

# LAWCHA

The Labor and Working-Class History Association

UNIONIZERS  
PAPELES PARA TODOS

ENOUGH IS ENOUGH AND  
TOO MUCH STINKS  
CORPORATE GREED NOW

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**NEWSLETTER**  
**SPRING/SUMMER 2012**

# CALL FOR PAPERS

## “Rights, Solidarity and Justice: Working People Organizing, Past and Present” LAWCHA National Conference, June 6-8, 2013, New York City

Meeting in a year in which surging corporate power has threatened both unions and democracy as we know it, the 2013 LAWCHA conference in New York City will focus on how varied groups of working people have built the solidarity needed to challenge their employers, each other, their communities, and the state to seek justice and improve their lives. Historically and today women, immigrants and people of color have often been at the forefront of these struggles. Many have seen the revitalization of their organizations—unions, cooperatives, mutual aid societies, and political movements—as critical to their struggles for equality and democracy in and beyond the workplace. In the present moment, faced with obstacles to organizing that evoke earlier centuries, workers and their allies are creating innovative organizational forms and strategies in the U.S. and around the world. LAWCHA seeks panels, roundtables, and workshop proposals that put today’s challenges and successes in deeper perspective, including comparisons across time, space, and national borders, and that explore the rich range of working peoples’ lives and movements, from Early American history to the Wisconsin upheaval and Occupy Wall Street. Meeting a few blocks from the site

of OWS at Brooklyn College’s Graduate Center for Worker Education, located in Manhattan in a city that has long been a laboratory of innovative working-class self-organization, we welcome panel proposals of all kinds, including those that are historical, contemporary, transnational, or comparative, and those that combine activists and academics.

LAWCHA is also interested in proposals for workshops and roundtables that examine past experience and current strategies for work in areas of LAWCHA’s on-going activity—historical memory and commemoration; teaching labor history in the schools; building global networks of labor historians; and labor activism and solidarity, as well as skills workshops on the art of organizing, op-ed writing and other media work, building labor centers and more. We envision the possibility of threads of linked sessions in each of these areas of interest forming a significant part of the program. We also encourage more conversational sessions than the conventional 3-paper/commentator format. While we welcome individual paper proposals, we are especially keen to receive proposals for complete sessions.

- Send proposals for panels (or individual papers), roundtables, and workshops to the LAWCHA conference program committee: [lawcha.cfp+2013NYC@gmail.com](mailto:lawcha.cfp+2013NYC@gmail.com).
- Proposals should include brief abstracts for sessions and individual papers and short biographies/c.v.s for participants.
- **DEADLINE** for submissions is: September 15, 2012; notification by December 15, 2012.
- Conference sessions and accommodations will be in and around the NYU/Brooklyn College campus in lower Manhattan

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## From the Cover



Lawrence workers celebrate victory in the “Bread and Roses Strike” which is being commemorated this year. Credit: Lawrence Historical society.



LAWCHA member Tom Alter, holding banner at right, participates in the Occupy Chicago May Day events. Credit: Tom Alter.

# LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

Shelton Stromquist, LAWCHA President

This, in many ways, is a time for LAWCHA to stretch and expand the scope and potential impact we can have in the many worlds of labor history. These worlds include, quite literally, a global community of labor scholars and activists, whose work is intertwined with common themes that invite comparison and the imperative for workers to organize networks of solidarity locally and internationally to contest the hegemon of global capitalism. In the coming months, we hope to expand LAWCHA's connections internationally by building stronger ties to labor history organizations, conferences, journals and archives around the world. Just as we have used our "Action Alerts" to highlight struggles in North America which directly involve labor historians and labor educators, so we see opportunities for more effectively disseminating information about workers' contemporary labor struggles worldwide and their calls for solidarity.

The exciting OAH/LAWCHA conference in Milwaukee last April (highlighted in this newsletter and on the website) revealed a field of labor history that is pulsating with new energy, new approaches, and a rich sense of the interconnections between past and present. The expanded meaning of "class" with which many historians are working came through in countless conference session and is also highlighted in the essay, "The Dirty Work of the Underclass," in this newsletter, written by LAWCHA board member Clarence Lang. We anticipate that an even richer and more diverse program will be assembled for the LAWCHA national conference in New York City, June 6-8, 2013. As the Call for Papers suggests, "LAWCHA seeks panels, roundtables, and workshop proposals that put today's challenges and successes in deeper perspective, including comparisons across time, space, and national borders, and that explore the rich range of working peoples' lives and movements, from Early American history to the Wisconsin upheaval and Occupy Wall Street."

Connecting the work of scholars, teachers, trade unionists, and community activists remains central to LAWCHA's mission. In that work we face both urgent crises, like the fight to save Blair Mountain as a historical site of great meaning for working people, and ongoing educational opportunities, such as commemorative occasions like the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire and

the Bread and Roses Strike at Lawrence, Massachusetts (see the article in this newsletter by LAWCHA member Dexter Arnold.) We are eager to expand the participation of LAWCHA members in such events, while supporting the local initiatives that activists and scholars jointly undertake. We have a responsibility to contest the corporate culture's sanitizing and effacing of working peoples' history and to do so publicly in whatever venues and by whatever means we can. This obviously includes public school curricula, preserving and interpreting of historic sites, and producing accessible and engaging history that reaches a wide audience. In all of these efforts, our work is contesting a powerful corporate culture, but in none of them do we work alone. LAWCHA can do much useful work through mobilizing our own membership to support and augment the work of our friends and allies in all of these arenas.



LAWCHA President Shelton Stromquist  
Credit: Tom Klug

# Labor Historians and the Dialogue between Past and Present

Rosemary Feurer, Northern Illinois University, Co-Editor

This issue of our newsletter presents reflections on the importance of dialogue between past and present. We start with the work of commemoration of the Lawrence “Bread and Roses” Strike of 1912, the uprising which is well known by labor historians for women’s activism, innovative strategies and its challenge to the labor movement of its time. But as Dexter Arnold details, it has taken much effort by a team of historians, trade unionists and local activists to begin to restore its memory in the very place it happened. Given that a hundred years ago working class activism helped to create a “new unionism” that was defeated in the era of war, the next few years give us the opportunity to bring to consciousness the recognition that the structures of our current labor movement inherit the promise and limits of the past. The role of place and memory in our efforts to contest the invisibility of the past was explored by a panel

at the OAH/LAWCHA meeting, (see LAWCHA website for Jim Green’s brief summary), which emphasized the rewards of engaging on the ground to change and activate memory and dialogue. Those rewards and dialogue are also addressed in Tom Alter’s piece on Occupy, which challenges historians to become more engaged in the ongoing movements that present important connections and challenges. Clarence Lang essay reminds us of how categories of class that are tied to racialized versions of past and present remain dominated by a right wing discourse, one that our field needs to be at the forefront in challenging. We end this issue with reports from the recent OAH/LAWCHA conference, a number of which continue the dialogue between past and present in fruitful ways, and with the coinciding Wisconsin Labor History Society annual meeting. Finally we offer a bibliography of works published in 2011.

## Bread and Roses Centennial and the Dialogue between Past and Present

Dexter Arnold

### **Bread and Roses Centennial Commemoration**

The Bread and Roses Centennial events have included commemorations, exhibits, art, music, and public talks. The year kicked off in January with a march from the Everett Mill where the strike began to City Hall where the program included the Lawrence High School Girls’ Ensemble’s performance included “The Internationale,” the song of the 1912 strikers. On January 29, centennial organizers marked the 100th anniversary of the killing of Anna LoPizzo with a ceremony at the street corner where she was shot. On Memorial Day, local historian Jonas Stundzia organized ceremonies to decorate the graves of LoPizzo, John Ramey, and Jonas Smolskas, the three workers killed during the 1912 struggles

As in the strike itself, music has been central to the centennial celebration. Last fall, A Besere Velt, the Boston Workmen’s Circle’s Yiddish Community Chorus, performed “The Cloth From Which We Are Cut,” its powerful program on the Triangle Fire, as a fundraiser for the Lawrence centennial activities.

This Labor Day, the chorus will present “As We Come Marching,” its new show on the 1912 strike at the Bread and Roses Festival. In January, the People’s Song Network held their annual meeting in Lawrence and incorporated the LHS Girls’ Ensemble into their evening concert with Bev Grant, Jon Fromer, Tom Juravich, and other artists. Charlie King and Karen Brandow, and Si Kahn headlined a concert to kick off the Academic Symposium.

“Short Pay! Short Pay!,” an exhibit at the Everett Mill has been the fulcrum for the year’s activities. Labor and community groups have used the exhibit space for meetings. There have been musical and theatrical performances. Centennial organizers have supplemented the exhibit with temporary programs including reproductions of the Maine Labor Murals and a display of Lewis Hine’s photos of Lawrence child workers.

The Lawrence Public Library has focused its book club readings on immigration and other working-class topics. Librarian Louise Sandberg organized a City Wide Read of Katherine Paterson’s Bread and



# Bread and Roses Centennial

## Dialogue between Past and Present

Roses Too. In spring, Paterson spent a couple days in Lawrence speaking in schools and at the library.

Centennial activities have included public talks. LAWCHA member Ardis Cameron spoke on the women of the Lawrence strike and the relevance of that experience today. Lawrence religious activists held a forum on the response of religious groups to the strike. In nearby Lowell, UMass Lowell Work, Labor and Society Program sponsored a program with IBEW International Representative and Massachusetts AFL-CIO Vice President Ed Collins and me on the 1912 Lowell textile strike and

its relevance today. In April, three hundred fifty attended a Bread and Roses Academic Symposium that included sessions on the 1912 strike and its aftermath, culture, and contemporary labor struggles. AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka was the lunch speaker. At lunch, the hall was decorated with stunning paintings by Boston teacher, Leo Mueller, the grandson of 1912 strike leader Samuel Lipson. Subjects of the paintings included the Haymarket Martyrs and murdered Wobblies Frank Little and Wesley Everest.

There's more to come. This summer the Lawrence Heritage State Park will host an exhibit of Ralph Fasanella's paintings. On Labor Day, the Bread and Roses Festival takes place on the Common along with the dedication of the 1912 Strikers Monument. In October, a program on Lithuanians' role in the strike will mark the anniversary of the murder of Jonas Smolka in an attack prompted by his IWW button.

### Lawrence 1912 Strikers' Monument

The 1912 strike by 20,000 Lawrence, Massachusetts textile workers is celebrated by activists and labor historians as a strike for "Bread and Roses." In Lawrence, however, the strike's legacy has been fiercely contested.

A Bread and Roses popular memory fueled local labor struggles for several decades after 1912.



Bread and Roses Strike  
Credit: Library of Congress

Yet even before the walk-out ended, the Citizens' Association had laid the groundwork for an official orthodoxy that distorted and demonized the strike. When the City of Lawrence celebrated the 50th anniversary of the 1912 struggles, it commemorated the anti-IWW God and Country campaign, not the strike.

Public recognition of the 1912 events began to change in the 1980s as the result of new city leadership and a celebration organized by Moe Foner's National Union of Hospital and Health Care Employ-

ees 1199 Bread and Roses project. For twenty-five years, the Bread and Roses Festival has celebrated Labor Day on the Lawrence Common. The Lawrence Heritage State Park has a permanent strike exhibit. Activists have placed Bread and Roses headstones on the graves of the three workers killed during the 1912 strike and the God and Country reaction.

And yet, 100 years after the strike, the only municipal memorial to the 1912 struggles is a flag pole on the Lawrence Common commemorating the anti-IWW God and Country counterattack. That's about to change. Lawrence Historical Commission chair Jonas Stundzia, whose grandmother was clubbed in 1912, and David Meehan, a retired Lawrence teacher and AFT member, are spearheading an effort to place a 1912 Strikers' Monument on the Common.

The 1912 Strikers' Monument will be compelling pro-labor public art featuring a bronze relief by sculptor Daniel Altschuler that captures the dynamism of the strike with its message of militancy and mobilization, struggle and solidarity. For the artwork, which is inspired by a photo of one of the largest strike parades, see <<http://rumbonews.com/archivo/e374/e374.pdf>>.

The 1912 Strikers' Monument committee is nearly halfway towards its fundraising goal of \$160,000 and hopes to dedicate the monument on

# Bread and Roses Centennial

## Dialogue between Past and Present

Labor Day, 2012. The names of donors contributing \$2,500 or more will be engraved on granite blocks at the base of the monument.

For more information about the project or donations, contact me (<dekearnold@yahoo.com>) or David Meehan (<monument1912strike@hotmail.com>).

The 1912 Strikers' Monument is only one of many activities celebrating the strike's anniversary. Because of the project's expense, it is independent of the broader Bread and Roses Centennial Committee, which is presenting a major exhibit, an academic symposium, and an exhibit of Ralph Fasanella's paintings, among other activities. For the Centennial Committee's programs, go to <<http://www.breadandrosescentennial.org>>.



IBEW Local 232 Recording Secretary and New Hampshire AFL-CIO Vice-President Linda Horan and the dedication of Anna LoPizzo's gravestone.

Credit: Dexter Arnold

### Marking the Bread and Roses Graves

Three Lawrence workers were killed during the 1912 labor struggles. In January, Anna LoPizzo, an Italian mill operative, was shot during a confrontation between police and strikers, and John Ramey, a teenage Syrian (Lebanese) worker, was bayoneted in the back. Nine months later during the anti-IWW God and Country campaign, Jonas Smolskas, a Lithuanian spinner, died after being attacked because he wore his IWW button.

While in Lawrence for a union meeting in 1998, I went looking for the three graves in Immaculate Conception Cemetery on the city's outskirts. Ramey's name was on a family monument, but the graves of LoPizzo and Smolskas were unmarked.

I discussed this with Dave Morris, who was IBEW 2321's Assistant Business Manager and a leader of the Lawrence Central Labor Council. He made a marker for LoPizzo's grave a personal project. During 1912, Barre, Vermont Italians took in strikers' children, so Dave arranged with Barre Granite Cutters Business Agent Matt Peake to have the headstone donated. Two years later, local historian Jonas Stundzia organized the placement of a stone on Smolskas's grave. Both Morris and Stundzia located relatives of the murdered workers, and Smolskas's granddaughter spoke at the 2002 ceremony. In 2008, Stundzia worked with the Ramey family and the American Lebanese Awareness Association to place a Bread and Roses marker on the Ramey family plot.

*LAWCHA member Dexter Arnold has been active in the labor movement for over 40 years as a rank-and-filer, local officer, and union staffer. He has been deeply engaged in the historical study of the Lawrence strike for many years. He currently teaches part-time on-line for the University of Illinois Global Labor Studies Program.*

# Effort to Save Blair Mountain Continues

Rosemary Feurer, Northern Illinois University



Marchers, including environmentalists, trade unionists, and a few historians, make their way up Blair Mountain, June 2011. Credit: Rosemary Feurer

LAWCHA has been keeping its members updated on the effort to save Blair Mountain, the West Virginia site of the uprising of miners and their supporters in 1921. Last June Friends of Blair Mountain hosted a protest march to the top of the mountain, and found vivid support and detractors, an indication of how much work remains to be completed. (See LAWCHA website for Rosemary Feurer's report on that march, and some interviews she conducted.)

One of the promising developments since then was the opening of the Blair Community Center and Museum, housed in a former church in Blair. On the other hand, there have been no solid victories to preserve the actual site. While in January 2012 the Environmental Protection Agency's vetoed a permit on Spruce No. 1 Mine, which overlooks the town of Blair, a federal judge ruled against the EPA in March 2012. The Obama administration has not yet responded to the court reversal. A second permit, for Camp Branch, is on the battlefield itself. After a period of comment, the EPA decided to renew the permit. So permits to mine are still in place all around Blair Mountain.

A new effort led by LAWCHA member Lou Martin, Assistant Professor of History, Chatham University, aims to convince legislators and the business community that the site has potential for economic development because of its historic significance. Martin noted, "Historic sites have great potential to teach history because they reach broad audiences and because there is a mysterious power to standing in a place where history happened. I believe that is why it has been such a struggle for decades to get Blair Mountain the official recognition it deserves. Not just because the coal companies hold title to the land, but also because of the mountain's potential to shape our understanding of history." Martin and other historians have

issued a new statement on the value of preserving instead of mining the site. Please consider joining this effort by becoming a member of Friends of Blair Mountain. You can see Lou's report on the June 2011 Blair march at [http://history.wvu.edu/history\\_blog/2011/6/28/marching-on-blair-mountain-pt-1](http://history.wvu.edu/history_blog/2011/6/28/marching-on-blair-mountain-pt-1).



Credit: Rosemary Feurer

# Perspective: The Dirty Work of the “Underclass”

Clarence Lang, University of Kansas

The last year and a half has been an educative moment with regard to the salience of class in the United States. Mass demonstrations in Wisconsin, last summer’s debt-ceiling crisis, spectacular Occupy mobilizations around the nation, and the self-assertion of the “99 Percent” have again put the lie to arguments that class is a useless analytical category – or, to the extent it is useful, it only meaningfully describes the existence of a middle class (middle of what or whom?) It remains to be seen what this period means for the labor and working-class history, but the current moment has provided a new set of opportunities for scholars in the field to engage matters of class, power and political economy in relevant ways for broad audiences. This includes the need to amplify the central role of race in framing class discourses.

If those of us subscribing to liberal-left views have been ambivalent on this point, the conservative-reactionary right certainly has not. Throughout the recent Republican primary campaign for the presidential nomination, candidates have appealed to populist sentiments through racially coded appeals evoking the dependency of the black “underclass” on government handouts. Late last year, former Speak of the House Newt Gingrich caused a commotion when he referred to child labor laws as “truly stupid.” He mused that poor children could develop the honest work ethic missing in their communities, and escape poverty, by replacing unionized janitors in their schools, and working as library, cafeteria and office assistants. The comments had little to do with race explicitly, though his casual assumption that such children lack adult role models who work, or earn money legally, is one commonly attributed to the “underclass.” Gingrich stirred a toxic brew of anti-unionism, thinly veiled racism exempting children of color from protections against exploitation, and disdain for meaningfully combating the poverty that engulfs almost 40 percent of black children.

The target of his remarks was clear. As if this was not a clear enough signal, Gingrich labeled President Barack Obama “the food stamp president,” and condescendingly offered to lecture a gathering of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) on why the black community should “demand paychecks and not be satisfied with food stamps.” The episode not only illustrated Republican-based animosity toward a program that has saved millions, across race, from food insecurity; it also crudely bound the president, and African Americans more generally, to a means-tested program popularly associated with stereotypes of black indolence. Not to be outdone, Mitt Romney, now the presumptive Republican nominee, castigated Obama for supplanting a “merit-based society with an entitlement society” – this from a

multimillionaire who possesses his own deep sense of entitlement to the White House.

Without using the term openly, contenders in the GOP field wielded “underclass” phraseology to attack a broad array of the populace clamoring for a more just social contract. It has, among other things, fueled opposition to public spending and jobs programs – and public employees themselves – that stand to benefit the whole of society. A central Republican presidential campaign message already has crystallized: You may be jobless, you may have lost your savings and your home may be in foreclosure, but the president’s policies benefit the “undeserving” poor, who are culturally and morally unlike you. Tellingly, Glenn Beck and Rush Limbaugh, both avatars of the conservative right, have portrayed the president’s tepid economic initiatives as stealth reparations for African Americans. Summoning the imagery of “underclass” debasement speaks to the GOP’s racial politics, but it also demonstrates how popular ideas about class, poverty, and government policy operate through racial inference.

Entering contemporary popular usage in the 1970s, the “underclass” became, according to Adolph Reed, Jr., “the central representation of poverty in American society.” Employed primarily to characterize those fastened to the lowest rungs of the black working class, it has functioned more as an ideological device than a real sociological category. It was a vehicle for shifting attention away from structural inequality to the cultural pathology of the poor: The “underclass” existed because of dysfunctional values, criminal deviance, pathological behavior (e.g., out-of-wedlock births and female-headed households), and reliance on government. Accordingly, this was a problem that social welfare expenditures could not remedy. Such expenditures, in fact, only reinforced “underclass” dependence. This had the effect of vilifying the poorest strata of working-class African Americans among middle-class whites and blacks alike, stigmatizing them in the imagination of other sectors of the working class, isolating them in public policy, and justifying draconian measures that have not only targeted the “underclass” for punishment but also eroded income, social mobility, and economic security for all.



Clarence Lang  
Credit: Tom Klug



# The Dirty Work of the “Underclass”

By equating social welfare with dependency and – more implicitly – blackness, the “underclass” literally has colored discussions of social policy, inviting people across social class to share in a culture of antagonism to the social safety net. This was a key component of the Reagan revolution of the 1980s, and it fed a campaign against the legacies of the 1930s New Deal and the 1960s Great Society – including old age pensions, indigent care, banking regulation, aid to families with dependent children, Head Start, fair labor standards and the right to unionize, federal support for homeownership and higher education. It also prompted a liberal retreat from racial and economic justice, as Democratic strategists distanced their party nationally from symbolic affiliation with the black working poor (e.g., the Bill Clinton administration’s dismantling of Aid to Families with Dependent Children in the name of “welfare reform”). The cumulative impact has been what historian Julilly Kohler-Hausmann terms a “punitive turn” in U.S. public policy geared toward market deregulation, privatization, union busting, and the erosion of work conditions and pay in the service of greater productivity and higher profits.

For the so-called “underclass,” decades of austerity have transformed many black working-class communities into zones of neoliberal devastation. As legal scholar Michelle Alexander describes in her book, *The New Jim Crow*, this has been fostered by a “war on drugs,” the increased militarization of local police, heightened state surveillance and harassment, expanded prosecutorial power, judicial attacks on Fourth Amendment protections against unreasonable searches and seizures, mass incarceration, criminalization, and public scorn (e.g., the wanton drug testing of recipients of means-tested programs). The criminalization of the “underclass” via black youth culture was the general backdrop against which self-appointed neighborhood watchman George Zimmerman profiled, stalked, and eventually shot and killed seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida. This criminalization, likewise, conditioned the initial indifference to Martin’s murder from local and state authorities. The specific class position of Martin’s family is beside the point. At issue are the racialized class politics that have framed black and brown youth in hooded sweatshirts and sagging jeans as a social threat that must be contained, controlled or eliminated.

Although perhaps not readily apparent, the larger historical context underlying Martin’s death is intertwined with a general offensive against the quality of life of broad swaths of working-class Americans – as in the use of unpaid “workfare” employees and prison laborers to supplant union labor; continuing attacks on public sector workers, among whom people of color are employed in disproportionate numbers; the enforcement of nativist, anti-immigrant policies that actively promote the racial profiling,

detainment and disciplining of Latino workers in states like Arizona; vicious attacks on women’s reproductive rights in Kansas and other states, which especially threaten working-class women of all races and ethnicity; and declining family income and rising household debt nationally. As with the federal callousness to black suffering during the 2005 Hurricane Katrina crisis, the social context of Martin’s death not only embodies racism, but also a culmination of a general assault on working people. “Attacks on the poor,” working-class studies scholar Michael Zweig reminds us, “are attacks on the working class.”

Protests by public workers in the Midwest and the Occupy upsurge may signal the possible renewal of a transformative working class-oriented activism. But so do local campaigns against felony conviction boxes on job applications, the mass rallies in Florida and elsewhere that challenged the official apathy to Martin’s shooting, and the fightback against Arizona’s SB 1070 that will have to occur on the ground as well as in the courtroom. Labor and working-class historians are among those best positioned to unpack the “underclass” and combat the dirty work this discourse has performed in U.S. social welfare policy. Contesting the stigmatization of poor people of color means claiming the “underclass” as part of a diverse working class inclusive of immigrant laborers of color; ex-felons; women receiving Temporary Aid to Needy Families benefits; unlicensed beauticians, babysitters, jitney drivers and others serving casual economies; and even those imagined not to work (e.g., “officially” unemployed people cobbling together income at the fringes of the neoliberal political economy through legal and illegal activity). The racially suggestive insults hurled at the poor, and used to undermine all notions of social security, is a warning that imagining the U.S. working class has to be capacious – for the sake of the “underclass,” and everyone else’s.

For the so-called “underclass,” decades of austerity have transformed many black working-class communities into zones of neoliberal devastation.

*Clarence Lang is an Associate Professor of African and African American Studies at the University of Kansas, and a LAWCHA board member. This essay is a revised version of a guest commentary, “The GOP, Black ‘Underclass,’ and Working-Class Studies,” that appeared on the blog site Working-Class Perspectives, February 6, 2012.*

# Perspective: Occupy and Labor

## What Role for Historians?

Tom Alter, University of Illinois, Chicago

*Next we feature a perspective and opinion of one of LAWCHA's most active graduate students and chair of our Graduate Student Committee, Tom Alter. We hope to continue with a regular column from graduate students. If you are a graduate student or know of someone who might contribute a column on a topic pertaining to labor past or present, please let us know.*

During a panel on Occupy and Labor at the recent Labor Notes conference this past May in Chicago, a panelist stated that “targeting corporate greed is out there like the weather.” It’s there, it exists, and it’s not going away anytime soon. She further noted that Occupy has helped us recognize that we have a common enemy outside of the workplace. At work we might hate our particular boss. Now outside of the workplace, thanks to Occupy, there is a movement against greedy bankers, Wall Street speculators and corrupt businesses. These sentiments existed to some extent well before Occupy Wall Street (OWS). But OWS crystallized them into the language of the 1% versus the 99%. No matter how flawed this rhetoric might be in collapsing the vast differences within the 99% in terms of race, class, and gender, it points to a palpable target of blame for the current Great Recession – the 1%.

This analysis is not unique. It is one shared by many sympathetic to the Occupy movement, including many labor historians, as seen in the countless mentions of Occupy at LAWCHA-sponsored panels at the recent OAH conference in Milwaukee. However, it is useful to reflect on the distinctions between labor historians’ response to the Wisconsin crisis and their engagement with Occupy. Governor Scott Walker’s attack against union collective bargaining rights in Wisconsin prompted a significant number of labor historians to put themselves on the line and jump into the fray by joining in marches and rallies and speaking out in numerous ways that shaped the public debate over the right of public sector workers to collectively bargain. Robert Johnston’s article “The Madison Moment: Labor Historians as Public Intellectuals during the Wisconsin Labor Crisis,” in the spring 2012 issue of *Labor* provides an excellent overview of how labor historians responded to the fight to defend Wisconsin public sector workers. When Occupy Wall Street began on September 17, 2011 and rapidly spread into a worldwide Occupy movement, the response from labor historians was a bit more tepid, I would argue. LAWCHA once again, through its website, made a call for its members to support the Occupy movement and send in their op-ed pieces and other examples of how they have involved themselves in Occupy. While a few labor histori-

ans responded with the same gusto as they had in Wisconsin, the overall response by labor historians was rather small and dropped off quickly, even though one can argue that Wisconsin was a necessary precursor for the Occupy movement.<sup>1</sup>

I think that the overwhelming focus of labor historians on trade unions and industrial capitalism has left them ill prepared for how to interact with an economically radical movement where organized labor’s role was initially not clear. To be fair, Occupy has been a hard movement to figure out, especially in its first weeks.

This ambivalence was apparent in the views of Chicago-area historians and graduate students who, knowing I was an activist in the area eagerly shared their initial experiences with Occupy Chicago. They were excited by what the Occupy movement represented and headed down to the corner of Jackson and LaSalle where Occupy Chicago had set-up a base outside of the Federal Reserve building. Unless one arrived during the organized speak-out of a General Assembly, one found only a group of individuals standing around, some with signs, some banging on drums, with fighting corporate greed the only unifying demand and no program on how to do this. If you had come down on your own looking for something to join, the scene could be a little confusing. Madison, Wisconsin this was not. Occupy, though, needs the assistance of labor historians.

Historic memory of economically radical movements has largely been preserved by labor historians. Historians David Montgomery, Herbert Gutman, and David Brody revolutionized the field of labor history from one of labor management, contracts, and pure economics to the study of working-class culture termed the “new labor history.” Montgomery, Gutman, and Brody in turn trained a new generation of historians, many of whom became part of the New Left of the 1960s and 1970s. New Left historians continue to this day to dominate the field of labor history within the academy.

So much of the work of a generation of labor historians has focused on the industrial working class. There was



Tom Alter (Holding Banner)  
Credit: Tom Alter

1. See <http://lawcha.nfshost.com/wordpress/?p=165> (accessed March 3, 2012) for LAWCHA historians’ response to Occupy as compared to their response to the Wisconsin struggle as discussed in Johnston’s article.

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# Occupy and Labor

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an assumption that the model for confronting the economic system was one based in the industrial workplace, and unions based on a model structured by an industrial capitalism framework. Labor historians, then, could relate to the outgrowth of public or service sector unions and collective bargaining systems that were close sisters of the industrial union sector. That might account for their ability to relate better to Wisconsin than Occupy. Protecting collective bargaining rights speaks to the history emanating from the New Deal era and model. But that model has slowly disintegrated.

Since the emergence of new labor history the U.S. economy has shifted from an industrial to a service basis. The lessons of fighting against industrial capitalism, while still useful, do not adequately address the needs of a working class now suffering under an economy governed by the dictates of finance capitalism. The workplace struggles over wages, work hours, health, and safety brought upon by industrial capitalism are now overshadowed by home foreclosures, depreciating pension funds due to fluctuations in the Stock Market, credit card debt, student loan debt, high interest rates, and Wall Street speculation that has driven up the cost of everything from gas to food, all brought on by finance capitalism and its drive for austerity.

The Occupy movement's economic radicalism harkens back to a type of movement not seen in the United States since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, one based on a different cohort of workers and farmers, but one more relevant to this moment. For roughly fifty years from the 1870s until the 1920s a farm-labor bloc committed to independent political action and organizing across a spectrum of waged and unwaged workers, occupied a political space in opposition to the two party system. The farm-labor bloc's organizational continuity began with the Greenback Labor Party of the 1870s, and can be traced through the Populist movement of the 1890s, to the Socialist Party of the early twentieth century, and to the numerous attempts to form a labor party during the 1920s. One can find echoes of the farm-labor bloc's economic radicalism and its critique of finance capitalism in today's Occupy movement. The agrarian radicalism of the farm-labor bloc rallied against speculation, rampant debt, greedy bankers, and business corruption of government. Nearly a century later, at a time of severe economic crisis, the Occupy movement has emerged to fight the same ills of finance capitalism. The farm-labor bloc thus provides the closest historic precedent and provides some important lessons for the Occupy movement. Many of the strategies of direct action, mass protest, and connecting these to alternative politics were born not only in the workplace but also in this bloc's activities. The praxis of connecting labor to broader issues

of economic control and inequality is an important aspect of this movement.

Until the recent emergence of the Occupy movement, the United States had not witnessed a movement based on economic radicalism since the trade union movement gathered around the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) during the 1930s. The economic radicalism of the 1930s union movement differed from that of the farm-labor bloc. While the farm-labor bloc was a response to finance capitalism, the CIO was a response to industrial capitalism. By reaching back to this history of the farm-labor bloc, we might find some "usable past" to pass along and caution the Occupy movement. In particular Occupy can learn from the Populist movement, the first anti-corporate movement.

One can classify Occupy as a populist movement.

Occupy, on the surface, has an arguably classless message, much like the Populist movement, with its call of "We Are the 99%" directed against banks and the rich and not directly at the capitalist system. This rhetoric has gone a long way in changing the political dialogue of the U.S. by putting a spotlight on growing income disparities, probably the greatest achievement of the Occupy movement to date. However, just as there were vast differences between all

the farmers that the Populist movement claimed to represent, there are great differences among the various layers of the 99% that Occupy claims to represent. How can a movement aimed at redressing economic inequalities be sustained that includes upper management - the top of the 99% and unemployed welfare recipients - the bottom 1%? The 99% also contains a meritocracy that is heavily invested in maintaining the capitalist system of the 1%. Labor historians can help Occupy avoid the same fate as the Populist movement. By not directly addressing the class interests of the majority land owning poor, tenant, and sharecropping farmers, both black and white, the Populist movement was co-opted by the Democratic Party and divided by Jim Crow. Though out of the ashes of the Populist movement emerged the largest socialist movement witnessed in the U.S. that spoke to the class objectives of wage workers and working farmers. The fate of the Occupy movement is yet to be determined.

At the same time that labor historians need to communicate the lessons from the radical agrarian based critique of finance capitalism, traditional industrial based labor history is needed as well. This is seen in the recent Occupy movement calls for a general strike on May 1, 2012. It was apparent that many Occupiers really do not fully understand what a general strike is, and how they were carried out in the past, other than that a general strike sounds cool. The reality is that strikes in the U.S are at an historic low, so moving from this reality to a general strike is, no

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# Occupy and Labor

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## What Role for Historians?

matter how much one may wish it otherwise, unrealistic.

By participating in Occupy labor and/or education committees across the country labor historians could educate Occupiers about the history of general strikes. One lesson that was needed was that general strikes take intense organizing and sometimes years of radical labor political agitation. Such lessons were passed along by members of Occupy Chicago's Labor Working Group (LWG) who are well versed in the history of Haymarket. After OWS called for a general strike on May 1, 2012 it was assumed Occupy Chicago would fall in line and do the same as other Occupy centers in joining the call for a general strike. Because of the political guidance of the LWG, Occupy Chicago was the only major Occupy center not calling for a general strike on May Day, and calling instead for a protest that could draw in the broadest number of people. The LWG won the political argument within Occupy Chicago to build a May Day committee separate from Occupy Chicago, one that that brought together organized labor and immigrant rights organizations. The previous May Day in Chicago there were two separate May Day events, a remembrance service at the grave site of the Haymarket martyrs organized by the Illinois Labor History Society that drew organized labor and a march from Union Park to Federal Plaza organized by immigrant rights organizations. That this year 2,000 trade unionists, immigrant rights activists, and Occupiers participated in a unified march on a Tuesday in the rain in the middle of the afternoon was a significant political breakthrough in Chicago.

The LWG has been meeting every Tuesday evening since late October 2011. It formed in the wake of Occupy Chicago's failed attempts to establish a tent encampment in Grant Park in the mode of numerous Occupy centers across the country. That Chicago was unable to create a tent city was initially seen as a weakness of the Occupy movement in Chicago as well as the undemocratic posture of Mayor Rahm Emanuel. However, lacking a tent city to defend, Occupy Chicago was forced to get out its message in other ways, resulting in the creation of Occupy committees like the LWG. Thus Occupy Chicago was ahead of the game compared to other Occupy centers once their encampments were forcibly removed.

LWG meetings attract between 25-50 rank-and-file trade unionists, union staffers, and other supporters of the labor movement providing workers a democratic forum, free from the stifling restraints of traditional union boundaries to discuss how to connect the Chicago area's numerous labor struggles through the Occupy movement. An example of how Occupy and labor have come together in Chicago was witnessed in the recent occupation of Serious Energy.

When Serious Energy (formerly Republic Windows and Doors) announced on February 23, 2012 that it was closing its Chicago factory, the workers represented by the United Electrical Workers (UE), responded the way they did in December 2008 by occupying the factory. Occupy Chicago, led by the LWG responded immediately. Through Facebook posts, text messages and good old-fashioned telephone calls, members of Occupy Chicago descended upon the Serious Energy factory to support the workers inside. UE representative Leah Fried said once Occupy Chicago members showed up at the factory the tone of negotiations with company management changed. "When they heard that Occupy Chicago had moved in outside their company, they were alarmed," Fried said. The workers won a small victory in that the company agreed to keep the factory open for 90 more days.<sup>2</sup>

I have witnessed a genuine thirst for labor history within the Occupy movement. In the fall during one of the numerous Occupy marches I saw a University of Illinois at Chicago undergrad marching while holding up a copy of James Green's *Death in the Haymarket*. This book made another appearance in the audience of a workshop I gave at the People's Summit (a counter NATO conference held in Chicago May 12-13) on the "History of Workers' Resistance." The workshop was well attended and consisted of mainly of twentysomethings. Many afterwards thanked me for giving them knowledge of a labor history that goes back to before the Civil War that they knew little of. I encourage labor historians to seek out and join their area Occupy labor committees.

The Occupy movement has shaken off the dust that had accumulated on the U.S. Left over the past decades. But where do Occupy and Labor go from here? As Jan Rodolfo, National Nurses United Midwest Director, aptly stated at the panel I began with, "The current state of the labor movement is the foremost factor in holding the Occupy movement back... The labor movement is still deeply defense... Labor needs to fight back... go on the offensive." If Occupy is going to transform into something else bigger and broader that truly challenges the status quo of the capitalist system it will need a labor movement on the offensive fighting with it. Labor historians can contribute a great deal in imparting the history of labor when it was on the move.

*Tom Alter is a graduate student studying labor history at the University of Illinois at Chicago. He is also a member of Occupy Chicago's Labor Working Group, and is the graduate student ex officio representative on LAWCHA's board.*

2. Author's notes; Micah Uetricht, "A famous Chicago factory gets Occupied," *Salon*, February 28, 2012, [http://www.salon.com/2012/02/28/a\\_famous\\_chicago\\_factory\\_gets\\_occupied/](http://www.salon.com/2012/02/28/a_famous_chicago_factory_gets_occupied/) (accessed February 28, 2012).

# Reports from the LAWCHA/OAH Meeting

Milwaukee, Wisconsin, April 18 - April 22, 2012



Downtown Milwaukee, Wisconsin, site of the 2012 LAWCHA/OAH Annual Meeting.  
Credit: Dori, Wikimedia Commons

*LAWCHA's joint 2012 meeting, held in conjunction with the annual Organization of American Historians meeting, was a smashing success. Over 30 sessions were co-sponsored by LAWCHA, thanks in no small part to the work of OAH program co-chair Nancy MacLean and OAH president and LAWCHA past-president Alice Kessler-Harris. The follow select capsules only begin to give a sense of the full content of the sessions. A summary of the conference highlights, as well as some other session highlights can be found on the LAWCHA website.*

## **The Crisis of the Public Sector and the Fight Over Its Future**

Bill Reck

Given the extent to which recent American political discourse and policy initiatives have centered around the efforts to cut spending on public services, it makes sense that, with the encouragement of LAWCHA, the 2012 meeting of the Organization of American Historians, held in one of the recent epicenters of these initiatives would have a

panel on struggles over the rights of public sector unions and employees.

The speakers, a group of academic and trade unionists, argued a number of points. First, one of the crises in the public sector has been the result of legislation that has curtailed the ability of public unions to provide services for all public employees. The legislation signed into law by Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker in 2011, part of which required existing unions to recertify each year and collect membership dues individually, resulted in significant declines in membership numbers. In turn, there has been a significant fear that these public unions will go to bat only for those workers who pay dues rather than all employees within a workplace. Attendees at this panel were reminded that the service, bureaucratic model of unionism has serious limitations, and that future efforts of public unions would have to take the form of renewed understandings of solidarity.

Second, attendees were reminded that even if forthcoming recalls against Scott Walker were to succeed, and even if public unions in Wisconsin were to regain all of their prior rights under the law, Wisconsinites would do well to continue their efforts to define a new notion of the public good so that Milwaukee's African American popula-



tion might benefit from renewed public sector energy in ways they heretofore have not. In a state that contains one of America's most racially segregated and impoverished cities, discussions over the allocation of public resources might be a better legacy of the assault on the public sector. Attendees learned that reinstating the former conditions of public sector employment, benefits, and unions would be a victory for workers and those who depend upon public services, but also that the energy contained within the debates and peoples' movements must be extended to focus on the populations within American society that are most vulnerable to service cuts.

Third, attendees were reminded that Wisconsin citizens, and citizens across America, have not given up on the notion of the "public" as a concept and as a provider of useful services. Despite efforts to privatize a number of public services, the most prominent of which over the last several years have been education systems – especially in urban and suburban areas – Americans across class, race, and gender lines have not lost the idea that there is a shared responsibility for one another. While there is some debate about the ability of varying levels of government to provide these services equitably and how this might be realized – a real concern, given the historical problems related to municipal codes and the sharing of funds and services across metropolitan and rural regions – the thousands of people present in Madison, Wisconsin, in the spring of 2011 showed that despite divergent views on implementation and outcomes, overall values regarding public services remain supportive. The speakers in this panel did an excellent job of showing that despite political discourses that celebrate rational individualism, Americans have not abandoned the ideas of mutuality and public good.

*Bill Reck is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee studying Milwaukee's north-side neighborhoods in the last decades of the twentieth century*

### **Report on the roundtable "Making Working-Class Women's History"**

Priscilla Murolo

This Friday-afternoon roundtable, co-sponsored by LAWCHA and the OAH Committee on the Status of Women in the Historical Profession, drew an audience of about fifty and generated a lively discussion. The presenters were Jessie Wilkerson and Joey Fink from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Naomi Williams from the University of Wisconsin at Madison. Priscilla Murolo served as the moderator.

Exploring working-class women's activism in the late twentieth century, the presentations challenged the narrative of decline that dominates literature on U.S. labor history in this period and tends to treat the experience of male workers in traditional manufacturing as the paradigm

for working-class experience as a whole. Like the declension narrative, the research that generated this roundtable offers potent critiques of capitalism, but it also offers inspiring visions of ways in which women workers made a way out of no way, finding creative and courageous ways to keep alive the democratic promise of social justice movements of the sixties. Naomi Williams shared her research on low-wage women hospital workers in Racine Wisconsin, who went on strike in 1976 with the slogan "Wages, Not Welfare." Joey Fink and Jessie Wilkerson spoke about their interviews for the Southern Oral History Program's project on the modern women's movement—in particular their collection of testimony from activists in eastern Tennessee who built a grassroots women's movement deeply connected to civil rights activism, labor organizing, and campaigns for economic and environmental justice. Oral history is also a crucial tool for Naomi Williams in her research on women hospital workers. Both the presentations and the discussion that followed stressed oral history's value as a means of giving voice to workers the declension narrative neglects.

*Priscilla Murolo is a LAWCHA board member and Professor of History at Sarah Lawrence College where she is Co-Director of the Graduate Program in Women's History*

### **Laboring the Empire: Roundtable on Work, Culture, and the American Empire**

Dan Bender and Jana Lipman

At the OAH, six scholars, Daniel Bender, Nan Enstad, Dorothy Fujita-Rony, Julie Greene, Jana Lipman, and Kimberly Phillips raised key questions about the intersection between labor and empire in U.S. history: How are our understandings of U.S. empire and global capitalism transformed when we consider the place of work and workers in the making and unmaking of the U.S. empire? And in turn, how are our narratives of U.S. labor organizing and struggles for social democracy complicated and troubled by an imperial project?

The Roundtable was invigorating and brought to light both the constitutive roles of corporate power and military violence within the U.S. empire. Julie Greene opened the roundtable, foregrounding the Progressive Era as an era of "New Empire." She highlighted the contours of the United States' informal empire, its military empire, and the "Wages of Empire" for working people. Nan Enstad then presented her research on the tobacco industry and cigarette production, which created global, and unexpectedly intimate, ties between the American South and China at the turn of the 20th century.

In contrast, Kim Phillips and Jana Lipman both emphasized the reality of formal and military empire U.S. history. Phillips stated bluntly that scholars need to take seriously the "work of killing," and she questioned the way

# Reports from the LAWCHA/OAH Meeting

in which the U.S. military has procured African American labor throughout its history. Lipman also emphasized U.S. military occupations, bases, and colonial routes for men and women in the U.S. military.

Dan Bender then suggested that labor historians look for empire “in all the usual places,” citing the importance of performative labor existing within ethnography and cultural production. Finally, Dorothy Fujita-Rony spoke of Cesar Chavez’s controversial, and largely forgotten visit to the Philippines in the 1970s. She challenged historians to consider moments where empire is erased, not only in standard narratives, but also in celebratory and simplified stories of multiculturalism.

We hope that the conversations which began at the OAH will continue and inspire new studies, as scholars of U.S. working-class history grapple with histories of empire, and in turn, historians of U.S. empire recognize the centrality of work and workers at its core.

*Daniel Bender is assistant professor of History at University of Toronto at Scarborough; Jana K. Lipman is a LAWCHA board member and Associate Professor at Tulane University.*

## “Organizing Workers in the New Jungle”

James Wolfinger

Scholars and activists offered an upbeat assessment of the contemporary state of labor in an era the panel termed “The New Jungle.” Nancy MacLean compared the economic inequality of the Gilded Age to today, but told the audience that new organizing was emerging across the country. Jennifer Klein emphasized how the labor movement has historically been strongest when it thinks expansively: economic citizenship, community organizing, and political engagement must be the watchwords. Kim Bobo of Interfaith Worker Justice emphasized how her organization is working to engage the religious community with organized labor. And Andrea van den Heever recounted how her participation in the 1982 secretary’s strike at Yale shaped her life in the labor movement for UNITE-HERE.

*James Wolfinger is Associate Professor of History and Teacher Education at DePaul University*

## Panel on Eli Zaretsky’s book, Why America Needs a Left: A Historical Argument (Polity Press)

Erik Gellman

Zaretsky led off the session by summarizing the framework and main arguments of his short and accessible book, beginning with the contention that America has always needed, and at times has had, a robust and inde-

pendent left. Zaretsky uses the abolitionist movement as the first of three historical case studies, looking back even before the common use of the word “left” in America in the 1920s. From there, the book examines the socialist upsurge during the New Deal era and the emergence of the New Left movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Each of these case studies came as the result of a crisis in American history where intellectuals devised new ideas to resolve America’s structural economic, social, and cultural problems. The focus of the abolitionists was slavery; the leftists of the 1930s dealt with the perceived breakdown of large-scale capitalism; and, interestingly, Zaretsky defines the third crisis as neoliberalism that emerged in the 1970s but had roots in the previous decade. During each crisis, Zaretsky contends, the left tried transform the American people’s conception of the nation. Each historical incarnation of the left sought out egalitarian practices, including racial, class, and gender relations through attempts at participatory democracy. And in all of these leftist moments, its intellectuals made a contribution to liberalism through tense collaboration and the subsequent liberal adoption of some of their ideas. This theme of a liberal-left relationship helps explain why the last case study - the New Left - did not produce a transformed liberalism, which has allowed for the resurgence of free market ideology and antidemocratic politics over the past three decades in America. In his talk, Zaretsky explained that this legacy motivated him to write a book that cogently describes the historical importance of the left and the need for its reemergence in 2012.

The respondents, David Roediger and Barbara Epstein, took *Why America Needs a Left* as a springboard for a conversation about the history of the leftist thought and movements in America. Roediger began by discussing the activist liberals George Frederickson and Herbert Hill to question which ideological network has become more decimated in our current context, the left or its liberal allies? Moreover, he suggested that the left has a historical problem when having to do the work of liberals, and conversely, when liberals have efficacy in American life, the left becomes free to do important work to transform ideological and cultural frameworks. Roediger also wondered why Zaretsky did not begin the book with the American Revolution as the earliest example of a leftist formation in American history. And in terms of slavery’s abolitionist movement in the mid-19th century, he pointed out that slaves themselves made abolition real rather than abolitionists in the North. Last, he wondered where to place antistatism and anarchism (Haymarket, for example) in this history of the left in American history.

Barbara Epstein followed by discussing the barometer of success of the left as either revolutionary (therefore it has consistently failed), or even if it never met this goal, to acknowledge how the left has dramatically changed American society. She highlighted Zaretsky’s point that the left has done its best work when it has pushed and grappled with liberalism rather than making reformers into its enemies. While she admitted that antagonizing moderates

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became necessary at times to expose the cloak of liberalism covering over mass inequalities, she agreed that Popular Front formations of the left allowed it to make significant social change because these moments produced alliances, social change, and compromise as positive outcomes. Second, Epstein wondered whether the left has always been responsible for bringing about egalitarian ideas, suggesting the need to carefully parse the line historians draw (or fail to draw) between leftists and liberals. (This relates to my own question in the session about Zaretsky's separation of the left from the grassroots actors who made up these social movements). Last, Epstein described the Vietnam War and a lack of a strong class analysis as factors that derailed the New Left. Furthermore, she questioned whether neoliberalism, the last crisis identified in the book, has yet been perceived by most Americans as a crisis. This last point reinforces the need for Eli Zaretsky's book: to debate and teach the flawed, complicated history of the left as a means for current activists to better expose our current crisis and identify potential solutions.

*Erik S. Gellman is a LAWCHA board member and Associate Professor of History, Roosevelt University.*

### **Is there a “Worker Christianity” that is different from that of the bosses?**

Janine Giordano Drake

There were a large number of papers dealing with religion and class at the OAH this year. So many, in fact, one might think we are developing a subfield within labor history on the question of how religion promotes and/or deters patterns of worker exploitation in the United States. On Thursday, a roundtable on “Religion, Corporate Capitalism, and Democracy in the Twentieth Century” focused on the ongoing relationship between the growth of American corporations and the support they have taken from conservative, Protestant Christianity. There, Darren Dochuk, Bethany Moreton, and Darren Grem, each one winners of recent awards for pathbreaking research, together reflected on the fact that evangelical institutions have supported and indeed encouraged business practices that have not always benefited all workers. In one interesting highlight, Moreton and Dochuk reflected on the overlap of some of their research findings, especially the role of the fundamentalist/evangelical institution, John Brown University (Arkansas) in fundamentalist/evangelical boosterism of Walmart and the Religious Right. These scholars draw our attention to new archives of twentieth century capitalist thought—Protestant intellectuals, church communities, and informal friendships within the (often Southern/Midwestern) evangelical Christian world.

However, before we jump to the conclusion, common in our field, that Modern American Protestantism has

consistently worked against the best interests of workers, we find another roundtable, just a few days later, called, “Religion, Democracy, and the Working Class in Capitalist America.” Here, a group of scholars, namely Chris Cantwell, John Hayes, Janine Giordano Drake, Matthew Pehl, and Jarod Roll, affirmed many of the arguments made by the previous panel about modern industrial business practices, however, we focused on how Christian workers mediated and reinvented their faith in response, and sometimes resistance to, industrial capitalism. To quote chair Kenneth Fones-Wolf, whose comment offered a lot to think about, “It seems clear to me that there is a working-class religion worthy of separate study. Working people, as the panelists note, debated tenets, contested authority, crafted theologies, chose meanings, switched faiths, and worshipped in their own styles, and that they did this in part due to their class (although not in any predictable or deterministic fashion). Thus, we need to pay attention to the ways in which they integrated the sacred into their entire lives, and to trace the ideas with which they constructed their theologies.” Indeed, as Herbert Gutman argued years ago, the religion of workers is not necessarily that of the ministers. The Christianity preached from pulpits is not always that which is practiced by workers in their homes or at work.

The field of American Religious History, long dominated by intellectual and denominational histories, is currently exploding with localized, social histories which focus on “lived religion.” This panel on working class history could have included several more participants if the space only allowed. Heath Carter, Thomas Wirth, Dave Burns and Matthew Bowman, and probably more, have also recently finished (or almost finished) very interesting dissertations on working class Christianities within cultural and political context. A recent forum on “class” at the *Journal of Southern Religion* reminds us that this field of “Working Class Religion” could have been simply a new field within Religious History. However, it would be a shame if scholarly attention to working class Christianity helped draw a better picture of our modern American religious ecology but did not better explain the connections between that working class Christianity and the one that continues to lubricate exploitative workplace organizational schemes. It was largely thanks to LAWCHA's sponsorship of these panels that scholars of this subject could come together from such diverse fields as “home fields” as Labor History, Religious Studies, African American Studies, Theology, Southern History, and Cultural/Folk History. From John Hayes' work on the interracial exchange of ideas through Populist folk music to Jarod Roll and Matthew Pehl's work on the role of “shop floor Christianities” to Chris Cantwell and Janine Giordano Drake's work on the role of Bible Studies and churches at large in mediating between the religions of the rich and the religions of the poor, we have more and more reason to believe that working class religion matters. “It not only helps us understand resistance and consent to capitalism “from the bottom up,” but it helps us better understand the way religious working people have made sense

## Reports from the LAWCHA/OAH Meeting



Kimberley Phillips (LAWCHA Immediate Past President) presents to Joe Trotter the LAWCHA Award for Distinguished Service to Labor and Working-Class History at the Annual LAWCHA meeting.  
Credit: Tom Klug



Kimberley Phillips presents Alice Kessler-Harris the LAWCHA Award for Distinguished Service to Labor and Working-Class History  
Credit: Tom Klug

of their world.”

*Janine Giordano Drake is completing her dissertation, “The Church Outside the Church”: The Working Class Religious Left, 1886-1936,” at University of Illinois-Champaign/Urbana.*

### At the Crossroads: Joe Trotter

Liesl Orenic

Milwaukee was a most appropriate location to reflect upon the impact of former LAWCHA president Joe Trotter’s work on the fields of urban history, African American labor history and public history. With an emphasis on his book *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915-1945*, scholars Earl Lewis, Robin Dearmon Muhammad, Eric Fure-Slocum and Liesl Miller Orenic discussed how Trotter’s analyses of black working-class life have challenged historians both inside and outside the traditional classroom to reconsider African Americans’ impact on the urban landscape and the range of public discourses

that helped sustain communities over several generations.

After an overview of Joe Trotter’s academic contributions by Liesl Miller Orenic, Eric Fure-Slocum focused on the modeling Trotter’s work offers other scholars in his rich archival resources and the treasure trove of historiographical discussion found in his appendices. Robin Dearmon Muhammad highlighted Trotter’s expansive treatment of migration as economic, social, institutional and environmental. Earl Lewis emphasized the global roots of Trotter’s scholarship, pointing out that his study of the African diaspora serves as a cornerstone for his prolific research on the African American experience.

When asked by Earl Lewis what projects still demand the attention of scholars Joe Trotter offered four topics: labor relations among black employers and black workers, the intraclass dynamics of the deindustrializing period, challenging the myth of single class communities and the study of non-church people in the African American community

*Liesl Orenic is associate professor at Dominican University in Chicago*



Nelson Lichtenstein presents the 2012 LAWCHA Herbert G. Gutman Dissertation Prize to Marjory Wood  
Credit: Tom Klug



Cindy Hahamovitch, left, receives the ILR/LAWCHA Taft Labor History Prize for 2011 from Prize Committee Chair Ilene DeVault.  
Credit: Tom Klug

### **OAH Session on Alice Kessler-Harris’ Work Through Her Students’ Eyes**

Lisa Phillips

This session, entitled “The Wide-Ranging Significance of Gender: The Influence of Alice Kessler-Harris’ Work through the Eyes of Her Students,” examined her influence on the distinct, but also linked fields of labor and social policy history. Panel members discussed the ways in which Kessler-Harris has been instrumental in creating a truly feminist American labor history that explores the gendered and racialized process of class formation, as well as the experiences, ideas and actions of women workers. The panelists all made the point that Kessler-Harris’ influence proved to be the springboard for rich inquiries into several seemingly diverse fields.

Karen Balcom noted Alice’s emphasis on the importance of collaboration. She, Alice, and Joan Sangster discussed how to research and write transnational histories. Jennifer Brier noted Kessler-Harris’ influence on histories that explore the intersections of gender, race, and sexuality. Beatrix Hoffman emphasized the path Kessler-Harris blazed for research on social policy and the welfare state. Colleen O’Neill discussed the significance of gender applied broadly to research on class and ethnicity. Rounding out the panel, Mary Poole noted Kessler-Harris influence

on her recent collaborative history with the East African Indigenous Maasai (and on participating with them in a land reform movement). Audience members joined in with comments on the Alice’s commitment of time as well as her “tough love” and honest mentoring style, as well as her insistence on writing good history.

*Lisa Phillips is assistant professor at Indiana State University, Terre Haute.*

## **Prize Winners**

### **Philip Taft History Award for 2012**

The Cornell University ILR School, in cooperation with LAWCHA, announced the winner of the 2011 Philip Taft History Award for the best book in American labor and working-class history published in 2011. The winner is Cindy Hahamovitch, College of William and Mary, for *No Man’s Land: Jamaican Guestworkers in America and the Global History of Deportable Labor* (Princeton University Press, 2011). The members of the 2011 Prize committee were: Edward Baptist, Ileen DeVault (chair), Gilbert Gonzalez, Moon-Ho Jung, and Susan Levine. For informa-





LAWCHA Treasurer Tom Klug with graduate student travel grant recipients, left to right: Brandon Ward (Purdue University), Janine Giordano (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign), and Joey Fink (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill).

Credit: Tom Klug

tion on nominations for the 2012 Prize, please visit the Taft Award website, <[www.ilr.cornell.edu/taftaward/](http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/taftaward/)>.

Hahamovitch also received the OAH Merle Curti Award in Social History and the James A. Rawley Prize for a book dealing with the history of race relations in the United States.

### **LAWCHA Herbert Gutman 2011 Dissertation Prize**

The Labor and Working Class History Association announced its sixth annual Dissertation Prize. The prize is named in honor of the late Herbert G. Gutman, a pioneering labor historian in the U.S. and a founder of the University of Illinois Press's "Working Class in American History" Series. This year the winner is Marjorie Elizabeth Wood for her 2011 University of Chicago dissertation, "Emancipating the Child Laborer: Children, Freedom, and the Moral Boundaries of the Market in the United States, 1853-1938." Advisor: Thomas Holt. The Gutman Prize Committee commented that Wood's dissertation "is a multidimensional probe that draws upon scholarship from slavery and emancipation studies, from gender and family history, from the history of consumption and from work on Progressive and New Deal era state building in order to cast a new and revealing light on one of the central issues of labor history.

This is therefore a dissertation very much in the tradition pioneered by Herbert Gutman." The 2012 Committee included Nelson Lichtenstein (chair) Michael Pierce, University of Arkansas, and Heather Thompson, Temple University.

## **Annual Report of the Treasurer**

Tom Klug

The following report is extracted from the more detailed report I presented in April to the Board of Directors at its meeting in Milwaukee.

In financial terms, the Labor and Working Class History Association is in good shape. It ended 2011 with net assets of \$29,299—all in cash in a business checking account. Revenues in 2011 came to \$9,585 and we spent \$10,417, which resulted in an overall deficit of \$832.

Since our beginning in 1999, nearly all of LAWCHA's revenue has come from annual membership dues (which is still \$20 from each regular member and \$10 from each student member). The organization had 506 members at the end of 2011, which amounted to \$9,320 in dues. This contrasted with 537 members and \$9,740 in dues in 2010. Membership, in fact, has fallen over the past two years, ever

# Reports from the LAWCHA/OAH Meeting

since LAWCHA reached its all-time high of 578 members in 2009. One surprising development over the past year has been the sudden and sizeable decline in the number of student members. There were 80 student members at the end of 2011 (15.8% of the entire membership), compared with 100 (18.6%) a year earlier. We are now back to where we were in 2008 when 15.4% of members were students.

On the expenditure side, 84% of our spending in 2011 was directly or indirectly related to two conferences. We contributed \$900 for speaker travel for the Triangle Fire Conference held in March in New York City. The following month, our annual conference took place in Atlanta in partnership with the Southern Labor Studies Association. This conference cost us \$7,881. We offered eight travel grants (at \$250 each) to graduate students, provided an honorarium to a conference speaker, subsidized the Saturday luncheon, paid for a board of directors lunch and a conference reception, and covered the costs of the LAWCHA executive assistant's travel.

At the beginning of this year, the Executive Committee set the 2012 budget at \$9,100. It is based on the assumption that membership and dues revenue will continue to erode this year. On the other hand, we also predict that our expenses will be lower this year than in 2011, mainly due to our annual conference coinciding with the Organization of American Historians' conference in Milwaukee which will entail fewer costs to our organization. We, therefore, anticipate that our revenues will exceed expenditures and we will end the current year with a sizeable surplus.

*Tom Klug has been LAWCHA treasurer since the organization's founding, and is a professor of history at Marygrove College, Detroit, Michigan.*

## **Wisconsin's Progressive History Offers Hope for Workers**

Kenneth Germanson

*The LAWCHA/OAH conference coincided with the annual meeting of the Wisconsin Labor History Society, where every year trade unionists, academics, and public supporters meet to discuss past and present. This year they met in the context of Governor Scott Walker's efforts to assault on workers rights. For more on the conference and WLHS, see <[www.wisconsinlaborhistory.org/](http://www.wisconsinlaborhistory.org/)>.*

If there was any thought that history is irrelevant in today's world, that was dispelled at the 31st Annual Conference of the Wisconsin Labor History Society held April 21 in Milwaukee.

"History is powerful," said Shel Stromquist, the conference keynote speaker, in setting the tone for the daylong event held concurrently with the LAWCHA and the OAH some three blocks away. Stromquist, professor of

history at the University of Iowa and incoming LAWCHA president, was among the founders of the Wisconsin society in 1981 when he worked at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

Never far from the thoughts of the more than 80 participants was the fact that Wisconsin workers and their unions are engaged in a historic struggle to preserve basic worker rights and constant references were made to the anti-union actions of Gov. Scott Walker and the Republican-controlled legislature. There were references, too, of the gigantic rallies held in Madison and of the recall elections being conducted in the state to counter the Republican actions.

Speaker after speaker reiterated the belief that working people need to learn from the past in order to respond effectively to the assault against workers and their unions that is so present in today's world.

Stromquist said that "collaborative action by workers is back," noting that the Madison rallies of 2011 help to spur on campaigns later in other states. "It's hard to imagine the Occupy movement without the uprising in Madison," he said. He called the current worker uprising the "new Wisconsin Idea," comparing it to the original "Wisconsin Idea" formulated early in the 20th Century that developed many pioneering social and worker justice developments. The old Wisconsin Idea, he said, looked to the experts (most of them like John R. Commons from the University) while the "new Wisconsin Idea" looks to the power of the workers. "Workers have seen the vicious attacks by capital on worker rights," he said, and have responded with popular mobilizations as shown in Madison.

The conference theme was "It's Not Over: Reclaiming Wisconsin's Labor Heritage," and Steve Cupery, WLHS President and a teachers' union representative, proclaimed in opening the conference that "This is only the beginning. Something is in the wind and the fight will never be over." Workers and unions are fighting on many fronts and Sheila Cochrane, secretary-treasurer of the Milwaukee Area Labor Council (AFL-CIO) reminded the audience that "within organized labor, we are all workers." She said the enemies of labor are seeking to "divide us," but that it was important to remember that all workers have common goals.

The conference was held in the downtown union hall of the Milwaukee Area Local of the American Postal Workers Union, and Paul McKenna, local president, said the local, formed on Dec. 6, 1906, was the 3rd postal worker unit in the nation. He added that despite being in an "open shop" environment, the local was 96% organized. He noted how it took the "Great Postal Strike of 1970" to get Congress to provide collective bargaining rights to the workers. Now the union is seeking to convince Congress not to cut back on postal services that would cost tens of thousands of jobs. "We have to focus on Congress now," he said.

It was obvious from the discussions that it will take mobilization on many levels to maintain and strengthen worker rights, including electoral politics, legislation and direct action.

## Reports from the LAWCHA/OAH Meeting

Mike Konopacki, prominent cartoonist favored by many unions, said the ability to characterize the boss in a humorous or derisive manner can often work to mobilize workers, while Peter Rickman, an organizer with the “We Are Wisconsin” group, said the use of modern social networking strategies, while important, is only a complement to organizing. “New Media and old-fashioned methods have merged,” he said.

The story of the closing of the giant Janesville, Wisconsin, GM plant – at the time the oldest company facility in the nation – is being memorialized in a documentary being prepared for PBS. Brad Lichtenstein, the videographer, showed scenes from the forthcoming film, including one scene depicting Gov. Walker telling Janesville business people of his plan to “divide” the workers in order to weaken their unions.

The conference ended with five activists discussing what they did and what they learned from participating in the Wisconsin Uprising, along with ideas on how best to restore Wisconsin’s once progressive nature. One of the youngest presenters was Charity Schmidt, a member of the teaching assistance unions and a doctoral student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She said that the growth of the 2011 Madison rallies – and the subsequent recall elections – occurred when the issues went beyond fighting the anti-union actions and involved the Scott Walker Administration’s attack on education, the environment and the social safety net. She said unions need to connect their issues “to the larger picture” and be more inclusive. Also under the age of 30, Muhammed Mati, who has been involved in the “Occupy the Hood” movement in Milwaukee, also called upon unionists to join in developing a “sense of community” and become also involved in issues like cleaning up neighborhoods and specific issues such as reconnecting young people getting out of prison with jobs. He added: “We’re out of touch with each other.”

Among Wisconsin’s 14 Democratic State Senators who fled the state to stall off passage of the Walker Act

10 that took away collective bargaining rights for public employees was Chris Larson of Milwaukee, who stated that being the youngest and newest member of the Senate put him in a strategic position. He was the only one of the 14, he said, who understood the use of social media, and soon became the “messenger” for the group during their weeks in Illinois. He called for unions to “simplify” the message in trying to reach the public, since few persons get involved until they “get hit by a policy.” One of the key labor leaders of the state, Michael Bolton, director of District 2 of the Steelworkers (Wisconsin and Michigan), noted that corporations have become global with their only obligation being to serve their shareholders, making it important to educate and involve workers. He said the recent uprising “leaves us where all workingmen and women belong, not in the corporate boardrooms begging for crumbs, but out on the streets standing up against corporate greed, educating our members on the issues and fighting back for a better life.”

It was Lane Hall, a University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee professor, who brought a bit of levity to the discussion as he described (and showed on a screen) the activities of the Overpass Light Brigade that early in the recall effort began showing up on the bridges over the highways in Wisconsin carrying pro-recall signs forming letters lighted by Christmas tree lights. It was necessary to use the lights because the effort was done during evening rush hours when it was already dark during the November and December period. The messages had to be held by ten or more volunteers, since by law they could not be affixed to the overpass railings. “We wanted to make the message visible to all people, not just those who agree with us,” he noted. Like so many of the efforts in Wisconsin, the Overpass Light Brigade activities were photographed, videotaped and reported by media throughout the nation, helping to show the widespread spirit behind the recall effort.

*Ken Germanson is President Emeritus of the Wisconsin Labor History Society.*

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