LAWCHA
The Labor and Working-Class History Association

LAWCHA at the OAH, April, 2012

Posted on May 29, 2012 by Rosemary Feurer

In late April the annual conference of the Organization of American Historians convened in Milwaukee with a program that, thanks to the inspiration of Alice Kessler Harris and the hard work of the OAH program committee and its co-chair Nancy MacLean, gave extraordinary attention to recent developments and current issues in labor and working-class history. In thirty sessions, co-sponsored by LAWCHA, participants heard an unusually rich array of papers and roundtables that included new work on municipal labor politics, black trade unionists and the long civil rights movement, explorations of the historical trajectory of anti-poverty policies and the new challenges of teaching poverty. Other sessions examined the history of capitalism and the state of political economy; new narratives of economic crisis; and labor and empire, past and present. The deep influence that the scholarship of former LAWCHA presidents, Joe Trotter and Alice Kessler Harris (current OAH president), has had on the changing meanings of working-class identity and experience were explored in two sessions devoted to their work. (See the full listing of LAWCHA co-sponsored sessions at the OAH.)

A LAWCHA literature and membership table, staffed by members of the board and graduate student committee and other member volunteers, functioned as a lively point of contact for information about the organization and a discussion site for sharing insights from conference sessions and the future work of LAWCHA.

More than eighty members of the Wisconsin Labor History Society (WLHS)—trade unionists, academics, and public supporters—met concurrently for Saturday sessions at the nearby Postal Workers Union Hall. A stimulating day of discussion focused on the current efforts of Wisconsin public workers and their allies to recall right-wing, anti-union governor Scott Walker and undo his vicious legislative agenda that undermines public workers' right to collective bargaining in the state. LAWCHA president, Shel Stromquist spoke on "Reinventing the 'new Wisconsin Idea.'" A videographer, Brad Lichtenstein, showed clips of a new documentary on the impact of a plant closing in Janesville and cartoonist Mike Konopacki discussed the value of humorous representations of "the boss." A panel of activists evaluated the legacies

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of the past year's struggles and their meaning for the future. For more on the conference and WLHS, see www.wisconsinlaborhistory.org/.

LAWCHA and WLHS members Michael Gordon and Steve Meyer led a Milwaukee Labor History Bus Tour following in the tradition of the legendary tours conducted by Milwaukee's last socialist mayor, Frank Zeidler. Highpoints included the site of the Bayview Massacre, that preceded the Haymarket incident in Chicago by several days.

Current struggles of public workers and the Occupy movement were also the centerpiece of sessions at the OAH-LAWCHA conference (see summaries below by Bill Reck and Linda Gordon.) Secondary school teachers from around Wisconsin attended the conference and a sampling of sessions co-sponsored by LAWCHA as part of their effort to address the new state requirement (preceding Scott Walker's election) for the teaching of labor history in the schools. At a Friday evening reception, LAWCHA and WLHS members had a chance to meet and compare notes with the more than 60 teachers in attendance. And on Sunday afternoon, a capstone session heard LAWCHA members Nikki Mandell, Rosemary Feurer, Andrew Kersten, and Randi Storch discuss new approaches to integrating labor history in school curricula. (See report by Randi Storch below.)

Another session, "Doing Labor History in Public: Recent Experiences with the Politics of Memory and Representation," focused on a longstanding concern of LAWCHA and labor historians working in public domains—how do we protect and defend and interpret historic sites of great meaning to workers and their communities? Presentations revisited struggles around the Ludlow Massacre site, Blair Mountain, the Triangle Fire, the miners' struggles at Virden, Illinois, labor history sites in Boston, and Haymarket. (See report by Jim Green below.)

A moving plenary session brought attention to the enormous influence of the late David Montgomery on the field labor and working-class history and on a life devoted to participation in the labor struggles of his time—as a union organizer and machinist, as an academic historian at Pittsburgh and Yale, and as a public citizen whose ability to bring history bear on the struggles of the present was unequaled. The session was chaired by OAH President Alice Kessler Harris and heard short, deeply felt presentations by Jim Green on Montgomery's scholarship, Andrea Van den Heever from UNITE-HERE on his role in the Yale workers' struggles, and from former students Cecelia Bucki and Yvette Richards Jordan on his extraordinary work with generations of graduate students. Michael Honey shared a musical tribute and

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memories of David's wider influence among historians whom he mentored.

Alice Kessler Harris's presidential address "Capitalism, Democracy and the Emancipation of Belief," examined the persistent tension between the ordering and disordering effects of capitalism and the persistent challenge posed by democratic impulses from resilient social movements and individual social critics. She drew extensively on her just published biography of Lillian Hellman *A Difficult Woman: The Challenging Life and Times of Lillian Hellman* (2012).

The Milwaukee gathering also provided the occasion for LAWCHA's Board of Directors to meet and consider the organization's direction for the coming year, and for the Annual Meeting Luncheon at which awards for Distinguished Service to Labor History were presented to Alice Kessler Harris and Joe Trotter, and the Herbert Gutman Prize for the best dissertation in 2011 to Marjorie Woods, University of Chicago, the Philip Taft Prize for the best new book in labor history to Cindy Hahamovitch, and William Jones for the best article in *Labor*. Three graduate student members of LAWCHA—Janine Giordano (University of Illinois, Urbana), Brandon Ward (Purdue), and Joey Fink (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill)–also received student travel grants for presenting papers at the conference.

The conference provided an extraordinary opportunity to highlight the current vigor of the field and the bright prospects for LAWCHA in the coming years.

Highlights from LAWCHA Co-Sponsored Sessions

Incorporating Labor History into Your Curriculum (Teachers' Session)

Randi Storch, SUNY-Cortland

Sunday's 1:30 session on incorporating labor history into the curriculum was a small but inspired session. Teachers were interested in engaging their students in the history of labor and the struggles of public sector workers, in particular. Whereas teachers throughout the country are working in a hostile climate, Wisconsin's teachers are subject to particular animosity and disdain. Nikki Mandell opened the session by asking teachers to think about the Wisconsin law that legislates labor history into the curriculum. What do teachers want to know about labor history, and what do they want their students to know? Randi Storch continued by discussing the various impediments that are put in the place of integrating labor history into our classes, including national and state curricular standards and chronologies and

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less than informative textbooks. Storch then focused attention to a thread of links on LAWCHA's teaching resources website that highlighted workers' experiences leading up to the winning of collective bargaining rights, a role-playing exercise that allowed students to engage in collective bargaining, and then LAWCHA's on-line collection of writings that focus on meaning of the Wisconsin fight to remove those rights. Andrew Kersten focused on key themes in Wisconsin's curriculum that would allow teachers to infuse the teaching of labor into their classes. And Rosemary Feurer gave an overview of her teaching resources website and several exercises that focused on the inequality of wealth in the United States.

The Crisis of the Public Sector and the Fight over its Future

Bill Reck, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (graduate student)

The Saturday afternoon session, "The Crisis of the Public Sector and the Fight over Its Future," was unusually full. Attendees were treated to a lively round of presentations and a vibrant session of comments, all of which were intended to remind those in the conference hall that the notion of the public, both the public sector and public mutual obligation, have not been destroyed by neoliberalism and, more specifically, the political struggles in Wisconsin centered around the efforts of legislators and business councils to roll back public union rights and public sector benefits.

Presenters came from a wide range of backgrounds, from academia to activism to unions (not to mention all of the links therein!), but the overarching message was the same: without a notion of public good; without a notion of public mutuality and service; without a notion of public obligation, especially to those members of society who have been most victimized by economic changes and discrimination; and without public unions acting like unions rather than as myopic service organizations, we really are the atomized individuals that media representations and politicians make us out to be. The good news here was, of course, that those in attendance were consistently reminded that what public and political discourses make us out to be are exactly what Wisconsinites and Americans are not: the fight of public sector unions quickly became a struggle that drew in broad swaths of the population, thus making clear that the public as a concept and more literally as providing useful, accessible services to citizens has not been eliminated at the level of everyday life despite the long trajectory of attacks against anything not associated with privatization and atomization.

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“The Context and Practice of the ‘Occupy’ Movement

Linda Gordon, New York University

Through the OAH’s “Hot Topics” category, which saves slots for last-minute additions to the annual meeting program, Linda Gordon organized a panel on the Occupy movement, sponsored by LAWCHA. Although scheduled during the last time slot, Sunday at 10, the turnout of 50-60 people was impressive. Alexander Shashko of the University of Wisconsin/Madison opened with a review of the Wisconsin resistance to Governor Scott Walker and Co.’s campaign to crush labor unions and demonstrated how Wisconsin’s uprising helped detonate the Occupy uprising. Alice O’Connor of University of California/Santa Barbara discussed how narratives of inequality were constructed and reconstructed in recent years: following the 2008 crash, Wall Street was identified as the villainous predator on the rest of us; after this the Right-wing rewrote the story, attempting to blame unions, public-sector workers and taxes as the villains; now Occupy works to re-identify Wall St and inequality as the problem. Then two non-historians (who generously came to Milwaukee for this purpose) spoke. Penny Lewis of CUNY-Brooklyn’s Labor Studies program argued that Occupy can only develop real clout through alliance with unions, and described ongoing relations between the two. Susan Dirr of the labor-rights group within Chicago’s Occupy movement discussed gender issues and analyzed the reasons that Occupy has not so far prioritized issues such as the attack on reproductive rights. (Barbara Ransby of University of Illinois/Chicago, initially on the panel to discuss Occupy and black radical politics, had to withdraw in order to speak at the conference about Manning Marable’s work in New York.) The lively discussion continued well past the official closing time of the panel, and ended with a strong statement by Shashko that historians have a moral obligation to find ways, no matter how small, to contribute to these struggles.

Doing Labor History in Public: Recent Experiences with the Politics of Memory and Representation

Jim Green, University of Massachusetts, Boston

Former LAWCHA president Kim Phillips chaired a LAWCHA/OAH Session on “Doing Labor History in Public” at the wonderful meetings in Milwaukee.

I noted the various existing labor history trails and tours (many listed on our website) and described a walking tour of Boston sites I have been doing since 2000.

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I mentioned the way our scholarship can bring to life certain sites and reinterpret others, and how these tours, however modest, are a contribution LAWCHA members can make to the public and, specifically to union members, who appreciate them a great deal. Rosemary Feurer spoke about her work on the 1897-1905 mine wars in Illinois. The short DVD about Mother Jones from this project has led to local results (the largest bas relief in Illinois has been erected in Virden, Illinois) and global collaboration with folks in Cork, Ireland, who plan to erect a bronze plaque on the 150 year commemoration of her baptism this August. Elizabeth Jameson described her role in a four-year collaboration that resulted in LAWCHA's most successful public history effort thus far: gaining National Landmark Status for the Ludlow massacre victims' memorial. Betsy had some people in tears when she described speaking at the Ludlow rededication, and seeing one of the survivor's sons, Frank Petrucci, in the crowd. Annelise Orleck described the massive and successful efforts undertaken to commemorate the Triangle Fire in New York City. Larry Spivack, President of the Illinois Labor History Society, discussed the many efforts ILHS has made to restore the Haymarket martyrs' memorial and to conduct labor tours in Chicago. There are so many requests for these tours, he told me, that he needs help from our members. Mike Honey summarized highlights from his great book on the Memphis sanitation workers strike and described the inspiring ways in which the Lorraine Motel was saved and transformed into a civil rights museum Taken together, these brief presentation were an impressive display of what labor historians are doing in the public arena preserve and interpret important sites and memorials from labor's past. However, we had hoped the make the session a kind of workshop as well, a chance for our members to talk with us and discuss future projects. That workshop, or workshops, can, I hope, be programmed for the next LAWCHA meeting.

At the Crossroads: Joe Trotter, the Syntheses of African American, Urban, Public, and Labor Histories

Liesl Orenic, Dominican University

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

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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 historigraphical 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 intra-class dynamics of the deindustrializing period, challenging the myth of single class communities and the study of non-church people in the African American community.

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

Priscilla Murolo, Sarah Lawrence College

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

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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.

Author

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  Rosemary Feurer

  Rosemary Feurer is Professor of History at Northern Illinois University. She is the author of *Radical Unionism in the Midwest, 1900-1950,* among other books and essays. She is working on The Illinois Mine Wars, 1860-1940 and a new biography of Mary Harris "Mother" Jones.

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