



## How Might We Teach the History of Labor Journalism?

Posted on March 13, 2018 by Christopher Phelps

"[The Labor Beat](#)," the new issue of *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History* guest-edited by Max Fraser and me, focuses on labor journalism's past and present. This post suggests strategies and resources for teachers at high school or university level looking to use this special issue to bring the history of labor journalism alive for students.

Editor's Note: Duke University Press makes available one article per issue of *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History* to non-subscribers, for 3 months after posting. We have selected Christopher Phelps' recent article, [Heywood Broun, Benjamin Stolberg, and the Politics of American Labor Journalism in the 1920s and 1930s](#). We welcome your comments about this essay.

[Max Fraser's interviews](#) of Steven Greenhouse, Jane Slaughter, and Sarah Jaffe show that labor journalism is alive and fiesty today, even if it has been wounded by deep cuts to newsroom staffs. Each journalist approaches the craft with sympathy for union labor, but they have different styles and dispositions. Teachers might consider assigning students the task of tracking down online one or two of the articles these journalists have written (Greenhouse's may most easily be found in the [New York Times](#), Slaughter's in [Labor Notes](#), and Jaffe's at [Dissent](#) and [The Nation](#)). Using their interviews with Fraser, what can be said about each writer's respective approaches and strengths? What causes and remedies do their analyses suggest for the problems facing the labor movement?



Trezzvant W. Anderson  
(1906-63) was a railway  
postal clerk, labor activist,  
and newspaper  
correspondent

[Kim Moody's article](#) on the Gilded Age labor press opens up interesting questions about the structure of labor journalism, particularly the varied venues in which it appears. Students might be prompted to contrast the kind of labor press he focuses on—do-it-yourself working-class movement papers of the 1880s—with official union organs, commercial newspapers, and liberal weeklies, all mentioned in my own article on [Heywood Broun and Benjamin Stolberg](#) in the 1920s and 1930s, or with the Negro press of the 1930s and 1940s so central to Willie James Griffin's article on black postal worker [Trezzvant Anderson](#).



The Seattle Union Record was one of many labor newspapers in the early twentieth century

Students might also be encouraged to reflect on social commitment in journalism. Political and class consciousness are found in Moody on John Swinton and Joseph Buchanan, Griffin on Anderson, me on Broun and Stolberg, and [Gabriel Winant on Barbara Ehrenreich](#) and her New Left feminist explorations of class prior to *Nickel and Dimed* (2001). Students could be broken into small groups to make some comparative judgments. What are the strengths and perils of outspokenly political journalism? Is “objectivity” desirable? Can any journalism avoid “advocacy”?

Instructors who value film’s ability to bring the past to life for students might consider using [Reds](#) (1981), Warren Beatty’s passionate evocation of radical labor journalist John Reed—or just a scene or two, perhaps the one when he is on hand to report on an Industrial Workers of the World meeting broken up by police, or else the one when he rebukes a magazine editor, exclaiming, “You just don’t rewrite what I write. You got that? Don’t rewrite what I write!”



Reporters surround Labor Secretary Frances Perkins at time of Flint, Michigan, automotive industry sit-down strikes, January 21, 1937. (Library of Congress)

Moody's Gilded Age article might be paired with *Newsies* (1992), a Disney musical about a nineteenth-century newsboy's strike. Winant's excavation of Ehrenreich's early years might be illuminated by an episode of *Good Girls Revolt* (2015), a short-lived Amazon television drama series that was critically praised and based on a non-fiction book about women's challenges to gender discrimination at *Newsweek* in the sixties. (Season 1, Episode 6 covers both women's organizing in the newsroom and the magazine's coverage of the 1970 postal wildcat strike.) These shows could prompt discussions about how labor journalism takes place in workplaces and how news industry employees are workers too.

For well over a century, those working the labor beat have stoked public awareness and provided the views by which labor has understood itself. A democratic classroom that stimulates students to reflect on the production and construction of news may make them shrewder in detecting how class and labor are represented in the news media that surrounds them.

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