

## Two Decades of LABOR History: An Interview with Leon Fink

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*Editors note: LAWCHA members will be receiving an abbreviated version of this essay in the 2022 newsletter. We are glad to be able to post the entire interview with Leon Fink, retiring editor of Labor: Studies in Working Class History [here](#).*

**Max Krochmal:** Let's start at the beginning. Tell me about the founding of *LABOR*. What did you hope to accomplish with *LABOR*, and how did it relate to other extant journals at the time?

**Leon Fink:** As I think about this first question, I'm drawn back into some history. I want to go back to my own experience with *Labor History* where I sat on the editorial board for several years. It was in the change of leadership at *Labor History* that I see much of the impulse for what became *LABOR*. *Labor History* was a venerable but tired product by the late 1990s. The field had surpassed the journal in important ways, so much so that some of the most energetic, original, and most distinguished contributors to the field were not really connecting to it.

*Labor History* had had three editors since its founding in 1960: Richard Morris, Milton Cantor, and then Daniel Leab, who ended up serving as editor for some 26 years from 1974 on. It was a journal that was really framed in a different time and format, produced by the Tamiment Institute, which itself was a nonprofit foundation rooted in the garment unions that, at that time, published another journal, *The New Leader*, a basically right wing social democratic journal that had a number of distinguished contributors, but had really fallen into near obsolescence politically. The Tamiment Institute was led by a gerontocracy and was not doing well financially after the decline of their socialist and labor summer camps. So *Labor History*'s first publication in 1960 came in that context, and it had the blessing of George Meany and even the Secretary of Labor, so it had semi-official support and tutelage.

**Krochmal:** What were your perceptions of the *Labor History* when you joined its editorial board?

**Fink:** *Labor History* was really a top-down operation, so much so that those of us on the board knew very little about how the journal was run, we didn't have annual meetings, and we didn't even have annual reports to the to the to the board from the managing editor. We had very little say in the running of the journal. The chairman of the board was Sidney Fine—it was very much old school labor history despite the fact that it was benefiting in its later years from the increasing entry into the field of a whole new generation of so-called “New Labor Historians,” which I was one, so it was doing well in terms of the number of submissions. Yet many of us felt that it was not taking advantage of this new wind from social history, and that was the impetus for me to apply to become editor when Dan retired in 2002.

When I first joined the board, I noticed that more essays about 19th-century topics had been submitted in the early decades than were being submitted in the late 1990s. There was even an influx of post-World War Two topics. So this trend that people notice and talk about now had clearly emerged much earlier. There were also a lot of submissions that were more concerned with gender and race than with class or organization, so, again, this is a current tendency with long coattails.

Last, the journal was in a position of financial stress. Because it wasn't sponsored by a press, Dan Leab was paid by the Tamiment and would hire people for certain specific tasks, such as a proofreader or a printer, as he went along. Shortly before I took it over as editor, we learned that the printing contract had been turned over to Carfax, which was part of the Taylor and Francis empire, with which we would soon have a more intimate connection. When I became editor, we learned that Tamiment had actually sold the entire journal and its copyright to Taylor and Francis—that the printer had bought out the journal. Initially that seemed to go fine, but within months the new Taylor and Francis editors asked us to publish six times a year for reasons of finance. They suddenly announced that part of their own agreement to take over the journal was the promise of an enhanced revenue stream, with higher library subscription rates to be justified by stepping up their publication schedule. It effectively was a speed-up, and it just would not work, but they were so intransigent on the matter that it led to a move in the night by me and fellow editors, including Julie Greene, who was Reviews Editor, and she was crucial, and with support from my department chair at UIC, Eric Arnesen, and a number of other key people—Nelson Lichtenstein, Eileen Boris, Sue Cobble, John French, and others who advised us.

**Krochmal:** What do you mean by “a move in the night”? Sounds dramatic for an historical journal.

**Fink:** I became the editor in the middle of 2002. My first issue of *Labor History* highlighted

Jeff Cowie’s article about Nixon on the cover. But inside it also showed our larger sensibility at that moment. In my editor’s note, I wrote “Welcome to the new *Labor History*. As editors, we hope to see this venerable quarterly—in print since 1960—expand its conceptual, intellectual and political reach in several ways. . . We intend to remain attuned to events in the world around us, as well as intellectual trends in the academy. On the former front, the contemporary issues associated with ‘globalization’—including sweatshops, trade agreements, new immigration, and growing inequality—offer an opening wedge to a host of issues awaiting historical contextualization. To take advantage of this changing world, we labor historians will need to expand our arena of curiosity and sharpening our faculties of understanding.”<sup>[1]</sup> We extended it geographically to include the Americas, added new features in Contemporary Arts and Media, revived the Notes and Documents section of primary texts, and opened a new Teaching Labor History section. So the creation a few years later of *LABOR: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* built on, and again extended, that conceptual framework.

Despite these initial intellectual innovations, we entered into a really a tumultuous year in 2003 with Taylor and Francis over the speed-up issue. When any acceptable compromise with the T&F higher-ups appeared impossible, we quietly reached out to a few university presses and surreptitiously reached agreement with Steve Cohen at Duke University Press to begin publication of a new journal the following year. Amazingly, we were able to mobilize out entire board behind the new project and also quickly reached agreement with LAWCHA president Jim Green to formally affiliate with the association. By July, however, we were still contractually trying to meet our obligations with *Labor History* to finish the year. We thus didn’t go public with the dispute, but we did summarize at the end in our last issue what we had accomplished, and what we were still hoping to do, and here’s how Julie Greene and I put it: “In this very short time span, we have featured worker-subjects ranging from colonial and Civil War soldiers to early 20th century teamsters, factory inspectors, and mineworkers to more contemporary poultry processes and welfare mothers. Connecting to political history, we have offered new takes on Richard Nixon and William Z. Foster as well as on NRA codes, social security legislation, and the World Trade Organization. Conceptually, we have from several angles plumbed the complexity of race, racism, and ethno-racial identity as they have affected both labor and radical movements. Our pages have also thoughtfully introduced the themes of geography, military history, personal narrative (and of course animal rights [the theme of the final issue]) for consideration by our readers.” After thanking all of the contributors and editors and assistants, I concluded, “May their example serve further to inspire our future Labor” and that last word was capitalized, suggesting the new journal *LABOR*, although it obviously went unelaborated to escape any censure from Taylor and Francis editors.<sup>[2]</sup>

**Krochmal:** How was the larger field of labor history changing in this moment, and since? How did *LABOR* respond?

**Fink:** All the editors had been trained in the “new” labor history, including myself. We had all come of age professionally by 2004. I was already a young full professor and so were many of my peers, at that stage of our careers. We had entered a moment of transition in the field at the time of the journal’s transition. We were already concerned with what was happening to the field of labor history, both intellectually and politically, and we were challenged by a number of factors, including the weakness of the organized labor movement itself and, therefore, with the question of “who were the allies that we could depend on?”; “what did it mean to write for and about a social movement based on workers, even if we widen the definition?”—essentially, “how much of a there, was there?” And that also meant, professionally, “would there be jobs for so-called labor historians and for how long, or was the air effectively going out of our field?” These are issues that have continued to concern all those of us in the field, but they were there from the beginning of *LABOR*. On the other hand, labor historians were making a huge impact on other sub-fields such as African American history and women’s and gender history and were effectively inserting class into the larger field of U.S. history. We had always been a rebellious subdiscipline, but by the end of the twentieth century, we were building new institutions, LAWCHA and *LABOR*. We had come into our own.

Intellectually, we worked hard to broaden the scope of *LABOR*, ultimately going global in reach and trying to expand especially in regard to issues of coercive forms of labor, outside the free labor paradigm that had defined the field. We engaged with slavery and with more marginalized sectors and systems of labor, and we attempted to deal with new kinds of work and issues that are outside the framework of trade unionism because they’re outside collective bargaining. Soon, many of these changes were represented within our pages. A great recent example is the special issue guest edited by Christopher Phelps on “Class and Consent,” that is, on sexual harassment at the workplace.<sup>[3]</sup> None of the articles included in the issue would have been published in the old *Labor History* under the old regime, so that represents a dramatic transformation of what constitutes the field of, at least, academic labor history.

At the same time, we’ve never lost touch with or some of the original impulses in the field, and you can see that in the very last issue that we published in May 2022. There’s a tribute to Richard Trumka, the head of the AFL-CIO who died. There’s an article on Pearl McGill and women pearl-button workers, one on the United Steelworkers’ role in building the private welfare state, and finally one on Jewish labor organizations and popular art and antiracist education during World War Two. All of the articles are basically within a union

framework, so the old paradigms remain virtually the entire subject matter. Far from being excluded, they continued to pop up because people who are working in this area still look to our pages for a prime outlet for their work.

On a more worrisome note, we have to acknowledge that the supply has dwindled a bit, the quantity of submissions has really dropped from the from the late 1990s when we received as many as 50 submissions a year, and then in the ought's (2000's), we were seeing 30 to 40, and more recently, it's more like 20, so that's not the best sign. That's an issue which all of us associated will have to take up.

**Krochmal:** Is this because we've been too effective in injecting our work into the broader field of U.S. history? Are we victims of our own success?

**Fink:** In a recent *Journal of American History*, there was a piece called, "Household Accounts: Black Domestic Workers in Southern White Spaces during the Great Depression," which was an imaginative use of white archives to cast light on the lives of Black domestics in the 1930s. It's outside the traditional "workers as agents" viewpoint but it also suggests that the larger public, at least the academic public, remains interested in labor history, especially to the extent that it's connected to questions of African American history or slavery or post-slavery or Jim Crow, etc. Another example of the imaginative margins is a paper that Lara Vapnek gave at our DC Labor History Seminar on lactation and the workplace and that's a remarkably novel topic, but one that seems obvious in retrospect, as an important one. So we have to acknowledge that the framework of labor history has been altered and the boundaries have been altered.

**Krochmal:** So in other words, you and the other editors have taken the "new" labor history and made it "new new," broadening it in all these ways without losing track of the originals—it's a "both-and" situation. You've made it more intersectional and more centered on workers' whole beings, not just their workplace experiences and not just their unions. And, and as a result, the journal *LABOR* and labor historians have had this tremendous impact on the field of US history, so that so much of the work being presented, say, at the OAH, is taking class seriously and interfacing with work that we have done in our field. But this represents an interesting contradiction for institutions like LAWCHA or *LABOR*. How do we create a home for up-and-coming academics when we've become so central that we're no longer looked to as a radical alternative and, on the flip side, how do we rebrand or pitch ourselves to scholars who don't come from union households or communities and don't really even know what labor unions are, but who are working on social histories that incorporate class in ways that are very recognizable to us—how do we get those folks in our front door?

**Fink:** It's a bit of a challenge for a group that has long prided itself on being rebels, to some extent. I think we maybe have need to recognize the sell-by date on how novel or distinctive our position about class is. Maybe a lesson for us is to further engage a wider set of subject matter, not just politics but also issues of climate or the military, topics that have not been the bread and butter of labor history. Certainly, imperialism as a whole is a popular frame now, but it has labor angles too. I think we should welcome people doing any almost any topic so long as they themselves find a connection to the themes of inequality of power and how people might come together, and examples of collective movement building. I think we have to stay attuned to the main themes in the world around us and see how we can adapt to those themes, and how our historical antennae can help deepen our understanding of those things. The classic question is, "What is the elephant in the room?" Going back some years the elephant in the room was that we weren't dealing with race; in other years the elephant in the room was gender and sexuality. What's the elephant in the room today? What are we not dealing with? I think that's our challenge and therefore needs to guide us, rather than expecting people to follow some older script about what labor history is.

In fact, speaking of elephants in the room, we have an upcoming issue of *LABOR* with an actual elephant on the cover. The cover article will be about circus workers, so we feature a picture of an elephant in the ring. Finally, we found the elephant in the room!

**Krochmal:** Looking ahead to the future, what are some new areas of inquiry in the field that we could imagine?

**Fink:** We need a forum or focus on rethinking work, that is what do we mean by work? One self-criticism of the field is that we don't have that many pieces that describe the actual relations at the workplace. There may be particular grievances that we seize on, but there's very little about how work itself has changed within an occupational group, or the impact of distance work. People talk about platform capitalism, but the actual nature of work, how it's changed, does work have different meanings for people?—these are questions we need to ask. Is work less meaningful for a lot of people than it used to be? Is it no longer central source of their identity and fulfillment? I don't know, but I would like to see some rebalancing in this area. It will fall to other hands to figure out how to make it a reality.

**Krochmal:** What are your hopes and dreams for the new editor, and for the future of the journal?

**Fink:** It'll be 20 years when I retire. I don't want to set an agenda for the next editor, but I'm hoping that there will be fresh ideas and, ultimately, a new generation of leaders in labor history. I don't think that will happen overnight, but I do sense that there is a whole

group of us in my cohort who are retiring, and then there was a bit of the falling off when labor history became less attractive professionally, but now again, there's a whole new cohort of younger people inspired by current events, writers with and without academic standing who are coming up and eager to have a say. So I'm hoping that this new generation will stamp the field in its image soon enough.

[1] Leon Fink, "Editor's Introduction," *Labor History* 43, no. 3 (August 2002), 245.

[2] Leon Fink and Julie Greene, "Editors' Introduction," *Labor History* 44, no. 4 (November 2003), 420.

[3] *LABOR: Studies in Working-Class History* 19, no. 1 (March 2022).

## Author



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