LAWCHA
The Labor and Working-Class History Association

The University of Iowa Labor Center Is Under Attack

Posted on July 22, 2018 by Jacob Remes
The University of Iowa Labor Center is under attack. LAWCHA has mobilized to support the fight to keep it open.

The Center is a 67-year-old major institution in Iowa, teaching thousands upon thousands of students and workers, conducting research, reaching out to the community, and generally serving as a critical voice of labor knowledge and advocacy. It will be a disaster to lose the Center. It is closely affiliated with LAWCHA–its director, Jen Sherer, is a recent board member, and John McKerley, who directs the Oral History Program, is a longtime member who has worked with us on various projects.
The officers, board, and past presidents of LAWCHA wrote a letter to the university's president, dean, and board. You can find it below. In addition, our friends in Iowa are asking everyone to take time to sign this petition: https://saveourlaborcenter.com/take-action.

July 17, 2018

Dear President Bruce Harreld, Dean Kevin Washburn, and the Iowa Board of Regents:

The Labor and Working-Class History Association (LAWCHA) urges you to reverse the decision to close the University of Iowa Labor Center. LAWCHA brings together hundreds of labor educators, historians, and working-class activists to promote a better understanding of working men and women's role in the United States and around the world. Today, at a time when workers' rights are under attack and inequality is on the rise, we need more research, teaching, and community engagement around labor issues, not less.

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For 67 years the UI Labor Center has brilliantly generated new research, taught thousands of students, and provided better understanding of labor issues. It was established in response to a call from Governor William Beardsley for greater "knowledge and understanding of labor and industrial relations." The UI Labor Center is the only Iowa state unit devoted to research and education on labor and workplace issues. Its innovative historical research and teaching is widely known and respected among scholars nationwide. Every year, the center teaches non-credit classes to over 2,000 continuing education students; provides instruction to undergraduate general education courses in labor history and labor studies; coordinates student research, experiential learning, internships and career placement; and conducts interdisciplinary research on a wide range of labor and workplace issues.

The center plays an important role in the field of labor and working-class history. Labor Center staff have served on LAWCHA's elected board; published in our journal, *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History*; and contributed to our national initiatives to develop undergraduate and K-12 teaching materials. In the late 1990s, the UI was among the founding institutions of the Midwest Labor and Working-Class History Colloquium, an important forum for graduate education that draws students from around the region and beyond. Center staff have played a key role in bringing together faculty from Midwestern institutions to support the development of emerging scholars.

The center directs the illustrious Iowa Labor History Oral Project (ILHOP), an almost fifty-year-old oral history collaboration between the university, the State Historical Society of Iowa, and the Iowa labor movement. ILHOP has contributed to hundreds of dissertations, articles, and books in labor and working-class history, including several path-breaking studies of workers in the twentieth-century Midwest. Since 2015, ILHOP has collected hundreds of new interviews focused on the years since 1970, providing documentation for critically important and little understood areas of historical inquiry. Indeed, just as the Labor Center's closure was announced, ILHOP staff had begun work on a major project funded by a $200,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) to increase online access to its newly digitized collection of over 1,200 interviews. This is just one indication of the national recognition the Labor Center has received for its research and teaching. But perhaps ILHOP's most unique aspect and greatest strength is its connection to the communities where interviewees live and work—a connection made possible only through the broad-based work of the center as a whole, and its ongoing

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educational outreach.

The Labor Center epitomizes the three pillars of the university's core teaching, research, and outreach missions. Claims to the contrary fly in the face of the university's own strategic plan, which emphasizes student success, research, and engagement. We are also acutely aware that the proposed closure comes on the heels of attacks on workers' rights in Iowa and politically motivated assaults on labor education across the United States. In this light, we are particularly concerned that the planned closure allows the UI College of Law to repurpose funds historically allocated to the center.

Closing the UI Labor Center would be a tremendous loss, not only to the 1.6. million workers in Iowa but to teachers and students in Iowa and across the country. We call on you to reverse the decision to close the Labor Center, rescind the furlough notices given to Labor Center employees, and recommit the Labor Center's existing university funding to Labor Center activities.

Sincerely,

The Labor and Working-Class History Association

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Jacob Remes is a historian of modern North America with a focus on urban disasters, working-class organizations, and migration. He is a founding co-editor of the *Journal of Disaster Studies*, the co-editor, with Andy Horowitz, of *Critical Disaster Studies* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021), and a series co-editor of the Penn Press book series *Critical Studies of Risk and Disaster.* His first book, *Disaster Citizenship: Survivors, Solidarity, and Power in the Progressive Era* (University of Illinois Press, 2016) examined the working class

response to and experience of the Salem, Massachusetts, Fire of 1914 and the Halifax, Nova Scotia, Explosion of 1917. He has also written scholarly articles on a variety of other subjects ranging from interwar Social Catholicism to Indigenous land rights to transnational printers in the 19th century. His popular writing on subjects relating to his research has appeared in the *Nation, Atlantic, Time, Salon,* and elsewhere. Before coming to Gallatin,

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