



Teaching Working-Class Literature in Labor History Courses

Posted on February 2, 2013 by Erik Loomis

[Labor Notes conducted an informal survey of labor activists, asking them about their favorite class-conscious novels.](#) The range of works was pretty interesting (and gave me a good reading list as well). It got me thinking about teaching working-class literature in history courses. I don't teach all that much fiction, tending to prefer a memoir like Ben Hamper's *Rivethed* or Jack Metzgar's *Striking Steel*. But in the last few years, I've taught three novels: John Steinbeck's *In Dubious Battle*, Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, and Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*.



John Steinbeck's *In Dubious Battle* (1936)

I had the greatest success with Steinbeck. The accessible language works well with undergraduates and I always appreciate how Steinbeck articulates the complexity of organizing. The students did alright with Sinclair, possibly because many had been exposed to *The Jungle* before, but I find the novel quite unpleasant to read. I realize this admission

will probably get me a stern talking to, but I just don't like it. I used Bellamy to introduce a course on the Gilded Age. I thought it was a great way to introduce them to the social and economic inequities of the time and give them a sense of how Americans were thinking about the change, but the students just hated it. I've wanted to try part of John Dos Passos' *U.S.A.* trilogy, but I'm not real sure the students could handle it.

Anyway, I thought this might be a useful entry point into a discussion of teaching working-class literature in our history courses. What books have people found useful or not so useful?

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