco State University will feature Dawn Mabalon on “We Eat Dust: Filipino Migratory Labor and Labor Organizing on the West Coast and Alaska: 1920 to the 1970s.” Essay awards will also be given to S.F. State students for outstanding papers on labor history.

The Bay Area Labor History Workshop program this spring features Jean Ellis and June Fisher on “Women in Muni,” Don Watson on “The 1970 Salinas Valley Lettuce Strike: A Memoir,” Jeff Rosen on “The Problem of the Minority Contractor: Business, Work and the Integration of the Construction Industry in the San Francisco Bay Area,” and

Bill Shields on “Youth Speaks: Students’ Labor History Projects.” This is the second year in a row that

Shields is bringing S.F. city college students to the Workshop on labor history topics. The

annual dinner meeting in June will honor Catherine Powell, the newly appointed

Director of the Labor Archives and Research Center.

The Fall Meeting at San Francisco City College Mission campus was entitled “Educating for Justice: Teaching for Labor and Community Power.” It was co-sponsored by the Southwest Labor Studies Association

and the Western Region of UALE. The coordinator was Bill Shields, director of the City College of S.F. Labor and Community Studies Department. It featured Nelson Lichtenstein on the history of labor education in the United States and Bill Fletcher on race and immigration. Dolores Huerta was keynoter. Labor history topics discussed were the ILWU oral labor history project of Harvey Schwartz, who has a pending book on ILWU to be published by the University of Washington Press, Gifford Hartman on “Oakland’s Work Holiday: the 1946 Oakland General Strike, and Jeff Rosen on “Cultivating Creativity: The Arts and the Farm Workers Movement during the 1960s and 1970s.” A presentation was also made on the history of Silicon Valley.



Coalition of Immokalee Workers Targets Burger King After Taco Bell and MacDonaldis Victories

by Alex Lichtenstein (alichtens@gmail.com), Center for Labor Research and Study, Florida International University, Miami

As LAWCHA members well know, farmworkers remain some of the most exploited workers in the U.S. Lacking many of the basic protections of labor law and collective bargaining rights, and laboring in isolated rural areas, many of these recent or undocumented immigrants find themselves at the mercy of powerful corporate agribusiness.

In the tomato fields of South Florida, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) has mounted a compelling campaign to fight back against low wages and appalling conditions. The giant inland factory farms that produce a high proportion of the fresh winter tomatoes consumed in the U.S. are hidden just out of sight of the glamorous resorts on either coast of the Florida peninsula. The CIW has built effectively on a tradition of farmworker organizing that brings together workers, students, immigrant advocates, and clergy to dramatize the struggle to wring fair conditions from powerful growers' organizations—in this case, the Florida Tomato Growers Exchange (FTGE).

Like the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union of the 1930s or the United Farm Workers campaigns of the 1960s, the CIW seeks to bring growers to the bargaining table through publicity campaigns and by putting pressure on those forces further up the corporate food chain. The fast food industry is the primary consumer of Florida-grown tomatoes. Over the past few

years, both Yum foods (parent company of Taco Bell) and McDonalds, two of the largest purchasers of Florida tomatoes, have agreed to pay a penny extra per pound in order to insure that workers in the fields get a fairer wage. But Burger King, whose corporate headquarters sits in the shadow of Miami International Airport, has refused to follow suit and will not negotiate with CIW. Moreover, BK has



CIW march and rally, Miami, Nov. 30, 2007
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urged the Growers Exchange to refuse to abide by the existing agreements CIW has already made with its competitors in the food industry.

On November 30, 2007, the CIW, in coalition with the Student-Farmworker Alliance and Interfaith Action of Southwest Florida, led a 9-mile march of up to 2000 people from

downtown Miami to BK headquarters in order to publicize the farmworkers' struggle to secure fair wages and decent conditions in the face of the hamburger giant's intransigence. Amid cries of "Si, se puede," representatives from unions, student groups, and faith-based organizations from across the country, including United Students Against Sweatshops, Change to Win, the AFL-CIO, Interfaith Worker Justice, UNITE HERE, SEIU, and Jobs with Justice, joined farmworkers in a raucous bi-lingual rally in front of Burger King's corporate building. Delivering a pair of worn out farmworker boots to a BK representative, the crowd demanded that the corporation's executives try to "walk in their shoes."

The CIW's position remains fairly straightforward. They want BK to match the premium price for tomatoes now paid by their competitors in the fast food market; they want BK to help negotiate and enforce a code of conduct that will protect farmworkers against health and safety violations, as well as persistent abusive practices like debt-peonage; and they want BK to refrain from threatening the agreements CIW has already struck with Yum! Foods and McDonalds.

Majority-owned by Goldman, Sachs, Burger King serves over 11 million people a day worldwide. According to the corporation's Annual Report, 2007 revenues "climbed 9% to a record \$2.2 billion" and the stock price of BK shares went up 68% in the same period [see www.allhailtheking.bk.com/ar07/to_our_shareholders/]. By some estimates, the penny-a-pound premium that CIW wants BK to pay field workers will cost the corporation \$325,000 annually, or .01625% of its yearly revenue, if my math is correct. So much for "have it your way." It remains to be seen if CIW will call for a boycott against BK, in a reprise of the tactic that finally brought Taco Bell to the bargaining table. But experience and history suggest that anti-corporate campaigns, consumer pressure, and community mobilization by coalitions of students, immigrants, workers, and clergy remain central to any improvements unrepresented farmworkers are able to make in this country.

(The website of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, with updates on their campaign, can be found at www.ciw-online.org.)



Labor and Politics Forum

Continued from page 10

Chavez moved farmworkers in California to organize and change decades of oppression SEIU has adopted his mantra – *Si Se Puede* – Yes We Can!

Labor and Politics from the Inside Looking Out:

Diane Rosenbaum was interviewed on January 11, 2008, by Bob Bussel

BB: Can you please discuss the circumstances that led you as a labor person to pursue a career in politics?

DR: I was a CWA shop steward at the phone company in the 1980s and found myself representing many workers who were suffering from repetitive motion illnesses and carpal tunnel syndrome. When the Oregon legislature attempted to change the workers compensation law and make it harder for workers to prove their claims, I was asked to come to the capitol and help oppose this legislation.

This experience led to my becoming a part-time lobbyist for CWA. Later, in 1996, I helped lead an effort that won approval of a statewide ballot measure to raise the minimum wage in Oregon. Shortly thereafter, the legislature attempted to undermine this increase, and I helped mobilize a coalition to keep that from happening. These experiences underscored for me the importance of politics and how people could be galvanized to achieve political change. So when a seat opened up in my district in Portland, I ran for it and was elected to the legislature in 1999.

BB: Have you ever experienced any conflict between being a “labor” legislator and having to represent a broader constituency?

DR: I represent a pretty progressive district so that hasn’t been a problem for me. As Martin Luther King, Jr., used to say, “all struggles are connected,” and whether I’m standing up for workers or other causes, I see the fight for fairness and justice as a consistent theme in everything I do. For example, I’ve fought for rights for gays and lesbians and domestic partnership legislation, and for me, these are the kinds of rights that unions have always stood for. I also receive high ratings from both the AFL-CIO and environmental groups and see no conflict between advocating for environmental protection and workers’ interest in having good jobs. So I think it’s possible to connect my values and principles as a trade unionist to other issues and bring people together to work on matters of common interest

BB: Some people in the union movement complain about labor’s relationship with the Democratic Party. They say the Democrats are too dominated by corporate money to push aggressively for a union agenda. They also fear that because Democrats know labor won’t support Republicans in most cases, they take labor for granted and will only go so far on labor’s behalf. As a labor person and a Democrat, how do you respond to these criticisms?

DR: Democrats are not a monolithic group, and there are

certainly pro-business Democrats who don’t share labor’s agenda. In Oregon, however, most Democrats fully acknowledge labor’s importance and capacity. A good example of this is our Secretary of State, Bill Bradbury. He chaired a Jobs with Justice hearing on behalf of hospital workers whose employer was violating their right to form a union with SEIU. He did this despite criticism and threats from powerful industry representatives, and that took real political courage.

In our last session, with a new Democratic majority in the Oregon Legislature and a Democratic Governor, Ted Kulongoski, whose deputy chief of staff Tim Nesbitt is a former Oregon AFL-CIO president, we passed an impressive package of pro-worker, union-sponsored legislation. So at least in Oregon, I think the Democrats have been accountable and responsive. However, that’s because the union movement in Oregon has proven time and again that it is a political force to be taken seriously. I might add that we have a number of labor legislators, and that makes a big difference in moving a labor agenda.

BB: With union density either stagnant or declining in most places, what strategies do you think unions should pursue to increase their political effectiveness?

DR: With low density, if you want to make political change, you have to work in coalition with others. One of my most memorable lessons in this regard was when I saw waitresses and farm workers join together in fighting to raise the minimum wage. I was gratified recently to see Planned Parenthood and the ACLU honor a UNITE HERE boycott of a local hotel. We also had good coalition work recently in our successful effort to regulate the payday loan industry.

Perhaps our greatest opportunity to build coalitions in Oregon is around renewable energy issues, where we have the potential to achieve both environmental protection and job creation. I’ve seen unions such as those in the building trades being drawn to the possibility of forming new alliances with environmental groups. There is real political power in forming stronger progressive coalitions that bring together diverse groups and provide labor with a larger set of allies.

I also think the Working Families Party has potential to wield significant influence. In Oregon, we would need to approve fusion voting in order to make the WFP viable, and we are taking that up in our upcoming special legislative session.

BB: A final question: can you talk about the National Labor Caucus of State Legislators?

DR: Well, there are about 1,500 of us who are elected officials from every state in the country, and a growing number of us are in positions of power. In my case I’m the Speaker Pro Tempore of the Oregon House of Representatives, and many members of the Labor Caucus hold leadership positions. I think that labor representatives bring particular skills to the table that can result in getting significant legislation passed to benefit working people. So I would definitely encourage more labor folks to consider running for political office. It’s hard and at times difficult work, but as I’ve seen in Oregon, when you have a group of unionists serving in the legislature, you can ensure that labor’s voice will truly be heard.

Report from the Program Committee

Upcoming Panels Co-Sponsored by LAWCHA in 2008

by Colleen O'Neill (colleen.oneill@usu.edu)

As co-chairs of the Program Committee, we are asking LAWCHA members to include LAWCHA as a co-sponsor of sessions you are proposing for academic meetings or public talks you are planning to deliver. Our goal is to promote the study of labor and working class history, and to further build LAWCHA's visibility across disciplines and regions. Please contact either Dorothy Fujita-Rony (dfr@uci.edu) or Colleen O'Neill (colleen.oneill@usu.edu) about the possibility of LAWCHA's co-sponsorship for future panels or programs. When your session is accepted, please let us know so that we can include it in the *LAWCHA Newsletter*. Please support your fellow LAWCHA members by attending their sessions at upcoming meetings.

Organization of American Historians Meeting

Hilton New York in New York City, March 28-31, 2008. See www.oah.org/meetings/2008/index.html

Panel: "Forty Years Since King: A Roundtable Discussion: Struggling to End Racism, Sexism, Poverty, and War," Clayborne Carson, Michael Honey, Barbara Ransby, and Manning Marable, March 29, 3-4:30 (reception follows) 4:30 PM

A reception honoring activism for peace, justice, and equality in the tradition of Martin Luther King and Coretta Scott King. Sponsored by the Labor and Working-Class History Association (LAWCHA), with support from the AFL-CIO, the Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute, the University of California Press, and W.W. Norton Publishers. (See box on page 3.)

Panel: "Organizing Domestic Workers: History in Action," Eileen Boris, Nadia Marin-Molina, Premilla Nadasen, and Domestic Workers United, March 29, 3-4:30

Panel: "Women's Diasporic Working-Class Radicalism in Early-Twentieth Century New York City," Franca Iacovetta, Nancy Mirabal, Jennifer Guglielmo, and Jose Moya, March 29, 3-4:30

Panel: "Asians and Latinos: Converging Communities, Identities and Histories," March 30, 8-9:30 AM.

Association for Asian American Studies

Chicago, April 16-20, 2008. See aaastudies.org/2008/index.html

Panel: "Globalization and Asian Pacific Island Worker Organizing"

Panel: "At the Heart of Asian American Movement: Third World Radicalism, Internationalism, and Interracialism."

California American Studies Association

SOKA University of America, Aliso Viejo, April 25-27, 2008. See casaconference2008.org/menu.html

Panel: "Korean American and Latino Immigrant Families in Los Angeles."

Fourteenth Berkshire Conference on the History of Women
University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, June 12-15, 2008. See berks.umn.edu/program.html

Panel: "Native American Women Workers in the Twentieth Century: A Comparative Conversation"

American Historical Association, Pacific Coast Branch

Pasadena, Calif., August 7-9, 2008. See pcb.cgu.edu/program.htm

Panel: "Work, Culture and Identity in the Southwest, 1769-1960"

Labouring Feminism II Conference

Stockholm, August 28-31, 2008. See www.abark.se/labfem2

Panel/Plenary: Alice Kessler-Harris and the Gendering of Labour History: An International Feminist Dialogue

Association for the Study of African American Life and History

Birmingham, Ala., October 1-October 5, 2008. See www.asalh.org/93rdconvention.html

Workers, the Nation State, and Beyond: the Newberry Conference on Labor History Across the Americas
Chicago, September 18-20, 2008

American Studies Association

Albuquerque, N.M., October 16-19, 2008

Panel: "Invisible Laborers in the U.S."

Western History Association Annual Meeting

Salt Lake City, October 22-24, 2008

Panel: "Working for Wages and Conserving the Land: Culture, Community and the Meaning of Relief Work in the Depression Era."

Also Upcoming

"Justice for Immigrants" Symposium

New Mexico State, Las Cruces, April 2-4, 2008. See www.nmsu.edu/~arts/jpt_symp/2008/JPT%202008%20Program.pdf

Dolores Huerta, community activist and co-founder of the National Farm Workers Association (the predecessor to the United Farm Workers Union), will be the featured speaker at this year's J. Paul Taylor Social Justice Symposium. Topics include: "Why Do People Come?," "Examining the Push Factors," "One Border Two Sides: The Immigration Controversy," "A Question of Justice: Law & Its Impact on Immigrants." Special guests and experts will discuss the issues. A photo exhibit by Diana Molina and poetry readings will also be part of the events.

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