

## Midwest Labor and Working-Class History Colloquium Report

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The Midwest Labor and Working-Class History colloquium (MLWCH) was held at the University of Iowa on April 15th and 16th, 2011, and it was a smashing success. Staughton and Alice Lynd joined graduate students in labor history from around the Midwest for the event. Pre-circulated papers were presented in a workshop format on topics including labor and working class history, human rights, immigration, and popular culture. The Lynds and student panelists ensured that the perspective of the colloquium would remain broad and international. Wilson Juarez presented a paper on the struggle to recover the memory of the genocide in Guatemala, and Jessica Schink (University of Iowa) examined mining workers struggles in Bolivia in the 1950s and 1960s. Such topics intersected nicely with Staughton Lynd's recent visit with the Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico, and with the focus of the Lynd's intellectual interests.



On Friday evening, Staughton Lynd gave a rousing keynote speech on guerrilla history to a group of approximately 80 people, many of whom were from the community. In it, he recounted his and Alice's lifelong dedication to social justice and used their experiences to demonstrate how we can practice guerrilla history. He also reminded his audience that thought without action has plagued academia in the United States for many years. To address this conundrum, he called on those who practice history to also develop other professional skills in order to engage in struggles for social justice. The Lynds' personal history of activism on behalf of workers, prisoners, draftees and others is an example of how that can be done.

The Lynds encouraged graduate students who participated in MLWCH to learn to let the voice of historical participants speak by viewing themselves as equal to their subjects. In doing so, historians must reconsider their own intellectual boundaries that often prevent them from capturing history from the perspective of the actor. Alice provided the colloquium with a powerful example of this when she spoke about her and Staughton's work with inmates who are kept in extreme isolation in the Supermax prison in Ohio. The Lynds work closely with inmates and have gained their perspective on issues that take place within the prison, and let the voices of the confined drive their own history. Using this methodology, the Lynds have noticed that white supremacists, Muslim extremists, and black nationalists supported one another to fight against prison guard violence, extreme

isolation, and other human rights issues that prisoners in Supermax institutions experience on a daily basis. Those stories would (and will continue to be) lost unless historians can listen closely to the historical actors and set aside their own personal biases.

Many graduate students and other participants were inspired by the community building that the MLWCH colloquium generated. Sarah Frohardt-Lane (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign) captured the mood of most of the participants when she explained that she and her colleagues from Urbana Champaign, Janine Giordano-Drake and Emily Pope-Obeda, “left feeling so energized about labor history.” Nate Holdren, who studies legal history at the University of Minnesota, explained that, “as someone who is not a labor historian, the colloquium was a fantastic way to meet and engage with a range of scholars in the field.” Wilson Juarez appreciated that sense of camaraderie that is such a central part of MLWCH. In particular he noted that it was “very inspirational because there is not typically a lot of activism in our generation.” This feeling of camaraderie was epitomized in the closing moments of the conference, in which Staughton Lynd led the participants in singing “One Man’s Hands” and “Solidarity Forever.”

Every year, MLWCH generates interest among new scholars who have an interest in labor and working class history, and share a strong commitment to social justice. This year, students from the University of Minnesota and the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee had a particularly strong presence, along with students from Purdue, University of Illinois—Urbana, and University of Iowa. Graduate students in the history department at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee have generously offered to host the colloquium in Spring 2012 (if the University has not been closed by Governor Scott Walker).

**See Also:** [MLWCH Wisconsin Discussion](#)

## Author



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