



Business and Labor Historians: Friends till the End

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The theme of the 2025 Business History Conference (BHC) was “The Business of Labor.” (Held in Atlanta, Georgia, from March 13-16). BHC in its annual gathering has long been open to scholars interested in labor and working-class history, and this year’s meeting featured dozens of labor-related topics, including three state-of-the-field roundtables. Dozens of scholars from around the world, including those from economics, history, and sociology departments as well as faculty members affiliated with business schools, presented on a variety of topics focusing on different times and places. Above all, the keynote speaker, University of Georgia’s Stephen Mihm, delivered an outstanding address that highlighted his personal connections to questions related to class as well as how the declining power of the working class, expressed most pointedly by how the near-eradication of labor unions and the iconic industries in which they once flourished, has pushed voters to support reactionary politicians like Donald Trump.



Roger Horowitz

A good number of LAWCHA members and self-identified labor historians, including former LAWCHA president Cindy Hahamovitch, participated in the conference and had favorable things to say about Mihm's keynote address as well as the individual panels. We can identify other reasons why the organization has been so open to labor history: The BHC's long-serving secretary-treasurer, Roger Horowitz, has written important labor history, seems to enjoy schmoozing with others who recognize the importance of studying the histories of class struggles, and was one of the founders of LAWCHA in 1998. Moreover, consider the books the BHC awarded for its prestigious Hagley Prize: Görkem Akgöz's *In the Shadow of War and Empire: Industrialization, Nation-Building, and Working-Class Politics in Turkey* (Brill, 2024) and Simone Müller's *The Toxic Ship: The Voyage of the Khian Sea and the Global Waste Trade* (University of Washington Press, 2023). Roughly twenty-five BHC 2025 conference participants are regular attendees at LAWCHA conferences.



Stephen Mihm

Discussions about the intersection between business and labor history are nothing new, though attempts to bridge the gaps have not always been successful—at least not

explicitly. Mihm's keynote talk reminded the audience that in 1986 historians [Steven Ross and Edwin Perkins published a paper](#) in which they made a case for the greater merger of these two subfields. Sadly, that article hardly made much of a splash; Mihm reminded the audience that it had been cited only twice (actually, a search of Google Scholar turns up five citations, which is still fairly pathetic for such an important argument). His keynote, which will come out later in the BHC's outstanding journal *Enterprise and Society*, will be its sixth citation.

Yet, plenty of other signs point to a healthy relationship between the two overlapping areas of study. Over the past few decades, labor historians have delivered various talks at the BHC about topics related to employers' response to the labor question, including welfare capitalist schemes, anti-labor union business lobbying campaigns, and strikebreaking and union-busting techniques. And large numbers of labor historians have collaborated with business historians in producing important works on the history of capitalism. It must be remembered: three decades before Mihm and other scholars [were covered in the New York Times in 2013](#) for touting the "new history of capitalism," [labor historian David Montgomery explained that he was chiefly interested in studying capitalism](#).

The state of the field roundtables sparked some controversy. A session called "New Directions in US Labor History," chaired by Chad Pearson that featured Mark Lause, Keri Leigh Merritt, and Matthew Hild, received some pushback for suggesting that too few scholars working in labor history identify as labor historians. Leading scholar of eighteenth-century labor history, Seth Rockman, shot back from the floor, suggesting that this identity with the field doesn't matter because plenty of scholars nevertheless produce important work that is read by labor historians and others. At a session called "Bringing Together the Business History and Labor and Working-Class History Association Conferences," chaired by Elizabeth Shermer, and featuring panelists Emily Twarog, Scott Nelson, Shennette Garrett-Scott, and Matt Garcia, one of us (Michael Hillard) asked a question from the floor about the state of "political economy." Panelist Matt Garcia responded by insisting that such questions only interest Marxist scholars and are thus not sufficiently worthy of further exploration. Such a comment reflects the wide presence of liberalism in the academy, including among labor historians.

This was one of two panels in which panelists and audience wrestled with the distinction between history of capitalism and business history. One sentiment was that the former was briefly "hot" in the several years after the financial crisis - due in part to the many good histories of US finance published then along with new reconsideration of how US and global slavery was intertwined with capitalism's rise. But, some observed, slavery historians per se don't feel urgency to necessarily identify with the historical of capitalism field, and overall

identification with the field seems to be languishing despite the continuing great work on capitalism as a framing force for workers. Business history, meanwhile, thanks to its ecumenical and open-ended sensibility, seems as strong as ever. Perhaps one lesson of these discussions is the need for more discussion in labor history of “political economy” as broader catch-all for those “forces acting upon workers,” one that recognizes that political economy should not be reduced to reductive Marxisms of the past. There continues to be room to further analyze and debate how changing capitalisms define the circumstances “not of their own choosing” that workers of all kinds and at various points in history contend with.



Melanie Sheehan

Such a conversation might also engage current political economists more directly. Simple examples are [William Lazonick's excellent and definitive work on the inner workings of financialization](#) in the US, and how the shift from managerialism to shareholderism has been a prime force leading employers to target and eliminate well-paying jobs, as institutional labor economist [David Weil has shown in his pathbreaking definition and analysis of the “fissured workplace.”](#) Of course, business history is relevant here. As conference participant Melanie Sheehan put it: “business history has something particular to contribute here, since it offers an avenue for studying the changing nature of capitalism through the concrete actions of businesspeople and government actors.”

Indeed, there was a breadth of panels and papers exploring the forces acting upon workers – multiple papers on welfare schemes in the US, Argentina and other nations, campaigns by employers to suppress and control workers from Southern US African Americans in the Jim Crow era to those in global colonies, the impact of automation, Black Americans as entrepreneurs, gender and emotional labor, and labor in the media. A modest but robust poster session included more studies highlighting anti-unionism and also the

untold history of agricultural workers in Oregon's "hoptopia" (i.e. hops for beer).



Shennette Garrett-Scott

Perhaps the most controversy erupted at one of the meeting's last sessions, "Engaging with Labor History: A Roundtable," which was chaired by Melanie Sheehan and featured interventions from Alyssa Kuchinski, Shennette Garrett-Scott (again), and Louis Hyman.



Louis Hyman

Provocatively, panelist Louis Hyman took the opportunity to announce his opinion that business history is more nuanced and that he finds that labor history conferences consist of romantic radicals who suffer from group think. As an example, he mentioned that he

attended a session at a LAWCHA conference about the Teamsters and every presenter insisted that the labor union was not corrupt. This gave him a chuckle. In response, one of us (Chad Pearson) challenged him on this point, recognizing that much good labor history scholarship has addressed the question of corruption in union leadership positions, for example, Mike Davis' *[Prisoners of the American Dream](#)*, Paul Buhle's *[Taking Care of Business](#)*, Frank Bardacke's *[Trampling Out the Vintage](#)*, Bryan Palmer's *[Revolutionary Teamsters](#)*, and Michael Goldfield's *[The Southern Key](#)*. Moreover, Pearson investigated by asking around about what appeared to be an absurd claim. He heard from someone who probably attended the same panel. This person said there was, in fact, disagreement on this particular question. If any readers attended that particular LAWCHA session, feel free to set the record straight. I, Chad Pearson, acknowledge that I may be wrong.

Some final thoughts: I, Chad Pearson, have noticed that some scholars write about labor history but nevertheless distance themselves from it. On two occasions at the conference, I heard speakers preface their labor-related comments with "I'm not a labor historian..." I have been hearing such statements for over two decades. I don't recall hearing this from those who study other topics. I would be interested in knowing why. (Though, quite a few BHC presenters also qualified that they weren't business historians, but this reflected the broad range of disciplines represented at the conference.). Thus, while questions about field boundaries and intersections remain unsettled and worthy of further discussion, we give many thanks to the organizers of the 2025 BHC conference. We are excited to participate in future BHC gatherings and admire the organization's determination to keep the labor question alive.

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Best Article award in 2004 and <Review of Radical Political Economics' Best Essay award for 2013. He has been an active collaborator with the labor movement since the 1970s, most recently collaborating with the successful effort to create the Charles Scontras Center for Labor and Community Education at the University of Southern Maine which is now in its second year.