LAWCHA
The Labor and Working-Class History Association

Nancy Felice Gabin, 1954-2024

Posted on July 5, 2024 by Lisa Philips

“Professor Gabin,” as I will always remember her, set a standard few of us will meet. Her research and writing, meticulous and groundbreaking. Her teaching, riveting. Her comments were always honest, fair, thorough (and brutal), all designed to push us, her students, to better research and scholarship.

Her *Feminism in the Labor Movement* was published as part of the cutting edge of what we called “women’s labor history” at the time. There simply had been little to NO accounting of the work women actually did “throughout time” but, particularly, in the United States in the twentieth century in the really masculine auto, steel, meatpacking industries, all men or so we thought. Professor Gabin brought us the histories NOT of women who worked alongside men (although they did) but of the women who took it to the men they worked with. Hers was an intricate study of the ways in which women negotiated the ever-changing gender line before, during, and after World War II as they unionized the auto industry. It was the story of their direct challenge to sexism as part of the United Auto Workers’ (UAW) “Women’s Auxiliary,” the title of which was symbolic of women’s “place” just as they were challenging it. In her expert hands, an entire two, now almost three, generations of

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scholars understand women's contributions as not "auxiliary" but central to the US economy.

Her work at Purdue with thousands of students, some of whom followed in her footsteps, is impossible to adequately acknowledge for the fields of history, labor, and women's and gender scholarship. Should you want a "quick" snapshot of Nancy's impact, do a google scholar search for her. The sheer number of "hits" leave a paper trail of extraordinary influence. Even her book reviews and footnotes are something to behold, again setting the standard for all of us from students to established professors. She hated "fluff" and encouraged us to avoid writing empty sentences, to interrogate what we were reading, to be critical, find flaws, and push the scholarship forward. Doing so, as she did for decades, takes a tremendous about of time and yet her office door was always open.

I took my first history class with Prof Gabin in 1989, a women's history course the semester she was pregnant with her daughter Katie. She would get short of breath "because of the baby." I can not express how important it was for me to see a young professor deliver fascinating lectures, while pregnant and openly talking about it. Katie was born on Valentine's Day, a pink heart let us know as we walked by Professor Gabin's door. There is so much more to write and so much to miss. If we're supposed to leave a mark in this world, Nancy more than did and I, for one, will be forever grateful for taking that first class with her.

Nancy contributed much to building LAWCHA. She served on program committees and chaired election committees, including assistance in ensuring that our electronic voting system worked alongside paper balloting for those who preferred it.

Author

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Organizing and Labor Radicalism. She is working on history of labor relations at Disney and teaches at Indiana State University.

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