

LAWCHA

The Labor and Working-Class History Association



NEWSLETTER FALL 2026

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President's Message

Eileen Boris
UC - Santa Barbara



Last June I attended two conferences that together represent the threads that LAWCHA weaves together through our multiple and varied constituencies: academic workers and the state of our labor sector, on the one hand, and labor historians and a larger transnational conversation on work and the working-class, on the other.

First, in Chicago, the biennial meeting of Labor Notes brought together rank and file activists, often dissidents from

their union leadership, to share organizing best practices, assess recent campaigns, and inspire with stories of courage, creativity, and combat in the face of corporate and state attacks on us all. LAWCHA was there at the book exhibit, thanks to University of Illinois Press which allowed us a portion of their table. We gave out membership forms, displayed recent copies of LABOR, and informed passersbys of our upcoming Boston conference. Among the over 4,000 attendees were other LAWCHA folks, including Nelson Lichtenstein, Peter Cole, Debbie Goldman, Patrick Dixon, and Max Krochmal.

In this newsletter Steve Early reports from that conference on a session that he curated and that is of particular interest to us: new books. A hunger for reading remains and is not confined to the academy. There is a large audience for labor history if we address it. To that end, as Patrick Dixon notes in another newsletter contribution, LAWCHA has joined with the Southern Labor Studies Association, LABOR: Studies in Working-Class History, and International Labor and Working-Class History to revive the “Working History” podcast, originally developed by Beth English for the SLSA. Hear us on the air, with our David Stein and Joan Flores-Villalobos among the cohosts! The collaborators have divided responsibility for creating the sessions; we will invite folks to go back to school with LAWCHA and think about labor historians in the front line struggle during the Minneapolis occupation by ICE.

Second, this summer I flew to Barcelona for the European Labor History Network Conference, a biennial meeting organized through subgroups like the Feminist Labor History Network, the Precarious Labor Network, and many more. It is always heady to recognize LAWCHA as part of a global community of historians asking parallel questions about class, gender, race, colonialism, workers’ lives, globalization, democracy, and more. With Jennifer Klein, I ducked out to see Gaudi buildings, monuments to the city’s art of a century ago, and the living architecture of La Familia Sagrada Cathedral. Thomas Jessen Adams also was among the LAWCHA members at this vibrant assemblage. In these pages, Jennifer Luft, the chair of our Global Affairs Committee, tells us about another recent conference at Warwick, UK on the legacy of E.P. Thompson. We are eager to connect with researchers outside of the US studying labor history in their own locale as well as ours. In keeping with the renewed transnational and global labor history turn, our prize-winning journal LABOR publishes in such a vein, across time but also space.

These are times of peril as well as promise. The Trump administration brazenly works to rewrite the past, a favorite tactic of authoritarian regimes whenever and wherever they can grab power. The attacks on the

Smithsonian—notably the Museum of American History, the National Museum of African American History and Culture, and its leaders—are even more vicious than the culture wars of the late 20th century. I represent LAWCHA on the History, Archives, and Preservation Project, HARPP, organized by the OAH. In this newsletter, learn more about these attacks on the writing and presenting of history from the article by Marc Stein, President of the OAH and Director of the digital Out History, and from a blog post I cowrote with Kristin Ahlberg reprinted from ACADEME, the journal of the AAUP.

These assaults are not only on our archives, exhibits, and classrooms. They have targeted individuals. We present you an update on the struggle of Texas State historian Tom Alter, who was fired when a right-wing provocateur spliced and distorted his remarks made online during the meeting of a socialist organization. From the same university, Texas State University San Marcos, comes a report from Jessica Pliley on the combing of the curriculum. How do you teach women’s history without the words, ‘women’ or ‘gender’? These restrictions on free speech are labor issues as much as they are questions of academic rights. They involve the teacher and researcher as a worker.

We are reminded of earlier state violence, in this example against Mexican immigrant women and their children, in an interview with Marla Ramirez on her multiple prize-winning *Banished Citizens: A History of The Mexican American Women Who Endured Repatriation*. A piece on the alternative, *The People’s 250 Project* spearheaded by Joe McCartin, underscores that working people are knowledge makers as well as historical actors and that the official story is not the only narrative that counts—or even should.

What happens when labor historians retire? We begin a feature with a roundtable by some of LAWCHA’s early leaders and invite commentary for future newsletters from others who have shifted their employment or stopped employment but who are engaged in the world of labor and labor history in other ways. Consider this a gesture to anti-work theorists from those of us who work too much, although not necessarily for wages, who half recognize that work will not love you back (hats off to feminist theorists Kathi Weeks and Sarah Jaffe for those insights) and it certainly does not make you free. Freedom requires more than work; it needs solidarity for nurturance. And so, Meredith Kahn’s essay on library unions is a case in point. So is our new collaboration with the Newberry Library Labor History Seminar, one of a number of updates included in this issue.

Okay, I grew up outside of Boston (couldn’t you tell from my accent?) and so I am thrilled that our 2027 conference will be at University of Massachusetts Boston, June 24-26 2027. Program committee co-chairs Alexandra Finley and Sergio Gonzales have issued an exciting call for papers with the theme of “Working Across Difference.” Nick Juravich and Steve Striffler of the UMass Labor Resource Center and Labor Studies Department are the local arrangements co-chairs. Along with their committees, they are planning wonderful plenaries, tours, and other components but the mainstay of the program comes from you, our members, friends, and soon to join members (remember getting LABOR is a real benefit and we are still a bargain given inflation and the quality of our offerings!) We enclose the call. Try to get your panels and proposals in by the current deadline on November 1 for plenty of time for the program committee to do its magic! We have rooms reserved on campus and union hotels not too far away at some discount.

Finally, I’d like to thank our amazing Executive Committee—Paul Ortiz (Vice-President), Liesl Orenic (Treasurer), Emily E. L.B. Twarog (Secretary), and Joe McCartin (Immediate Past President), along with Patrick Dixon (Executive Assistant). A special thanks goes to the Newsletter Committee chaired by Michael Hillard, with members Jane Berger, Colleen Woods, and Martha Guerrero Badillo, and Patrick Dixon. We are open to your suggestions, your efforts as volunteers, and proposals for new initiatives.

Onward in love and solidarity,

Eileen

Editors’ Letter

This is our fourth issue since Donald Trump’s reelection. The Trump regime has given historians – along with the nation and globe – much to contend with. In this issue we present varied ways in which historians and academic workers are mobilizing resistance. From the McCarthyist firing of Texas State Professor Tom Alter, to the Trump Administration’s across the board attack on history – at the Smithsonian, Universities and through the hagiographic, whitewashed 250 celebration – labor historians are joining others in fighting back.

LAWCHA’s continued robustness is on display here. We welcome incoming President Eileen Boris, whose letter here further details the issue’s contents and challenges us to keep doing the work while keeping our collective chin up. We include new reports from LAWCHA committees, expanded opportunities to present work in progress including the newly aligned Newberry-LAWCHA Labor History Seminar and, of course, the upcoming biennial Boston 2027 Meeting. We also introduce a new feature, which we very much would like feedback on, where we invite some LAWCHA elders to reflect on their careers and retirement.

Don’t forget to get your proposals for Boston ready by November 1, and by all means, keep heart.

The Editors,

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2027 LAWCHA CONFERENCE

Working Across Divisions

June 24–26 • UMass Boston

“WORKING ACROSS DIVISIONS” asks us to think critically about the dichotomies that structure both the world of labor and our analyses of it, and then to trouble those boundaries. Scholars often define one form of labor against another: wage vs. unwaged labor; public vs. private; domestic vs. marketplace; free vs. bound; productive vs. unproductive; skilled vs. unskilled. These categories have shaped law, organizing, policy, and scholarship. Yet they have also obscured the ways that working people consistently cross, blur, and unsettle such divisions, laboring across boundaries of race, age, gender, citizenship, empire, and nation. They have confronted fractures within the working class itself, including divisions rooted in racism, sexism, xenophobia, ableism, and anti-Blackness, while also forging solidarities that transcend them. How have such divisions been constructed, maintained, resisted, or reimagined? Under what conditions have workers built alliances across lines of craft, sector, immigration status, or political ideology? When have those efforts faltered, and why?

At a moment when new technologies, global supply chains, environmental crises, and resurgent authoritarianisms reshape the terrain of work, we ask how we might expand the boundaries of what counts as “work” and who counts as a “worker.” How do carceral labor, reproductive labor, care work, and climate-related labor struggles challenge inherited analytical frameworks? How might histories of colonialism, racial capitalism, and imperialism help us rethink divisions between metropole and periphery, North and South, formal and informal economies? What can labor history contribute to contemporary debates about AI, automation, border regimes, and the future of organizing? “Working Across Divisions” ultimately calls on us to examine not only how labor has been divided, but also how working people have imagined and enacted unity across differences. By historicizing division and foregrounding efforts to overcome it, we hope to foster conversations that illuminate both the fractures and the possibilities within working-class life, past and present.

We welcome papers that explore labor and working-class history across all time periods and geographic regions. We especially encourage comparative, transnational, and global approaches; scholarship that bridges academic and activist communities; and work that connects theory and praxis. Topics may include, but are not limited to, migration and mobility; coercion and unfreedom; care work and social reproduction; labor and the environment; disability and work; religion and labor; labor and incarceration; higher education and academic labor; public history and pedagogy; and intersections of labor with race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and citizenship.



We will consider traditional panels with 3 papers; roundtables; performance-oriented and artistic sessions, including films; proposals for a poster session; and moderated conversations between activists or artists and historians. We welcome proposals from scholars and activists in all fields, and especially urge submissions from contingent faculty, community college faculty, K–12 teachers, and independent scholars.

We encourage the submission of complete panels rather than individual papers. Single paper authors are encouraged to seek out others prior to submission. We ask that organizers aim for diversity in the gender identity, race, ethnicity, and/or employment status of presenters when pulling together submissions. To assist, the conference has created a collaboration form where individuals can post ideas and seek others to create panels.

Proposals should be submitted by November 1. The conference will take place June 24–26 at the University of Massachusetts – Boston.
Conference email: LAWCHA2027@gmail.com

LAWCHA 2027 Program Co-Chairs

Alexandra Finley, University of Pittsburgh
Sergio González, Marquette University

LABOR

Studies in Working-Class History

the official journal for LAWCHA

A subscription to *LABOR: Studies in Working-Class History* is available through membership in LAWCHA

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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Julie Greene / Introduction

THE COMMON VERSE

Lucille Clifton (1936–2010) / Study the Masters

ARTS & MEDIA

Jessie Wilkerson with Tabitha Arnold / “Labor-Intensive Art”: A Conversation

GOING PUBLIC

Stephanie Fortado with David Bates, Zack Poppel, Annemarie Strassel, Shannon Waite, and Augustus Wood / Connecting Labor History to the Labor Movement: A Conversation

ARTICLES

Hugh R. Wood / Violence, Masculinity, and the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers During the Great Strike of 1877 in Reading, Pennsylvania

Jeffery L. Gould / “Just Another Boss”: Autogestion, Workers’ Control, and the Fate of Socialism in Chile, 1972

BOOKMARK:

Rudi Batzell’s *Organizing Workers in the Shadow of Slavery: Global Inequality, Racial Boundaries, and the Rise of Unions in American and British Capitalism, 1870–1929*

Julie Greene / Introduction

Naomi R Williams / Racial Capitalism, Critical Race Theory, and the Shadow of Slavery

Kevin Kenny / Race, Class, and Migration in the Shadow of Slavery

Lara Vapnek / Where Are the Women Workers?

Richard Price / Class, Race, and Organized Labor in Comparative Perspective

Rudi Batzell / Class and Racial Capitalism: Bringing Economic Geography and Labor Markets Back In

POINT/COUNTERPOINT

Augustus Wood and N. B. D. Connolly / Class Warfare in Black Atlanta: Grassroots Struggles, Power, and Repression Under Gentrification

BOOK REVIEWS

Eileen Boris / *On the Job: A History of American Work Uniforms* by Heather Akou

Aimee Loiselle / *The Politics of Care Work: Puerto Rican Women Organizing for Social Justice* by Emma Amador

Jonathan Connolly / *Empire of Labor: How the East India Company Colonized Hired Work* by Titas Chakraborty

Joshua McGuffie / *Cleaning Up the Bomb Factory: Grassroots Activism and Nuclear Waste in the Midwest* by Casey Huegel

Erik Loomis / *The Pandemic and the Working Class: How U.S. Labor Navigated COVID-19* by Nick Juravich and Steve Striffler, eds.

Clarence Taylor / *Para Power: How Paraprofessional Labor Changed Education* by Nick Juravich

Janine Giordano Drake / *Counterfeiting Labor’s Voice: William Carsey and the Shaping of American Reform Politics* by Mark Lause

Nick Juravich / *I Didn’t Come Here to Lie: My Life and Education* by Karen Lewis and Elizabeth Todd-Breland

Limin Teh / *The Master in Bondage: Factory Workers in China, 1949–2019* by Huaiyin Li

Erik Loomis / *Labor’s Partisans: Essential Writing on the Union Movement from the 1950s to Today* by Nelson Lichtenstein and Samir Sonti, eds.

Sarah Arnold / *Screen Workers and the Irish Film Industry* by Denis Murphy

Andreas Meyris / *The Pullman Strike: A Gilded Age Clash Between Labor, Capital, and Government* by Edward T. O’Donnell

Kevin Boyle / *Blue-Collar Empire: The Untold Story of US Labor’s Global Anticommunist Crusade* by Jeff Schuhrke Katherine

Leah Pace / *Race and the Greening of Atlanta: Inequality, Democracy, and Environmental Politics in an Ascendant Metropolis* by Christopher Sellers

Paul Heideman / *Making Republicans Liberal: Social Struggle and the Politics of Compromise* by Kristoffer Smemo

“The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly”: Labor History and the Promise of Democratization

By Marc Stein

On July 9, 2026, in the aftermath of the White House Domestic Policy Council’s 162-page July Fourth hit job on the Smithsonian National Museum of American History, the rightwing Blaze Media published “An Attempt to Turn Back the Clock: Woke Historians Melt Down over Exposé of Smithsonian’s Ideological Rot.” As the 2026-27 president of the Organization of American Historians, I had joined many others in defending the Smithsonian and its independence from authoritarian state control. Blaze correctly noted that I was quoted in the New York Times as saying of the Domestic Policy Council’s work, “Released on July 4, 2026, the 250th birthday of the U.S. Declaration of Independence, the report is a declaration of independence from history.” Blaze also correctly quoted me as claiming that the report “mischaracterizes and misrepresents the words of Anthea Hartig, who has consistently worked to educate and inform visitors to the museum with innovative exhibits and inspirational programs.”

So far, so good. But Blaze also called my statements into question by referring to me as “the San Francisco-based homosexual activist and historian who currently serves as the OAH’s president.” Homosexual? I thought we stopped calling ourselves that in the 1970s, but ye olde scribes at Blaze must have missed that. San Francisco-based? I suppose Blaze, based in Irving, Texas, wanted to distinguish me from all the other Marc Steins who are serving as president of the OAH. Blaze also introduced my words about Hartig by calling me “an apparent critic of ‘child protection’ initiatives and defender of ‘drag queen story hours.’” Guilty as charged on the second count, I will even cop a plea to the first if it’s understood that I’m critical of fake child protection initiatives by government leaders who routinely aid and abet the genuine abuse, exploitation, and harassment of minor children, teenage girls, trans youth, and young staffers.

Four days later, Shane Harris, who “apparently” is the editor-in-chief of The Association of Mature American Citizens Newslines, commented on a column I wrote for TIME, which Harris regarded as even worse than journalist Jennifer Schuessler’s recent coverage of the Smithsonian conflict for the New York Times. (For those keeping track, AMAC is based in Bohemia, New York, which I have to say is a pretty unlikely place name for mature reactionaries.) After expressing “regret” for having to report that I am the OAH president (so much for “maturity”), Harris responded to several of the points I made in TIME before turning to “the real kicker,” which he inaccurately claimed was “the last line in his piece.” (The last line actually encouraged everyone to “go see the Smithsonian for yourselves.”)

What was the objectionable line? According to Harris, my “issue” with the National Museum of American History wasn’t that it was “too political,” but that it was “not political enough” (his words). He quoted me (accurately) as saying, “If anything, I would like to see the museum do more, not less, to democratize and diversify its presentation of American history.” For Harris, “perhaps no statement better captures the sorry state of American academia” and “it is a sad day indeed when historians believe that it is their job to ‘democratize’ and ‘diversify’ history rather than just telling the unvarnished truth—the good, the bad, and the ugly.”

For the record, I wrote the line that Harris found so objectionable in the context of finding myself, because of my OAH role, in the uncomfortable position of defending an institution that, in other times and places, I might very well have criticized. In other contexts, I might have called out the Smithsonian for failing to be sufficiently critical of the U.S. past, for not doing enough to address American diversity, and for not adequately addressing the complicated histories of nationalism and patriotism in the United States. In 2026, I have judged it more important to join with others to defend the Smithsonian against authoritarian attacks from the right. And if Harris really believes that historians should highlight “the bad” and “the ugly” in America’s past, he should join me in criticizing the Domestic Policy Council’s approach to history, which calls for an exclusive focus on “the good” and “the great” (with the notable exception of any references to the Clinton, Obama, and Biden eras).

Though I am hesitant to give Harris’s article more attention than it deserves, I am interested in responding because I think his nasty comments go to the heart of what we are witnessing in the current war on history, which has escalated during the commemoration of the 250th birthday of the Declaration of Independence. I am especially interested in responding here, in the newsletter of the Labor and Working Class History Association, because labor and working class historians have played such key roles in the very democratization of history that Harris finds so problematic.

Like the Domestic Policy Council’s report, Harris’s column seems to be utterly clueless about how profoundly anti-democratic the discipline of history and historical museums across the United States were before the 1970s. My generation (high school in the 1970s, college in the 1980s) was the first to benefit from the transformations that occurred in the practice of history in the post-1960s era, when it no longer seemed viable to narrate American history exclusively through the prisms of “great men,” “great ideas,” and “great events.” At my undergraduate institution, I was able to enroll in classes on African American and U.S. women’s history; I wrote papers on LGBTQ history and the history of abortion; and there were classes on labor history as well. For many of us, the democratization of history—the decades-long transformation in who writes and reads history, whose stories are archived and transmitted, how we study and communicate about the past, and how we connect and link the past, present, and future—was precisely what made history more interesting, more relevant, and more inspiring. For many of us, democratizing and diversifying history was necessary to achieve the goal that Harris highlighted: presenting the “unvarnished truth—the good, the bad, and the ugly.”

The democratization of history that has played out over the last fifty years has greatly influenced all of my scholarship, including my recent work on the last major commemoration of the U.S. founding: the bicentennial of 1976. While much of the book focuses on political leaders, commemoration planners, and official celebrations, I also address ordinary people, grassroots organizers, bicentennial workers, union campaigns, and counter-bicentennial activism. In my recent OutHistory exhibit “Queering the Bicentennial,” for example, I quote a gay African American bicentennial worker, James Roberts, whose job required him to dress in eighteenth century drag and perform revolutionary-era vignettes. In the 1990s, when I asked him if he recalled anything specific about the roles he was assigned, he responded: “No, it was bad then. You don’t want to remember shit like that.” The exhibit also discusses an African American gay college history professor, “Jay Herman,” who helped lead the effort to create Philadelphia’s Afro-American Historical and Cultural Museum. When I interviewed him in the 1990s, shortly before he died of AIDS, “Herman” asked me to use a pseudonym, which I have done.

My 2026 book, *Bicentennial: A Revolutionary History of the 1970s*, addresses several interesting aspects of Philadelphia labor history that would be worth more in-depth exploration:

- In the early 1970s, several bicentennial workers, including Coordinator of Community Development Catherine Leslie, filed lawsuits against the Philadelphia Bicentennial Corporation (PBC) for race and gender discrimination (see pages 30, 32, 36, 43, 51, 111). In 1975, Director of Educational Projects Deborah Wilkinson filed a race and sex discrimination lawsuit against Philadelphia ’76 Inc. (which replaced PBC) after she was dismissed without cause on her first day of work (166).

- In December 1974, a long-simmering conflict began to come to a boil when Philadelphia City Council debated a proposal to ban street vendors other than newspaper dealers from most of Center City. After months of discussions, lawsuits, and protests, many led by the Black Vendors Association, city officials began cracking down on vendors near Independence Hall and City Council approved further restrictions (164).

- In December 1975, with the City of Philadelphia facing a financial crisis that threatened to upend plans for the bicentennial, Mayor Frank Rizzo and Building Trades Council leader Thomas Magrann announced an “extraordinary and unprecedented” agreement that would affect sixty thousand workers. The agreement stipulated that if overtime work was needed to complete bicentennial projects on time, workers would accept time-and-a-quarter rather than time-and-a-half pay. The city’s managing director praised the deal, calling it “a far-sighted and civic minded gesture on the part of the unions,” who “want Philadelphia to be ready when the Bicentennial comes” (155-156).

- In January and March 1976, street vendors won court victories that limited the enforcement of the Philadelphia’s anti-vending regulations. Shortly thereafter ten vendors were arrested for disrupting a City Council discussion of revised regulations. After City Council approved new regulations in May, vendors staged further protests, leading the city to delay enforcement until after July Fourth (220).

- In February 1976, Philadelphia sanitation workers walked off the job. (I couldn’t resist writing in my book that the delayed garbage removal produced “smells that eighteenth-century residents might have experienced.”) That same month, 3,000 city workers marched to City Hall to protest the Rizzo administration’s plans to close Philadelphia General Hospital, the city’s only public hospital (219).

- In April, the Philadelphia Museum of Art announced that it would be closing many of its galleries after the city reneged on its promise to fund additional security guards. Making good on its threat, the museum closed half of its galleries for several weeks. The galleries reopened in May after the city provided funds to hire 110 college students dressed in red, white, and blue uniforms to serve as gallery observers (221).

- In May, after Philadelphia announced plans to lay off more than 900 workers (five percent of its non-uniformed workforce) the Philadelphia Tribune (the city’s main African American newspaper) warned that a potential strike in response would “cripple the City just in time for the July4 Bicentennial celebration” (219, 221).

- In June, Philadelphia’s Transport Workers Union responded to work furloughs and staff shortages by announcing that it had asked its members to refuse overtime work for bicentennial events. Shortly thereafter workers voted in favor of a transit shutdown on July Fourth. One union leader sarcastically urged the city to encourage bicentennial tourists to bring tricycles and roller skates. When transit workers began to decline overtime work the next day, 45,000 students lost their usual means of getting to school. A few days later, the city and union reached a deal (219-220).

- On July 1, Philadelphia’s contract with more than 24,000 city workers expired, threatening chaos as July Fourth approached (220). Acting at a moment of maximum leverage, the union representing most of the city’s non-uniformed municipal workers—affiliated with the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees—initiated a job action. Carefully avoiding a strike because of the legal, financial, and public relations implications, city employees engaged in work slowdowns and refused to accept overtime assignments. By July Fourth, the press was reporting on huge trash pileups on city streets and the Museum of Art announced that it would close the next day because of a shortage of guards. After city workers refused to work overtime to fix faulty air-conditioning at the Civic Center and indoor temperatures reached 105 degrees, the Happy Birthday America World Exposition of Antiques and Collectibles closed early (288).

- On July 9, the new Philadelphia Garment Center opened a labor history museum with an exhibit on the history of organized labor. Lieutenant Governor Ernest Kline, Mayor Rizzo, and Philadelphia AFL-CIO Council President Edward Toohey attended the opening ceremony, which likely was awkward because thousands of city employees had just begun a job action (283).

- On July 12, police began enforcing the city’s new street vendor regulations in Center City, ordering approximately forty vendors to cease operations (this represented approximately two-thirds of the vendors near Independence Hall). Notwithstanding further protests and more litigation, the city ultimately achieved its goal of reducing the number of Center City street vendors (289).

- On July 13, in response to major reductions in government-funded summer jobs for youth, the Philadelphia Urban Coalition and 1000 supporters blocked traffic at sixteen sites. After they repeated their action two days later, the Rizzo administration promised to hire at least 1500 additional young people (289).

- On August 9, thirty-eight days after job actions by city workers began, the city and its main union reached a tentative settlement. The city won no pay increases for the 1976-77 fiscal year; the union won a 7% (plus cost of living) salary increase effective July 1, 1977, and reversal of the planned layoff of 1000 workers.

Now that’s what I call the good, the bad, and the ugly.



LaborHistoryLinks.org was relaunched Spring 2026

An annotated gateway to thousands of resources on working-class life and labor struggles. Search books, archives, museum exhibits, oral histories, maps, films, podcasts, teaching materials, timelines, bibliographies and more.

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LABOR NOTES 2026

How LAWCHA and Labor Left Intersected in Chicago

By Steve Early

The now 47-year old independent labor education project and newsletter known as Labor Notes made its debut as a conference sponsor at the old Book Cadillac Hotel in Detroit in 1981.

As LAWCHA members who've focused on rank-and-file insurgencies during the decade before this meeting will confirm, its participants included leading trouble-makers in the Teamsters, Steel Workers, United Auto Workers, and other industrial unions then not very hospitable to colonizing by former sixties radicals.

The turn-out of less than 600 was heavily blue-collar, male, and pale (but not yet stale). Every competing left organization, with any workplace presence anywhere, sent cadres to participate; indigenous militants within their political orbit came as well.

Few academics spoke, unless they had a past connection to the [International Socialists](#), the group which created Labor Notes as a largely volunteer-run vehicle for rank-and-file activism, on a non-sectarian basis. Labor Notes founders operated out of a dingy storefront in Detroit (dubbed the "Plywood Palace") and shared space with a fledgling outfit called Teamsters for a Democratic Union.

In that long-ago era, Labor Notes was, by necessity, very much focused on internal union struggles for democracy and reform. External organizing as a survival strategy for U.S. labor was not yet a priority for many activists in this embattled network (unless their day job was, like mine at the time, organizing new union members).

Flash forward to the latest national gathering of Labor Notes last June in Chicago. With registration capped at 4,700—and many more unable to attend—this year's diverse, dynamic, and multi-racial crowd included the broadest array of blue-collar and white collar worker organizers ever assembled by Labor Notes, which now boasts a full-time staff of nearly twenty.

If you wanted to be at the 100-person founding "summit" of the Federal Unionist Network (FUN), exchange ideas with young IBEW electricians trying to shake up their building trades union, network with the fastest growing part of the Communications Workers of America (which is media, not telecom, workers), find out what Amazon workers are doing in multiple countries, or get advice on organizing a citywide general strike like the one last winter in Minnesota, you should have been there at the Hyatt Regency O'Hare.

Labor Notes' longtime focus on "putting the movement back in the labor movement" also finds year-round expression in scores of local training sessions. These [Troublemaker Schools](#) bring together grassroots activists, on a cross-union basis, in their own city or region to learn how to organize, bargain, strike, handle grievances, and run for union office more effectively.

Often the assigned reading is from a [bulging bookshelf of titles](#) originally published by Labor Notes itself or Work Rights Press in Boston. See, for example, Democracy is Power, multiple editions of The Troublemakers Handbook, Secrets of a Successful Organizer, and Keep Going: A Guide to Organizing When It's Hard, which was just published, marketed, and distributed via a new partnership with [PM Press](#) in Ithaca, NY.

For many years, Labor Notes has provided a national conference forum for both activists and academics

with a new book to peddle. This year's "Meet the Author" event in Chicago broke all past attendance records. The titles featured were from PM, New Press, Haymarket Books, Hardball, big name trade publishers like Simon and Schuster, and academic presses like Yale, Cornell, and the Universities of California, Georgia, and Illinois. (LAWCHA members take note—that's who to send your book proposals to!)

The line-up of 27 distinguished authors included Jaz Brisack, a Starbucks Workers United founder and Aleida Garcia Aguirre, a veteran of the 2022 grad student strike at the University of California, who co-edited an invaluable oral history of that state-wide struggle.

Other presenters also drew on their past experience as shop-floor agitators. Daniel Gross, who paid tribute to his mentor, friend, and former co-author Staughton Lynd; Jerome Scott, whose new book tells the story of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers; and Mark Kagan, whose memoir about being a left-inspired NYC subway worker and Transport Workers Local 100 reformer should be required reading for any successful practitioners of the "rank-and-file strategy" favored by much of DSA today.

We also heard from LAWCHA member Nelson Lichtenstein about his co-editing of Labor's Partisans: Essential Writings on the Union Movement from the 1950s to Today, which takes a deep dive into back issues of Dissent magazine. (A quick audience poll revealed that even within this sub-set of Labor Notes conference goers, there were more readers of Jacobin, than its older social democratic predecessor.)

Other presenters found a publishing home in the University of Illinois Press (UIP) series on the "Working Class in American History," which has multiple co-editors from LAWCHA. Retired researcher Debbie Goldman described Disconnected, her account of how call center workers won better conditions in the telecom industry and boosted their internal union clout. Her former CWA co-worker Gay Semel spoke in place of the late Jane LaTour, a NYC labor educator whose posthumously published book, Backroom Bargaining, chronicles rank-and-file struggles against mob domination of Big Apple unions.

A new LAWCHA member and longtime Labor Notes supporter, Semel has her own first book coming out soon from UIP. It's called Cablevision War and reports on a long first contract struggle waged by CWA members in Brooklyn who had to overcome the political connections and business clout of the billionaire Dolan Family, infamous owners of Madison Square Garden, the Knicks, and the Rangers. The next exciting iteration of the big Labor Notes gathering last June will be held in Chicago again—but this time, downtown at the Hyatt Regency McCormack Place on March 24–26, 2028. That's a new venue that Labor Notes says "will allow us to accommodate thousands more attendees."

Registration will open in the fall of 2027. So don't miss Labor Notes 2028, particularly if you have a labor-related book, appearing between now and then, that you would like to promote among young, labor activist readers, including many employed in higher education themselves or in labor studies programs around the country.

Steve Early is a longtime non-academic member of LAWCHA and past contributor to LABOR, who has been active in the Communications Workers of America since 1980. He is a former Labor Notes advisory committee member and author of six books about labor, politics, and veterans' affairs. His most recent (co-authored with Suzanne Gordon) is Courage of Complicity: How Veterans are Responding to the Assault on Democracy from PM Press. He can be reached at Lsupport@aol.com.

Censoring Curriculum and Pursuing “Value-Neutrality” via AI at Texas State University

By Jessica P. Pliley, Texas State University

After a couple of the rightwing politicians accused Texas State University of elevating indoctrination over education because the university’s “inclusion of LGBTQ-related curriculum across its academic offerings,”¹ the Board of Regents of the Texas State University System, composed of political appointees, announced a review of all curriculum to ensure the “principle of value neutral instruction” at the university.² The review was split into two phases, with Phase One reviewing “Special Topics courses for policy compliance, General Education courses, and courses selected for additional value-neutrality review.”³ Not surprisingly one third of the 685 selected for the first round of review came from the College of Liberal Arts, and within those, the university targeted almost all courses that covered content related to race, ethnicity, gender and/or sexuality for the value neutrality review.⁴ The History Department ranked number one in terms of classes that were flagged for review; not surprising since all of our classes interrogate power. The thousands of remaining courses would be reviewed in the Spring.

So what does value neutrality look like in this context? And how can it be determined? Enter, AI. The university released guidelines that urged faculty to avoid use of “prescriptive language” in course titles such as “decolonizing,” “interrogating,” and “challenging,” (among others).⁵ In course descriptions, instead of saying “This course centers marginalized voices and challenges dominant narratives,” the university advised, “This course examines diverse perspectives and analyzes historiographical debates.” None of the examples offered in the guidelines came from course descriptions of courses actually offered at Texas State.

To streamline the process of curricular review, the university developed asked Chat GPT to “Identify any language that signals advocacy, prescriptive conclusions, affective outcomes, or ideological commitments (e.g., ‘commit to social justice,’ ‘recognize privilege,’ ‘center marginalized voices’).”⁶ My own course, Women’s History since 1877, was flagged for using the following terms:

- “women’s activism” – implies a value-laden focus on advocacy rather than analysis.
- “women’s rights movements” – while historically accurate, it can sound advocacy-oriented if not framed analytically.
- “diversity of women’s experiences” – “diversity” can carry normative undertones; consider “range” or “variety” for neutrality.

Faculty responded with private outrage and public silence. Aware that two faculty members—philosopher Idris Robinson and labor historian Tom Alter—had been fired for political speech outside of the classroom, faculty

struggled to resist these changes. Membership in the Texas State Employees Union and AAUP jumped. But facing threats to their job security, many faculty simply complied by erasing the visibility of “controversial” content.

Queer content quietly disappeared under the value neutral method of renaming. My own graduate class Queer History: GLBT Histories in the United States became The History of Sexualities. Even terms like “gender” and “women” were seen as dangerous. A Fashion Merchandising class called “Gender, Appearance, and Society” became “Fashion in Society” and the Mass Communications department rebranded one course from “Women and Minorities in the Media” to “Audience and Representation in Media.” “Diversity and Social Justice in Social Work”, one of those classes required by accrediting bodies, became “Populations in Social Work.” It might as well have been called “The People Part of Social Work.” After the Curriculum Review was complete in June 2026, of the undergraduate courses that counted towards a minor in Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality studies, seven had been deleted, five had undergone significant names changes, and only two undergraduate courses remained with obvious queer content: Queer Art and Visual Culture and Queer and Trans Texts.

Then, on May 23, 2026, Vice Provost of Academic Innovation Jorge Figueroa Flores deleted Queer and Trans Texts with no explanation. At this point the course had been under substantial review by the English Department and the College of Liberal Arts. Though the English Department justified the course’s vitality by stating: “As an elective, it expands coverage of literary study and supports students seeking familiarity with diverse areas of scholarship. It also provides preparation for advanced coursework by developing skills in critical reading, theoretical application, and analytical writing,” the Provost’s Office objected to use of the terms “queer” and “trans” in the title and the course description.

The labor of reviewing the entire course catalog of a university that educates 41,000 students fell to the unlucky faculty who serve on departmental and college curriculum committees. These folks, of which I am one, found their entire academic year hijacked due to the political whims of politicians who failed to undermine academic freedom in the state legislature. The workload was intense, and no course releases or other forms of compensation were forthcoming. But beyond the undue labor burden was the moral injury caused by having to try to figure how to protect course content and standards of disciplinary expertise while being subject to the dangerous standards of “value-neutrality” as defined by AI. Most of us were dizzy (or nauseous) by the cascading ironies and harms that proliferated.

Texas State University is not unique in this experience. UT Austin, Texas A&M, Texas Tech and many other public universities in the state have been forced through a similar process. But pushback is emerging. This summer Texas AAUP-AFT and the AAUP filed lawsuits alleging that the First Amendment rights of faculty at Texas Tech and Texas A&M had been violated by the curricular review.⁷ The cases will appear before the Fifth Circuit. In the meantime, students at Texas State will face a course catalog that is unchallenging, doesn’t encourage interrogation, and, is simply, boring.

¹ https://mcusercontent.com/000045cecbf68668f1c6603a1/files/3ec6bf59-de10-b253-db38-b62606c29f6b/9.22.25_Texas_State_University_LGBTQ_Curriculum.pdf

² See 10/10/2026 Curricular Review email.

³ See 10/24/2026 Curricular Review email.

⁴ <https://universitystar.com/33999/news/course-audits-could-impact-spring-classes/>. See databases of Phase One Review.

⁵ <https://universitystar.com/flipbook/value-neutral-instruction-and-the-curriculum-guide/#1>

⁶ See AI Prompts.

⁷ <https://www.aft.org/news/american-association-university-professors-and-texas-aaup-aft-fight-back-against-academic>

Update on My Defense Campaign

By Tom Alter

Below is a statement we invited from our LAWCHA sibling, Tom Alter, updating us on the campaign to overturn his unjust firing from Texas State University one year ago. We urge you to read Tom's account and support his cause at defendtomalter.org.



A year out from my illegal firing, the defense campaign centered on my case remains strong. On September 10, 2025, Texas State University president Kelly Damphousse fired me from my tenured associate professor of history position through a post on his personal Facebook page without due process. Damphousse and his administration claimed that I was “inciting violence” and that I am a danger to the “health and safety of the university community.” This was in response to a campaign for my firing by a self-described fascist YouTuber who was platformed by the online publication the Texas Scorecard. The Scorecard is financed by two Christian nationalist oil and gas fracking billionaires who use their environmentally destructive wealth to support far-right politicians. “The fascist YouTuber filmed a presentation I delivered on working-class based organizing during an online socialism conference. I gave the talk on my own time, from my home office, and was not affiliated with Texas State. Using a clip from my presentation, in which I was sharply critical of U.S. foreign policy, the fascist wannabe influencer

falsely claimed that I was calling for the overthrow of the U.S. government. Rather, what I specifically called for was supporting striking hotel workers in Houston, defending our communities from ICE, and amplifying trans liberation.

My two unions, the Texas State Employees Union-CWA (TSEU) and the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), immediately came to my assistance. LAWCHA was also right there from the beginning. LAWCHA was the first academic association to put out a statement in my defense. This led almost every historical association relevant to my areas of study to release statements defending me, academic freedom, and tenure. LAWCHA members have also been among the most consistent and generous donors to the GoFundMe appeal that has kept my family and me going during the past year. My family and I sincerely thank all of you.

While local support in San Marcos remains the base of my defense campaign, national and even international support has been incredible. Beginning this past February, I embarked on a three-month speaking tour that included 37 speaking appearances from California to the Midwest, New England, Philadelphia and New York. The tour was capped off by a homecoming May Day rally in San Marcos where union and community members packed a local Irish pub to overflowing. During the tour, events were held with others facing repression for speaking out against the genocide in Palestine and opposing ICE and police brutality. The events, most sponsored by local unions, also served to build unions and area coalitions. A more limited tour is currently being planned for this fall. Organized stops already include Ann Arbor, where I will join in solidarity with the Michigan 8 and Minneapolis, to stand with the Minnesota 15. On the one-year anniversary of my illegal firing, I will be in Whiting, Indiana at an event in solidarity with union refinery workers currently locked out by BP. Other events are in the works in Wisconsin and North Carolina.

The fall tour will be more limited because I was recently hired by the TSEU as a full-time union organizer. This provides my family with health insurance and a more stable income. At the same time, it allows me to deepen my work building the labor movement in Texas. Though now working for the TSEU, my lawsuit against Texas State administrators for my reinstatement remains ongoing and the union hopes to see me return to the classroom. The Texas AAUP-AFT continues to cover my legal expenses with a union lawyer. The court hearings on my case have begun, with an August 27 hearing on the scope of the lawsuit and another scheduled for October 22 on my lawyer's motion that I be reinstated for the duration of the lawsuit. We are not expecting the trial to begin until fall 2027. We still have a long fight ahead of us. The legal avenue is only one aspect of the fight. The other is the public, nonpartisan defense campaign rooted in the labor movement. Our will remains strong. When we fight, we win.

If you would like to sponsor me to come to your area for a speaking event, please contact defendtomalter@gmail.com. And follow the Committee to Defend Tom Alter at www.defendtomalter.org

With Love and Solidarity,

Tom Alter

Reflections on Labor Historians' Career and Retirement

Alice Kessler-Harris, Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, Nikki Mandell, & Nelson Lichtenstein

As Eileen Boris previewed, here is a first of what will be a continuing series in the newsletter. This feature was organized as a serial digital (both email and zoom) collaboration.

Describe your career, and how it fit with the field's evolution.

Alice Kessler-Harris



When I completed my dissertation in 1968, I was pretty ignorant of labor history as a field. I chose to write about Jewish immigrants to New York in the 1890s, and located them in a framework that echoed Robert and Helen Merrill Lynd's Middletown studies on the cultural history of the 1920s and 1930s. Advised by Rudolph Vecoli, as well as by Pete Forcey and Warren Susman, I thought of myself as an immigrant historian, perhaps even as a cultural historian. I learned Yiddish; read fiction and poetry written in the period, and focused on questions of class and assimilation. I did not ignore labor or workers' organizations, but they were less central than issues of religion and ethnicity.

After I defended the dissertation, Pete Forcey introduced me to Herbert Gutman. That meeting changed everything. Herb, one of three (then fairly young) historians who were instrumental in shaping the field of labor history, took me on. He handed me E.P. Thompson's Making of the English Working Class and introduced me to a cohort of his own students who soon became close friends. He read and commented on my work, invited me to give papers at conferences where I hung out with leading British labor historians. In short, I became part of a community of labor historians who, by the early 1970s, formed the core of a new and thriving field.

I identified as a labor historian even as I turned to exploring female labor leaders and then women wage-earners. I was not alone: the family had already become part of the research agenda and other historians had already uncovered female labor leaders. But the turn to women and then gender challenged the exclusively male focus of labor history. The field itself, already committed to exploring the impact of race on workers and the workplace, took it upon itself to examine the effect of masculinity on the idea of work itself.

Jacquelyn Dowd Hall

What drew me to certain strains of labor history feels bone deep. My mother, of course, had never heard of Bread and Roses, but through her I learned the value of work leavened by pleasure. Also, through her I glimpsed the injustice of racial segregation.



So, women and work and race. But I had no idea that these could be subjects of history until I got to graduate school

at Columbia in 1966. I was a stranger in a strange land, equal parts scared, shy, and thrilled to find myself in the right place at the right time. I was on the margins with eyes wide open as all around me students and young professors were inventing new fields of knowledge and igniting a student movement that rippled around the world.

I came away with an identity somewhat different from the one you might expect. I wanted to join the community of historians writing history from the

bottom up. I also saw myself as a white Southerner in a way I had not before. I wanted to speak for and change from within a region that appeared so exotic and terrible from the perspective of my peers and professors in 1960s New York. I wanted to center women in the field of southern history and expand the focus of women's history beyond the Northeast. My first book, on women and lynching, aimed to do just that.

Before that book came out, another right-time right-place stroke of luck was sending me in a new direction. I got a job teaching in the UNC History Department and directing a nascent oral history program. It was this—my leadership of the Southern Oral History Program—that led me into labor history. I arrived in Chapel Hill in 1973, and by 1975 we were conducting interviews with southern labor leaders and planning an absurdly ambitious project aimed at documenting black and white working-class life. That project sprang from two observations. The first was that, unlike in England and New England, the South's industrial revolution had occurred within living memory. We could talk directly to the first men and women to beat a path off the farms and into the factories.

The second observation had to do with labor history's evolution. Studies of slavery put the South at the center of the most exciting new work on race and African American history. But the new labor history had done little to incorporate the experience of black or white southern workers. Just as with women's history, I saw an opportunity to help to shift the center of gravity of both the new labor history and of the history of my native region. The timing could not have been better, for the mid 1970's marked the moment when labor historians seemed to be expanding beyond their earlier preoccupation with white male workers in the urban northeast.

In 1978, we won a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. At almost the same time, I got a fellowship for a separate project on working-class women. That led to articles on "Disorderly Women" and other topics on the Bread-and-Roses theme of activism's links with sexuality and desire. By the early 1980's we had created an archive of almost 400 interviews with black and white tobacco, furniture and textile workers and had a contract from UNC Press to write what became *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World*.

Representing my five coauthors—all graduate students then, all distinguished and in most cases retired (!) scholars now—I presented the core themes of *Like a Family* at a 1984 conference on "The Future of Labor History: Toward a Synthesis." Given that this was my first exposure to labor historians en masse, I am happy to report that I was not alarmed by the fault lines that infamous gathering exposed. Suffice it to say that it was one thing to welcome, in theory, the race and gender critiques of the mid 1970's but quite another to "synthesize" the vast body of work done by the pioneering founders of the field and the generation of young scholars they inspired. I am even happier to say that by the time I became founding president of the Labor and Working-Class History Association in 1999, those tensions were giving way to a capacious view of class relations and working-class experience that could hold all the subfields of history in its embrace.

Nikki Mandell

I entered graduate school in 1982 after a long hiatus from undergraduate work. I was unprepared in many



ways. I hadn't majored in history as an undergrad, and as the first in my working-class family to earn a BA I knew nothing about grad school. This question about the "field's evolution" would have totally baffled

me – as did the query: "What's your question?" Without naming names (pardon the passive voice here) I was quickly disabused of the notions that "field" meant chronology or geography, that labor meant unions, that history meant men. I began reading still new paradigm-shifting studies by David Brody, David Montgomery, and Herbert Gutman. Ruth Rosen introduced me to Alice Kessler-Harris' just-published *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States*, as well as her own pathbreaking study of prostitution. So much for saying I wasn't interested in labor or women's history. It was an exciting time as social and cultural historians redefined the field. The job market, however, was not so exciting. I count myself exceedingly fortunate to have found a tenure-track position – at a public comprehensive (R-3)

where I had the bittersweet privilege of shepherding our program's last graduate student to completion. Teaching, not the field, had the greatest impact on my career. Similar to many peer institutions, I carried a 4-4 teaching load, overwhelmingly outside my field and with no TAs. The History Wars were in full swing. So, alongside research in the growing sub-field of labor relations, I branched out into the emerging field of scholarship of teaching and learning and history pedagogy.

Nelson Lichtenstein

I took my Ph.D. from UC Berkeley in 1974. An account of my politicalization and that of other similarly inclined comrades can be found in Andrew Higgins' 2026 collection of mini-memoirs, *From the*



Free Speech Movement to the Factory Floor. As it turned out, I never "industrialized," but my political and moral imagination certainly did, so that much of my scholarship has sought to explain the world from a "shop floor" perspective, even when

the subject at hand is high finance, management ideology, Democratic Party politics, or retail supply chains.

Although I began teaching in the late 1970s, I did not really feel that I was a part of academia until about 1990 when I finally took on a series of stellar graduate students, first at the University of Virginia and then at UC Santa Barbara. That late start and the comradeship I came to enjoy with so many of those students was one reason that I postponed retirement until the spring of 2020, when I was 75.

Post retirement work-life balance: how you are utilizing your time? What ways, if any, did your career as a labor/working class historian shaped the meaning of retirement for you?

Alice Kessler-Harris

Except that I no longer teach regular classes, I use my time in much the same way I always did. I still try to write daily—though I am much slower than I once was. I am in touch with many former students, who send me their manuscripts, their articles and their new books. I enjoy dispensing advice about publishing, career trajectories, and negotiating the stresses of work/family life. I'm involved in two important "projects." One is at the New York Historical where I chair a scholarly board at the Center for Women's History. That board has helped to turn the NYH into a location where young academics are trained in museum work and Public History, where graduate students and new PhDs learn to ready their work for publication, and where a wider public is exposed to every dimension of women's history. I've also been involved in creating the Labor History Research Project – a web site housed at the Kalmanovitz Initiative (headed by Joseph McCartin at Georgetown) that attempts to provide access to sources in labor history for students, teachers, journalists, and others.

Being a labor historian shaped my life choices. For almost a decade from the mid-seventies to the early eighties I helped to develop and direct a joint trade union/university labor college whose classes were located at the union headquarters in downtown Manhattan. The union provided the classroom space, paid the tuition, and negotiated release time for member-attendees who earned bachelor's degrees in the social sciences. The university provided the faculty and advisers, prepared and mounted the curriculum in cooperation with the trade union, and certified completion of the program. That experience has continued to inform my activities into retirement—fostering old and new relationships with workers and trade unionists and, crucially, shaping my political perceptions and actions.

Jacquelyn Dowd Hall

Just as I slipped into labor history from its southern flank, I slipped gradually into retirement rather than taking a sudden plunge. Indeed, I see it as one of the gifts of our profession that, if we choose, we can keep on doing the parts of our jobs we love. I chose "phased retirement," which, luckily for me, meant that I spent my last few years lavishing time on a small number of

my favorite classes. When I formally retired in 2014, I still had students to see through to degrees or first jobs, plus I was in the throes of finishing a book. For these reasons, I did not step back from the known world until 2020 when everyone else was doing so as well.

It was at that point that I began truly to register the existential pressures of a new and challenging stage of life. When Covid shut the university, my house was stacked high with boxes of professional papers ready to go to the archives. I had to live through lockdown staring at reminders of the good, bad, and the ugly of my professional career. At the same time, I dragged down from the attic hundreds of the handwritten, soul-searching letters we used to write to our lovers, family, and friends.

Faced with these sources, I found myself embarking on what I had encountered in countless interviews: a process of life review aimed at reevaluating the relationships and choices that shaped my own story. Since then, I have been working toward two goals. The first is primarily a gift to my family: a series of chronologically arranged, annotated excerpts from my personal letters, relying especially on my correspondence with my mother. The second goal is a series of contextualized essays about my experience as part of the first generation of women to push through the doors of the academy.

These efforts are moving slowly in part because these are not easy topics to write about. How and in what voice does one convey gratitude for such a lucky life while, at the same time, confronting the loves and losses, conflicts and betrayals that constitute the luckiest of lived lives? I'm also moving slowly because I have stepped away from the all-consuming focus I used to bring to writing. My mother taught me to value Bread and Roses, and the collaborations at the heart of oral history have brought endless joy into what can be an isolating profession. But for me writing itself—perhaps because I value good writing so highly—has always been just what George Orwell said it was: “a horrible, exhausting struggle, like a long bout with some painful illness.” Spare me the blank page! Once I got past that, I could, and often did, keep going day and night.

No more! I never say no to socializing with friends old and new. I treasure the contacts I still have with UNC's flourishing history department and oral history program and with former students across the country. I am surprised and delighted by how much more

intimately I am coming to know members of my own family and by a gift I never anticipated: living long enough to fall in love with a whole new generation of grand-nieces and nephews, all born after I retired. And finally, faced with AI and the prospect of what some are predicting will be a “post-literate” world, I thank my lucky stars for another gift: the love of reading. After a career of reading mostly history, I am on the hunt for and absolutely luxuriate in gripping works of fiction.

But here's the kicker. These projects are going slowly not just because writing is hard and I am deliberately allowing myself time for other things I treasure. There is also the problem nobody wants to talk about: the dissolution of the body. You think you are prepared for that, but, trust me, you are not. I am in relatively good health. But I never know which body part is going to send out the next signal of distress. Like everyone else my age, I devote inordinate amounts of time to doctors. People sometime ask me what I am up to these days and I say, “Stayin' alive.”

Looming over all of these pleasures and challenges is a shock so pervasive that it hardly needs mentioning. (You may notice that I have not mentioned it until now.) Two years after I retired, Donald Trump won the presidency. I have not, by any means, met the moment. Far from it. But I have found comradeship and small opportunities for leadership in local giving circles and protest organizations.

So here I am in a strange and yet—now that I think about it—familiar place. Trying to complete what feel to me like compelling projects. Trying not to let work interfere with citizenship, love, and pleasure. Trying to stay alive in a woman's body. Age gives all of this a new valence. And yet, haven't I always struggled with these very issues? Theorists of human development argue over whether people in late life change in the face of new realities or consolidate identities around a stable core. I'd say both. I'm amazed at all it seems that I still have to learn. But I'm also amazed at the continuities between me as a girl propelling herself out of Oklahoma and me as a woman trying to rise to the challenge of retirement and face up to my own mortality.

Nikki Mandell

I'm part of the Scott Walker-induced diaspora. For me, this meant going on permanent strike by way of an early retirement made possible by union-negotiated benefits. I had no plan beyond getting

out of Wisconsin. My husband and I quickly moved across the country. I would never have envisioned this chapter of my life. I think a key for me, was that with kids grown and no teaching (grading) load I now had time to get involved in professional associations, do history without regard to tenure-promotion hierarchies, and dive into political advocacy. LAWCHA has offered an important scholarly connection in retirement. I've built bonds with colleagues across the country, kept a hand in history pedagogy, and established relations that led to new endeavors in public history. Turns out that a fantastic way to learn about my new home was to offer my services as a historian. Over the past few years, I've researched and co-curated exhibits on Portland Jobs with Justice, Oregon labor history, and a Japanese senior lunch program; and written a history of Oregon's home-grown version of EMILY's List. More recently, friends have drawn me ever-deeper into a vibrant community of political activists, where I'm getting a “how-the-sausage-is-made” seat at the table in how bills are passed. Not pretty. A community of friends, not enough hiking, lots of gardening, and learning to weave keep me going.

Nelson Lichtenstein

At first, I could hardly distinguish life under Covid from retirement. Whether they were working or not, almost everyone in or around the academy was isolated at home staring at a screen. Initially, I found this a liberating and energizing experience. No social or campus obligations, even on zoom. So, while taking longish bike rides on California's South Coast, I also plunged into two kinds of work, both extensions of my endeavors while still taking a paycheck from UCSB. It never occurred to me to try anything else because I have always found writing and mentoring young scholars highly rewarding, and indeed, I had the sense that unless I continued with the former, my opportunities for the latter, especially in formal retirement, would become limited.

So, the first thing I did was to take on as many book and article writing opportunities as I could manage. I finished up a book on Bill Clinton's economic policies, edited with a former grad student a collection of labor essays taken from Dissent, and wrote another book, Why Labor Unions Matter, appearing in the fall of 2026. Needless to say, I was also enormously energized by the wave of strikes and organizing efforts that began as early as 2021, so the second thing I did was to turn myself into a journalist, writing for *Jacobin*, *American Prospect*, *Dissent*, and other venues

articles and interventions on the “great resignation” of 2020-21, Starbucks and Amazon organizing, the big 2022-23 strikes at the University of California, and in Hollywood and the auto industry, as well as more recent pieces on Jewish labor, UAW politics, *Labor Notes* and other radical education projects, as well as reviews, directed at a lay audience, on books that consider the larger trajectory of world capitalism and the labor movement.

Please offer further reflections (including “surprises” and “advice to your younger self”).

Alice Kessler-Harris

I expected retirement to be a continuation of all the best parts of academic life. And for a while it was. I could and did continue to advise graduate students completing the dissertation process; I enjoyed the adulation of young colleagues who freely told me how much they admired me. I taught an occasional class, participated in an enticing seminar; attended conferences at will; and above all, had time to write. What I didn't anticipate was how quickly the demands would increase and my priorities change. It wasn't that I didn't enjoy all these things, but that I found myself doing a lot of other things that soon consumed most of my time. As a retiree, I was expected to have enough free time to donate it voluntarily. I couldn't say no to joining a university committee or two. Or to sitting on dissertation committees as an outside reader. Nor could I refuse to read the manuscripts of colleagues or to respond to requests for help from professional organizations like LAWCHA and the AHA that I cared about. The truth is that I enjoyed these requests too. They were not only flattering—but they kept me in touch with former students and colleagues, rendering moot the threat of isolation that came with retirement. But continuing activity exists in tension with the inevitable demands of accommodating to old age. As I advanced from my seventies into my eighties, I found myself moving and thinking and writing more slowly. I've not been able to keep up with the challenges of AI. I am perplexed by the implications of a new vocabulary. Abolition Feminism, Incarceration Studies, Critical Fabulation, the changing meaning of class – all these have required new dimensions of thought and scrutiny. They have taught me that the field has moved on; questions have changed; my answers no longer satisfy new generations.

But the biggest surprise is how much the changing circumstances of life have called attention to the centrality of human connection. Love conquers all.

Friends and colleagues on whom I relied have become ill, lost their memories, moved into retirement homes and died. Some of my dearest family members have vanished: a beloved brother, an admirable sister-in-law, my wonderful husband and partner, friends without number. In turn I accommodate to each loss, but each one takes a bite out of me. I can't count the toll in energy and reflection. Together they remind me that as important as my professional life has been, in the end it is the personal relationships that sustain me — sustain us all. I have been lucky, so lucky, to have had both in abundance.

Jacquelyn Dowd Hall

I wish I had found more trusted confidants in my early years in the profession and that I had had the confidence to believe that I would eventually be good at — or at least good enough at — this work. Together, confidants and confidence would have saved me a lot of heartache. Speaking of heartache, I wish I'd known at the end of my first marriage that I'd end up spending thirty years and counting with a husband I love and trust more and more as the years go by. But isn't that like wishing you could have a whole life do-over knowing then what you know now?

I'm surprised that we chose to spend these final years in a continuing care retirement community. Here I am surrounded not by students absorbed in the drama of their ascending lives but by people trying to live fully amid constant reminders of life's fleetingness and fragility. I find that touching, even bracing. But I also find it hard to learn my way around a new place with its own complicated hierarchies and mores. I have to remind myself to seek out the confidants and summon the confidence to see me through. Thank goodness that I am navigating this new community while securely linked to the local and national circle of comrades that I have gradually and gratefully become a part of over the past 60 plus years.

Nikki Mandell

The fact that I retired at all was the biggest surprise. Unlike the others, I didn't contemplate or ease into retirement, and I moved thousands of miles away from my institutional connections. The first few years were a bit unsettling — I very much missed my students and the joys of teaching and efforts to connect with historians in my new hometown echoed the semi-invisibility of my adjunct experiences. I was able to get my bearings and build a meaningful retirement by taking the advice we give to undergrads (and their parents) wary of what they can "do" with a history

major: the skills of historical research and analysis are highly adaptable and valuable in a wide range of endeavors.

The question of finding meaning boils down to what do we value and are we able to act on those values. For me, a meaningful life is one that contributes beyond my own self-interest. A decade into retirement, my pension and relatively good health allow me to indulge in personal pleasures (from visiting family to wilderness adventures). And, I've found many ways to contribute my skills to my new community. I still miss teaching history, but find deep satisfaction in volunteering in ESOL classes at my local community college. I satisfy my historical curiosity through public history projects, and have finally begun tracking down some family history. There's never a lack of political work to be done. Each of these, and more, have opened doors to new friendships. It all gives me purpose amidst the chaos and horror engulfing the country.

One more note. I appreciated here learning how scholars who I looked up to as pioneers of the "new labor history," were themselves drawn to the field. Alice and Jaqueline's stories make me curious about the ways that pattern might be repeating today. These stories are also a reminder of how privileged we are to have earned our livings doing work we want to carry into retirement.

I'm saddened and infuriated by the fact that the foundation of our retirement stories — a secure pension — is unavailable to a majority of scholars in the United States. I was extraordinarily fortunate to be hired into what was already a shrinking pool of tenure-track positions. And, I'm doubly fortunate that a vibrant, progressive labor movement fought for a good defined benefits package that survives through the neo-liberal onslaught (and, extends to Wisconsin faculty who are excluded from public sector bargaining rights). We need to pay it forward by actively supporting today's struggles.

Nelson Lichtenstein

If one suspects that all this activity is designed to put at bay the existential questions that press inward toward the end of one's life, then the reader is correct. I'd still like to make my mark on the world, and even now I regret that I am not editing a journal, directing an institute, or leading a seminar full of energetic young intellectuals. Interpreting the world for a new generation constitutes the road to changing it.

Once in a Lifetime, or Same as it Ever Was?: A Brief History of Library Workers' Unions

Meredith Kahn
University of Michigan



"...if we recognize at the outset unionization carries a higher emotional charge than most library issues, we shall be forewarned to speak dispassionately. But as an honest and sincere proposal for the good of the library profession, the problem deserves honest and sincere study." — Bernard Berelson, 1939¹

Along with fellow union organizers, I co-wrote the first book about labor published by the American Library Association in decades. *Organize Your Library! Developing the Collective Power of Library Workers* tells the stories of dozens of library workers who have fought for better wages, job protections, and a voice in decision-making.² Our book comes at a pivotal moment for libraries, their workers, and the communities they serve, as our

workplaces have become a focus of the culture wars³ and long-standing efforts to defund or delegitimize public services under the auspices of austerity.⁴

We wrote this book for library workers, who can be found in both the private and public sectors, in K-12 schools, local governments, colleges and universities, and even in corporate environments. Some of these workers are credentialed librarians, while the majority are paraprofessional staff. Though they have a variety of job duties, classification schemes, and work environments, nearly all of these workers can find themselves ensnared by "vocational awe," the manipulative idea that the institution in which we labor is so fundamentally good and beyond critique that we should simply feel lucky to work there.⁵ We use an early chapter of the book to convince our readers that though the problems they face at work might have unique circumstances, their struggle to build power is connected to a bigger conflict and a longer history.

This history merits telling, as library workers have been a part of the labor movement for a long time. Female librarians at the New York Public Library founded the first union for public library workers in 1917 to fight discriminatory hiring practices faced by women in their ranks.⁶ The formation of unions at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC, Boston Public Library, and the Free Library of Philadelphia quickly followed,⁷ though anti-union activism painted union supporters as "irresponsible fanatics" who endangered the "genteel occupation" of

1 Bernard Berelson, "Library unionization," *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy*, 9, no. 4 (1939): 477, www.jstor.org/stable/4302641.

2 This piece was adapted and expanded based on research and interviews conducted for *Organize Your Library: Developing the Collective Power of Library Workers*.

3 Meredith Kahn, "What happened in Alpena was about more than just books," *Bridge Michigan*, August 22, 2024, <https://bridgemi.com/guest-commentary/opinion-what-happened-alpena-was-about-more-books/>.

4 Emily Drabinski, "Facing Cuts Likely to Worsen Under Trump, Academic Librarians Urgently Organize," *Truthout*, November 17, 2024, <https://truthout.org/articles/facing-cuts-likely-to-worsen-under-trump-academic-librarians-urgently-organize/>.

5 Fobazi Ettarh, "Vocational Awe and Librarianship: The Lies We Tell Ourselves," *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, January 10, 2018, <https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2018/vocational-awe/>.

6 James W. Milden, "Women, Public Libraries, and Library Unions: The Formative Years," *The Journal of Library History* (1974–1987) 12, no. 2 (1977): 150–158, www.jstor.org/stable/25540731.

7 Robert C. O'Reilly and Marjorie I. O'Reilly, *Librarians and Labor Relations: Employment under Union Contracts* (Greenwood Press, 1981), 14.

professional librarians.⁸ These appeals to professionalism and the nobility of our work sound strangely familiar to twenty-first-century ears, and their historical effectiveness helps us understand why they are still among the anti-union rhetoric we hear today. None of these early unions survived, and a number of public library systems saw the dissolution and reorganization of successive unions over the course of decades.⁹

After this first wave of unionization, we arrive at a second wave in the wake of the Great Depression. Reading a 1939 Library Quarterly article detailing a period of renewed interest in unionization in the library sector, we learn that public library workers in Butte, Montana, formed a union in 1934 “after the library board had voted to close the library because of lack of funds.”¹⁰ But unions were not the only solution proposed to benefit libraries and (purportedly) their workers. During this era of post-Depression union activity, libraries themselves encouraged the formation of “staff associations,” whose aim was to “be organized along constructive lines, stressing particularly the aim of cooperation with the library authorities, rather than by emphasizing ‘rights’ in an antagonistic spirit.”¹¹ Functioning in a manner akin to “company unions,” these staff associations lacked the ability to meaningfully address wages and working conditions because they existed at the pleasure of management, and instead they served as social and professional support.¹²

But why were library workers again agitating for unions so soon after that first wave of organizing? As a record of a professional organization making its way through the tail end of the Great Depression, the American Library Association secretary’s report of 1937 is a fascinating read. The association’s long-serving leader Carl H. Milam describes the working conditions of those Depression-era library workers:

Salaries, low by any standard, qualifications considered, have not kept pace with the rising cost of living or with salaries in other professions... Library employees, along with most other intelligent employed persons, are perhaps feeling the urge to

*demand not only better working conditions and salaries which will support a higher standard of living, but also more economic security and a larger part in the control of the destinies and policies of the agencies or institutions with which they are associated. Surely it is not too much to hope that the directors of libraries, when facing these issues, will recall that the modern library movement was reared in the liberal democratic tradition.*¹³

Like our colleagues of the 1930s, today’s library workers also find themselves struggling with stagnant wages, difficult working conditions, and threats to the existence of libraries themselves. Again, we see that while the particular circumstances of our own workplaces can feel distinctive, our stories are part of a longer narrative that stretches back generations.

Our third wave of unionization begins in the postwar period, as changes in state laws regarding collective bargaining spurred the formation of many new library unions. By 1971, nearly half of states had passed laws legalizing public sector unions,¹⁴ clearing the way for workers in public, academic, and K-12 schools to organize and collectively bargain. University of California, Berkeley librarians were among the first academic librarians at a public institution to unionize in 1965,¹⁵ and by the summer of 1971 the community would see not one but two labor actions by library unions. In June, twenty librarians—members of the University Federation of Librarians, AFT Local 1795—participated in a university-wide strike, joining their union siblings in a fight over wages. On the picket line, the police sprayed two librarians with mace, and one was sent to the hospital. They later won a 10 percent raise.¹⁶ In August of that same year, staff and librarians of the Berkeley Public Library went out on a two-day strike and were the first-ever Berkeley city employees to strike. The workers won a 5 percent wage increase and later successfully fought efforts to eliminate library hours on Sundays.¹⁷

As we can learn from organized labor in a variety of

industries, the more that library employees join with other workers, the more power they can build and exercise. In the aforementioned UC Berkeley labor action, because librarians participated in the strike, and were even attacked and injured by police on the picket line, they gained the trust and camaraderie of other groups of workers on campus. This battle-tested solidarity led to material gains for the librarians. According to Laurel Burley, a member of the library worker union:

No one sold anybody out and indeed in the last marathon bargaining session some seven hours were spent with the University offering the building trades a few more dollars if they would forget about the librarians’ low salaries, a sell-out the building trades refused to listen to.¹⁸

The importance of solidarity has been understood within our profession for quite some time, particularly as it applies to public sector library workers. A 1981 volume addressing Librarians and Labor Relations, asserts that as public sector workers, in order to be successful in their fight for better wages and working conditions, library unions must “court the support and assistance of their community, including other segments of organized labor.” They must also “recognize that their colleagues are not administrator-librarians; their colleagues are among other union people in the sense of support to finance their services.”¹⁹ For this reason, throughout Organize Your Library we encourage readers to learn from workers outside the library, and to read and think broadly about labor via publications like Labor Notes or the writings of labor luminaries such as Jane McAlevey.

In our book we tell the story of the Concerned Black Workers of the Free Library of Philadelphia, labor activists who fought for stronger protections for library staff returning to in-person work in 2020, dubbed “one of the most visible showings of worker power in Philadelphia.”²⁰ For years these workers had raised concerns about inequity and discrimination in the library, but the Free Library of Philadelphia’s plans for re-opening coincided with a nationwide conversation about race and racism

in American life, presenting Black library workers with a unique opportunity to connect their concerns about the resumption of in-person library services to ongoing conversations about how the library was failing its workers and its community.²¹

The Concerned Black Workers launched an open letter campaign modeled after a similar letter published a few weeks earlier by Black journalists at the Philadelphia Inquirer, which highlighted their negative workplace experiences, including allegations of racism and inequitable pay.²² In Organize Your Library, a member of the Concerned Black Workers of the Free Library of Philadelphia describes what happened next:

The paper covered us like no one’s business. They were at every event we had, every protest. They were calling us, doing interviews, and they kept us on the front page. So when the Free Library’s executive director resigned, it was above the fold on the front page of the Philadelphia Inquirer, because we were all kind of working together at this point in time to fight racism in the workplace. I think that’s really important for people to think about who else is publicly fighting the same fight that we are and how we can work together and support each other.

In the wake of their activism, the Concerned Black Workers saw the selection of new leadership for both their library and their union, and a renewed interest among their colleagues in fighting for change at work.

Do we now find ourselves in a fourth wave of unionization among library workers? The numbers are inconclusive and might not be sufficient for understanding the fuller picture. US Bureau of Labor Statistics data tells us that the percentage of workers represented by unions has been shrinking for decades, but education, training, and library occupations (which include library workers as well as teachers) are still the most likely to be represented by a union when compared to all other occupations, and union representation among these workers is shrinking slower than in the labor market as a whole.²³ Meanwhile, public

8 Milden, “Women, Public Libraries, and Library Unions,” 153.

9 Theodore Lewis Guyton, *Unionization: The Viewpoint of Librarians* (American Library Association, 1975), 12-15.

10 Berelson, “Library Unionization,” 499.

11 Louis M. Nourse, “Staff associations—A Job for Junior Members,” *Bulletin of the American Library Association* 28, no. 12 (1934): 873, www.jstor.org/stable/25688320.

12 Berelson, “Library Unionization,” 509; and Guyton, *Unionization*, 66.

13 Carl H. Milam, “Administrative reports,” *Bulletin of the American Library Association*, 31, no. 9 (1937): 488, www.jstor.org/stable/25689176.

14 Gail Schlachter, “Quasi Unions and Organizational Hegemony within the Library Field,” *The Library Quarterly* 43, no. 3 (1973): 192, www.jstor.org/stable/4306283.

15 Phillips, Margaret, David Eifler, and Tiffany Linton Page, “Democratizing the Union at UC Berkeley: Lecturers and Librarians in Solidarity,” *Library Trends* 68, no. 2 (2019): 343-367, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/lib.2019.0043>.

16 William Robert Eshelman, “Library Unionization Fronts,” *Wilson Library Bulletin* 47 (1972): 132.

17 Guyton, *Unionization*, 25.

18 Eshelman, “Library Unionization Fronts,” 133.

19 O’Reilly and O’Reilly, *Librarians and Labor Relations*, 55.

20 Juliana Reyes, “Worker Strength—Labor Unions and Individuals Showed in 2020 That the Struggle in the City Continues,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, January 3, 2021, www.inquirer.com/jobs/labor/labor-unions-workers-covid-philadelphia-2020-20210103.html.

21 Lisa Peet, “Free Library of Philadelphia Director Siobhan Reardon resigns after criticisms of system-wide racism,” *Library Journal*, July 24, 2020, www.libraryjournal.com/story/free-library-of-philadelphia-director-siobhan-reardon-resigns-after-criticisms-of-system-wide-racism.

22 Hanaa’ Tameez, “The Philadelphia Inquirer’s Journalists of Color are Taking a ‘Sick and Tired Day’ After ‘Buildings Matter, Too’ Headline,” *NiemanLab*, June 4, 2020, www.niemanlab.org/2020/06/the-philadelphia-inquirers-journalists-of-color-are-taking-a-sick-and-tired-day-after-buildings-matter-too-headline/.

23 In 2000, 44.7% of those in education, training, and library occupations were represented by a union. By 2025, this percentage had fallen to 35.9%. Across all occupations and industries, only 14.9% of workers were represented by unions in 2000. By 2025, this figure was 11.2%. Data pulled from US Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Data Retrieval: Labor Force Statistics (CPS), Table 3. Union affiliation of employed wage and salary workers by occupation and industry,” <https://www.bls.gov/webapps/legacy/cpslatab3.htm>

perception of unions remains strong, with an approval rate of 68% among Americans generally, a notable increase from the record-low approval rate of 48% in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis.²⁴ Research tells us that despite overall union representation being low nationwide, if given the option many workers would join a union.²⁵ If library workers are like other workers, we can assume many of them want a union. So why don't more of them have one? Because like all workers, they face obstacles in forming a union, getting recognized, and bargaining a first contract. And like other workers, their employers often fight unionization. These fights can be particularly challenging for public sector library workers, whose bosses can use tax dollars²⁶ and legislation²⁷ to hobble or even prevent organizing.

But numbers alone might not be the only predictor of whether we're in a renewed period of interest in unionization. In 2022, members of the American Library Association elected my co-author Emily Drabinski (who campaigned on an explicitly pro-labor platform) as the president of the most important library advocacy organization, which also serves as the largest professional association for library employees and leadership. In 2025, ALA selected labor leader Daniel Montgomery as their new executive director. Prior to leading ALA, Montgomery served as president of the Illinois Federation of Teachers for fifteen years. Finally, in the spring of 2026, the workers of the ALA itself went public with their intent to form a union.²⁸ The vibes are unambiguous, even if the numbers don't tell the whole story.

In today's labor fight, we hear the echoes of past struggles. The final chapter of the 1981 *Librarians and Labor Relations* begins with a lengthy description of the challenges facing public sector workers as they advocated for better wages and working conditions in an era of energy crises and early anti-tax movements:

An uneasiness settled upon the American citizenry in the latter 1970s, a mood related to questions about the effects that energy deficiencies will have

*upon a technological society. It is related to inflation and to the sagging imbalance in the nation's balance of payments as goods are imported and exported. It is related to the shift within the population through which the proportion of older persons has increased, and the proportion of younger persons has decreased. Narrowly, it is related to the question of how to provide social and economic stability in the face of world shortages and fierce competition... Such an obvious mood cannot lead public employees toward a feeling of confidence or security in their jobs.*²⁹

This passage—alluding to the energy and fiscal crises of the 1970s—will no doubt give today's readers déjà vu. Library workers of 2026 might feel uneasy due to the incipient energy crisis of the second Trump administration, chaos caused by tariffs, the preponderance of generative AI marketing, or industry disruption.³⁰ While each moment in this account might have felt unprecedented to those living in it, this brief examination of over a century of history shows that library workers know how to come together to fight for and win better working conditions, and to ensure the survival of the very institutions they serve.

The fifth statement of the American Library Association's Code of Ethics declares that library workers should be guided by the principle that “we treat co-workers and other colleagues with respect, fairness, and good faith, and advocate conditions of employment that safeguard the rights and welfare of all employees of our institutions.” The ninth states that library workers “confront inequity and oppression.”³¹ Our book takes these principles seriously, and further argues that to make them a reality, library workers should organize themselves into unions to make positive and long-lasting structural changes in their workplaces. As history has shown us, the collective bargaining power of library workers is the best way to safeguard our rights and welfare on the job.

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27 Jay Waagmeester, “Union-Restricting Measure Crosses Finish Line, Gets DeSantis Signature,” *WLRN*, May 4, 2026, <https://www.wlrn.org/government-politics/2026-05-04/union-restricting-measure-crosses-finish-line-gets-desantis-signature>.
28 Rosie Newmark, “ALA Workers Move to Unionize,” *American Libraries Magazine*, April 29, 2026, <https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/2026/04/29/ala-workers-move-to-unionize/>.
29 O'Reilly and O'Reilly, *Librarians and Labor Relations*, 167.
30 Jim Milliot, “Baker & Taylor Prepares Plan to Shut Down,” *Publishers Weekly*, October 7, 2025, <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/98777-baker-taylor-prepares-plan-to-shut-down.html>.
31 American Library Association, “Code of Ethics,” last amended June 29, 2021, <https://www.ala.org/tools/ethics>.

BANISHED CITIZENS

by Marla A. Ramirez

An Interview by Martha Guerrero Badillo (Yale University)

What inspired you to get into this research and write your book?

As a researcher, I have always been interested in the history of immigration policies and their prolonged consequences on everyday people. In 2011, as a graduate student at the University of California, Santa Barbara, I wrote a master's thesis that examined the social, legal, and political determinants influencing the post-secondary educational and labor market trajectories of undocumented immigrant youth. Grounded in the history of education and utilizing an oral history methodology under the guidance of late Professor Horacio Roque Ramírez, all my interviews started with the following question: “How do you self-identify?” This inquiry served a dual methodological function: it helped to further establish rapport with and produce valuable information about the self-conceptualizations of my interlocutors.

One of the participants in my master's thesis, Jesús, answered this question in a distinct way: “I am a US citizen, but not recognized as one.” I had assumed that as a Mexican citizen who immigrated to the US at an early age, Jesús meant that he had embraced a sense of cultural US citizenship. In other words, I thought he was saying that he was an undocumented immigrant raised in the US, who had immersed himself in American culture, and he understood himself as a US citizen in a cultural sense, even if he was not legally one. Nonetheless, I heard the voice of my mentor Horacio in my head: “Never assume what a narrator means. Instead, always ask a follow-up question.” So I asked Jesús, “What do you mean when you say that you are a US citizen, but not recognized as one? Can you elaborate on that?”

This follow-up question and Jesús's answer changed the trajectory of my research and my career. Jesús proceeded to explain that his paternal grandmother, Trinidad Rodríguez, was a second-generation Mexican American woman born to a US-citizen mother in Redlands, California. In 1921, when Trinidad was four years old, her mother died. A year later, during the post-World War I economic recession, Trinidad lived with her half-sister and destitute stepfather. During the post-World War I economic recession of the early 1920s, amid heightened xenophobic state practices and mass removals, Trinidad and her family were banished. They were targeted as part of the mass Mexican American banishment drives that removed approximately 1 million ethnic Mexicans between 1921 and 1944, a starting sixty percent of whom were US-citizen women and children.

After Jesús explained his reasoning, I decided to put aside the interview guide I had prepared on the topic of my master's thesis. Instead, I proceeded with a line of questioning about his legal status and his grandmother's removal from the US. I needed to understand the mechanisms by which the direct descendants of US-citizen women who had been removed from the US to Mexico decades earlier came to reside in the US as unauthorized immigrants. How had that transgenerational legal disenfranchisement taken place? I also wondered if Jesús was an isolated case or if there were other descendants of banished citizens who were still enduring the prolonged consequences of banishment. I completed my master's thesis on my original research topic (undocumented immigrant youth), but on the side, I read the Mexican repatriation historiography. I also immediately began conducting archival research for what became my dissertation topic, which was the basis for my recently published book, *Banished Citizens: A History of the Mexican American Women Who Endured Repatriation* (Harvard University Press, 2025). Chapter one of the book focuses on the story of Trinidad's banishment and the Rodríguez family histories that were connected to it.

What were some of the biggest surprises and challenges along the way?

The primary challenge in researching this book involved locating banished women and their families for interviews. While US and Mexican archives document the mass removals of the Great Depression—focusing largely on repatriated Mexican farmworker men—they offer only fragmented hints regarding US-citizen women and children. Because official repositories predominantly preserved records of male agricultural laborers recruited during wartime shortages, the gendered dimensions of banishment remain largely absent from academic scholarship. Consequently, *Banished Citizens* sought out women survivors and their families who had resettled in the United States, as was the case of Trinidad, Jesús, and their relatives.

However, no official archival records documented the resettlement residence of banished families upon their return to the United States. Nonetheless, I like to think that the research fairies were on my side. On February 26, 2012, the California State

Legislature and the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors convened at LA Plaza de Cultura y Artes, adjacent to La Placita Olvera in Los Angeles, to formally acknowledge governmental participation in the coerced removals of Mexican Americans during the Great Depression. That day, local and state governmental officials also unveiled a commemorative plaque addressing this history. Discovering an online flyer only one week prior, I attended the event due to its historical significance and important relevance to my research. I was also hopeful that banished women and their families might have been invited to accept the formal apology. Banished families did indeed attend. Equipped with a digital audio recording, a notepad, and pen in hand, I introduced myself and my project to the few banished families in attendance. The oral histories shared by the banished women, their children, and grandchildren during individual and transgenerational oral history interviews conducted between 2012 and 2017 subsequently formed the foundation of my book.

The biggest surprise was finding that each participating family in my study had at least one member who was a self-designated family historian. They were talented researchers in their own right who had preserved family records, photographs, newspapers, identification records, and letters documenting their family’s banishment history. Some had even conducted archival research about their family history in the National Archives and Records Administration regional facilities in California. They decided to research their history to make sense of their family’s memories of banishment out of disbelief that their US-citizen mothers and grandmothers were banished from their native country. After finding evidence that their mother’s and grandmother’s stories were not family tales, they continued collecting archival evidence to have tangible proof of their banishment. My collaboration with participating families in my study allowed me to fill the silences in institutional archives and expand the official record in the historiography by contributing a women-centered history of banishment.

Your book documents how, between 1921 and 1944, more than one million Mexican Americans were forcibly removed from the United States. What are some of the biggest lessons for today that can be derived from uncovering and examining this history?

Parallels between contemporary mass removal and historical interwar banishment campaigns have become increasingly apparent. As I wrote in the epilogue of my book, the “self-deportation” campaigns we see and hear about today in the news mirror the so-called repatriation drives during the interwar period, both of which have targeted working-class mixed-status families for removal. People from racialized backgrounds—non-white, working-class people—are again suspected to be unauthorized immigrants regardless of their legal status. Thus, many US citizens, legal permanent residents, and those with various immigrant visas have been questioned, harassed, and even unjustifiably detained by ICE during the past couple of years. The current and past removal drives have been promoted as economic recovery efforts that will allegedly save US taxpayer funds. This rhetoric insists on portraying mass removals as voluntary and benevolent efforts. Nonetheless, as demonstrated by the women and their families at the center of my book, banishment and “self-deportations” are carried out through a coercive process that has created long-lasting repercussions.

While historical mass expulsion campaigns provide a blueprint for the mechanics of state-sponsored displacement, the accounts of banished women examined in my book offer a critical framework for responding to the contemporary mass deportations. More importantly, banished citizen women offer us a window into the enduring, long-term consequences of uncontested mass removals. I hope that my book, *Banished Citizens*, inspires readers to act against the continued criminalization and displacement of both immigrants and racialized US citizens.

You underscore how exclusionary immigration policies linked gender, ethnicity, and class status to ideas of moral character and economic responsibility. Can you expand on the roles of gender, race and ethnicity, and class throughout your book?

Gender, race and ethnicity, and class were central to my study. During the interwar period, US-citizen women and their children of Mexican descent could not be legally deported or repatriated, as the US was their native land. Consequently, as early as the 1917 Immigration Act, federal and state officials in collaboration with social workers at the local level invoked the outdated legal doctrine of coverture—an English common law principle that linked a married woman’s legal identity to that of her husband—to racialize entire families as economic liabilities and target them for removal through portrayals of Mexican American women and their children as likely to become public charges. By conflating gender, ethnicity, and class with notions of moral character and economic liability, these officials constructed a pretext for the removal of Mexican American women and minors. This mechanism legally reclassified US citizens as foreigners by subsuming their legal identities under the economic dependency of Mexican immigrant men, in turn enabling the systematic exclusion of mixed-status Mexican families from the United States. Contemporary challenges to birthright citizenship represent a continuity of this logic, seeking to render mixed-status families as perpetual outsiders targeted for removal. Current legal and political strategies attempt to nullify the constitutional right of immigrant mothers to bear US-citizen children endowed with full political rights, solely based on the mother’s undocumented status.



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By Eileen Boris and Kristen Ahlberg

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In an interview with journalists [Maggie Haberman and Jonathan Swan](#), Donald Trump claimed to be a great man, on par with world-shattering figures like Mao, Napoleon, Stalin, Hitler, and Genghis Khan—or so a “presidential historian” told him. That this presidential historian was the caddy for golfing star Gary Player only underscores the disdain for expertise, standards, and facts that the second Trump administration has brought to researching, preserving, and narrating the nation’s past.

Censorship, erasure, and falsehoods have characterized the Trumpian stewardship of America’s story—dismantling interpretive panels with references to slavery at the Philadelphia President’s House, eliminating exhibits at national parks that highlight working women and climate change, demanding new labels at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History, and tampering with the architectural footprint of the White House itself. Now the [History, Archives, and Records Preservation Project](#), an initiative of the Organization of American Historians (OAH), has documented the overweening scope of this attack on American history by a presidential administration that substitutes its own ideology for scholarly method. The attack does not stop with relabeling and eliminating historical truths it deems less than “patriotic;” additionally, this administration has set about disappearing the very building blocks of historical research and writing.

[The Federal Assault on History: A Record of Executive Actions](#), a briefing report issued in June, offers a comprehensive review of efforts under Trump II. It argues “that the United States is confronting a systemic campaign to control the production and public presentation of history and historical practices.” It records the executive orders, agency directives, staff layoffs, and funding cuts that undermine historians’ craft and reshape historical meaning to conform to Trumpian ideological requisites. Though courts rejected the elimination of previously awarded National Endowment for the Humanities grants, the administration has resorted to more durable actions. It has disbanded federal advisory boards and tampered with evaluative panels while proposing new rules to tighten oversight of federal grants, essentially replacing peer review with political or ideological criteria. One particularly troubling example was the 2025 abrupt termination of the members of the US Department of State Advisory Committee on Historical Diplomatic Documentation (HAC). The 1991 Foreign Affairs Authorization Act charged the HAC with advising the department’s Office of the Historian on all aspects of preparation and production of the Foreign Relations of the United States, and by statute, the HAC is to operate on a permanent basis with members selected by scholarly professional societies. Because this arbitrary dismissal meant cancellation of remaining quarterly meetings for 2025, the committee could not perform its statutory duties. Nor could the members advise on the Department of State’s declassification efforts and records management practices—an example of how Trump administration actions delay the availability of documents for historical analysis.

The Department of Government Efficiency’s slashing of personnel inaugurated an ongoing uptick in resignations and retirements. The National Archives and Records Administration now reports 15 percent fewer full-time equivalent staff, resulting in lessening archival management throughout the government. Lack of recordkeeping will curtail documentation of the making of federal policies and programs—and their outcomes. It isn’t surprising that Trump’s revenge tour-dominated second administration has actively undermined the preservation of government records, given his refusal to hand over materials from his first term to the national archives. Moreover, the administration has politicized previously nonpartisan positions, such as the Archivist of the Unit-

ed States. Without a permanent archivist, the National Historical Publications Records Commission has no chair to organize its semiannual meetings that determine which grants will be made to projects throughout the nation that preserve vital records, including those of the Founding Fathers, Indigenous languages, and oppositional figures like Marcus Garvey.

Behind these moves lies the troubling promotion of what the White House calls “patriotic history.” While debates over revisionist history have spilled into public discourse during the last half-century, the current White House-led push moves forward the project of a wider backlash against civil rights that emerged through attacks on gender ideology and diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. Two executive orders stand out in this regard. [“Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History”](#) (EO 14253) fabricates a tale about the hijacking of American history through “divisive race-centered ideologies” and “gender ideology” while downplaying “our Nation’s unparalleled legacy of advancing liberty, individual rights, and human happiness.” This executive order called for a review of historical interpretation at all federal cultural institutions, including the Smithsonian, national parks, and monuments. [In response, the OAH countered](#) that rather than returning sanity, the order would eliminate the unsavory aspects of the past, like slavery, segregation, and discrimination, along with “suppressing the voices of historically excluded groups.”

[“Ending Radical Indoctrination in K-12 Schooling”](#) (EO 14190) would censure what students learn, stamping out “radical, anti-American ideologies” that teach about racism, sexism, or discrimination by withholding funding. Particularly targeted would be any lessons that promote definitions of gender beyond two sexes or advocate “discriminatory equity ideology.” Celebration of heroes, more often white, straight, wealthy, Christian, and male, would shape not only Trump’s proposed sculpture garden but K-12 curriculum.

The Trump attack on history would hollow out the institutions and recordkeeping that enable historical research while undermining existing scholarship. Censorship and elimination of staff and programs in governmental agencies are in keeping with assaults on academic freedom and governmental transparency. Trump’s version of the past flattens the men who signed the Declaration of Independence into cardboard figures. His version represents only a small part of the nation as the whole, excluding the majority from the very idea of community.

Historians are pushing back. We have gone to court to expose this great untelling and challenged its ideological origins through ongoing reportage and other forms of advocacy such as testimonies, forums, and legal suits. We continue to document the assault: conducting oral histories of fired federal workers, recording endangered museum and park exhibits, and maintaining statistical and other materials until the time comes when restoration and renewal become possible.

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#Peoples250

By Patrick Dixon

When LAWCHA's leadership board met at the biennial conference at the University of Chicago in June 2025, various attendees observed that as an organization we should not allow the semi-quincentennial to pass by without some measure of participation of the association's members. As the Trump Administration's early months were taking shape and we became increasingly aware of the ongoing efforts to overhaul the Smithsonian and reorganize signage in the country's national parks, we grew concerned that the story of the United States presented on the occasion of the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence was in the hands of a series of irresponsible actors who would present a whitewashed image of American history that would deliberately overlook the vast contributions of working-class, indigenous, and marginalized communities.

While Freedom 250, the Trump administration's executive-appointed body which largely obscured the work of America 250, the bipartisan commission founded in 2016, did indeed overlook the expansive body of scholarship developed over decades by historians of the American working class. Reflecting on events fourteen months later, we may have given the administration too much credit in expecting it to present a coherent historical narrative to the broader national public. Efforts to present a new patriotic historical storytelling were more often asinine than effective. As one of the limited number to attend the Freedom 250's Great American State Fair on the National Mall this July, I witnessed many images of the American past on the colorful fencing encircling the event, but the two most noteworthy historical figures featured in such displays appeared to be, of all people, astronaut Neil Armstrong and 'King of the Wild Frontier' Davy Crockett. At the celebratory event on the night of July 4, the president himself, acting as the headline performer marking the United States' 250 year anniversary, offered his own limited narrative of American history as a fable of flags and war stories in a presentation that was sufficiently late and meandering that the Independence Day firework display ultimately took place on July 5.

Elsewhere, the story of the American past that elected Republicans were trying to communicate remained similarly unclear. In a recent appearance before the House Oversight Subcommittee on Delivering on Government Efficiency, National Museum of American History Director Anthea Hartig was asked by Rep. Boebert of Colorado: "What about the tens of millions of aborted babies, the babies that have been killed in America...where's their history?" While institutions like Hillsdale College may have prepared textbooks and syllabi presenting their own mission-aligned interpretation of American history, the decentralized aspects of the federal system have made it difficult for conservatives to effectively impose a continent-wide historical agenda.

It was within this broader context, familiar to LAWCHA members, that we developed the #Peoples250 social media campaign early this year. While in previous years we may have encouraged a series of op-eds within national and local newspapers (when they existed), we aimed to create an easier on-ramp, where one did not need to be a writer with a PhD in history in order to participate. Our goal was, after all, to put working class voices at the forefront of the semi-quincentennial. While all of the large social media platforms have their problems, we decided that short-form video would be our chosen medium and that we would use TikTok as our primary means of dissemination. This was indeed a new format and style of presentation for many of us, often a little scrappy and home-made in style, and lacking in the serious dignity and framing in which speakers may appear in a PBS documentary. But we felt that it offered an easier platform for us to share with non-academics.

We built partnerships with union members, the Zinn Education project, and state labor history associations to develop content. The Wisconsin Labor History Society proved to be an outstanding partner, drawing on their expansive network of both active and retired union activists to share personal memories on a diversity of significant historical moments, including the founding of the Coalition of Labor Union Women in 1974, the closing of the vast Uniroyal Goodrich tire plant in Eau Claire in 1991, and the Act 10 protests in Madison in 2011. Through such recollections, participants reminded social media audiences that the making of the American nation and the realization of the promises of democracy and equality were not fully realized in 1776 and that the effort to realize them is an ongoing struggle in our own time.

On occasion we drew on archival content too, producing new edits of historical interviews with workers from the VHS era. When we posted tightly edited excerpts from early-2000s interviews with former Bethlehem Steel workers Eddie Bartee and Edie Papadakis of Sparrows Point, Baltimore, several thousand people viewed them, prompting many to share their own memories of relatives connected to the steel community. Perhaps not a viral moment, but a chance for meaningful engagement with people who are often beyond our reach through the usual methods of public communication. Looking ahead, I encourage historians to continue exploring how we can make effective use of these popular platforms, however strange or unfamiliar they may initially seem. They have their limitations, to be sure, but they also might allow us to engage in conversations with a wider audience that has a proven appetite for historical knowledge while reinforcing the sense that we all have both a role – and a stake – in the documentation of history.

Thompson's Continuing Legacy: Report from Warwick

By Jennifer Luff (Johns Hopkins)

The University of Warwick holds a storied place in the genealogy of US labor history. The Centre for the Study of Social History, launched in 1968 by E. P. Thompson, mentored an influential cohort of scholars, including David Montgomery, Leon Fink, and Melvyn Dubofsky. This summer, historians at Warwick breathed new life into that tradition by organizing a workshop titled "Between Thompson and The Global: Reflections on labour history today." Historians gathered to discuss the legacy of E. P. Thompson's model of doing labor history amid the contemporary spread of global and transnational approaches. While there was no consensus on exactly what constituted "Thompsonian" methods, workshop members agreed that he remains a towering presence for labor historians around the world.

The workshop was organized by Warwick historians Laura Schwartz (a scholar of feminism, domestic labour, and precarity in Britain); Aditya Sarkar (who studies labour and capitalism in modern South Asia); Pierre Pur-seigle (scholar of urban history, disaster history, and Head of Department); and Song-Chuan Chen (historian of China and Sino-Western relations). They sought papers that explicitly engaged critiques of Thompsonian labour history's "methodological nationalism" and focus on a narrow swathe of workers, and considered the trade-offs involved in histories that operate in global registers. Also on the agenda: the politics of doing labour history at a historical moment when trade unionism is in crisis. These questions resonate sharply for historians of Britain. As many scholars have noted, in the last generation labour history has been abruptly shunted out of the historical mainstream in British history departments, journals, and scholarly societies, relegated to toeholds in business schools and industrial relations programmes. New signs of life have emerged in recent years in studies of working-class experience that attend to gender, race, sexuality, and precarious labor. Nevertheless, in Britain, the history of labour---whatever it is called---remains on the margins.

The Warwick workshop decidedly eschewed methodological nationalism with a range of papers that drew on Thompsonian concepts in varied geographies. Adrian Grama (Cambridge) and Jan de Graaf (Bochum) explored the uneven development of industrial employment across postwar Europe and the persistent power of native-born unionists to control shop floor dynamics and deny access to jobs for the "primitive rebels" of southern and eastern Europe. Samuel Boscarello (IMT Lucca) investigated the ways that trade unions and faith-based organizations mobilized the concept of "moral economy" to press Italian managers to undertake "corporate social responsibility" initiatives in the 1970s. Matt Myers (Oxford) argued for the continuing significance of national frameworks and of "old" institutions such as trade unions for understanding the strength and aspirations of labor movements in the 1970s, and the power of populism today. Dave Featherstone (Glasgow) revisited Thompson's writings about and political engagements with anti-colonial activists and movements to reconstruct debates in the British New Left about "third-worldism" and internationalism, and finds both insights and incomprehension in Thompson's thoughts about the global.

Some papers focused on race-making and labour. Thompson Climaco (Federal Rural University of Rio de Janeiro) put Thompson in dialogue with W. E. B. Du Bois to study the messy transition from enslaved to free labour in Brazil, showing how racial categorizations were imbricated in labour relations and struggles. Jennifer Luff (Johns Hopkins) discussed struggles over British labour shortages during World War I and the government's proposal to import indentured colonial workers into Britain to staff munitions factories. The rapid mobilization of British trade unions and labour intellectuals to fight "coloured labour" and defend the perquisites of "white" British workers would reverberate in the race riots of 1919.

Meanwhile, several scholars offered accounts of the development of labour history in their national academies in recent decades, emphasizing Thompson's prominence in those literatures. Nicolás Gómez Baeza (Universidad Austral de Chile) explained the evolution of labour history in Patagonia in recent decades. He showed how Patagonian traditions of storytelling and history-making mirrored Thompson's "history from below," and thus proved compatible with, and critical of, European labour history narratives even as Patagonian scholars take up global approaches. Felipe Azevedo e Soza (Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro) and Paulo Fontes (Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro) presented a sweeping narrative of transformations in Brazilian labour history, showing that its recent academic institutionalization has benefited from methodological innovations, especially the integration of the study of slavery with the study of labour and the rise of Atlantic history. Thompson's work has been a touchstone for this scholarship, even today. "The Thompsonian methodology proved more universal than its own empirical horizon," they argue; "taken to its most radical consequences," it "already contained within itself the critique of the very national limitation with which it had been conceived."

In our discussions, participants reflected on the somewhat surprising durability of E. P. Thompson's influence in very disparate geographic contexts. Exactly what are we talking about when we talk about Thompson? For some, it was the methodology of "history from below," and attending to the workplace practices, sensibility, and struggles of workers. For others, it was the centering of workers' experience in broader social and political transformations, such as developments within capitalism. In many ways, of course, these approaches were common to social history and cannot be simply attributed to Thompson. Likewise, some of the keywords and concepts—moral economy, class as a relationship, and so on—that he deployed were not solely his creations. Some of his interlocutors, such as Dipesh Chakrabarty, produced sophisticated rethinkings of these approaches and ideas that deserve as much, if not more, consideration.

Participants agreed that Thompson's bracing prose style surely accounts for much of his enduring appeal. Phrases such as "the enormous condescension of posterity" and "present at its own making" are etched in many of our brains, and a moment of paging through Thompson's works quickly yields more memorable lines. Thompson's energetic political commitments, not least his involvement with the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, also continue to inspire, even as the limitations of his outlook become clearer, thanks to the scholarship of people such as Priya Satia.

Whatever the virtues or shortcomings of E. P. Thompson, we can all applaud the Warwick initiative for seeking to reinvigorate British labour history through dialogue with global approaches and scholars. Ideas and intellectual movements, after all, do not rise like the sun at an appointed time, either. Thanks to the Warwick organizers for making some weather.

LAWCHA's Global Affairs Committee welcomes reports and dispatches from labor history gatherings and workshops outside of the United States, as well as intelligence about upcoming events.

LAWCHA Teaching Resources Committee

Resources for teaching and learning
Professional opportunities for LAWCHA members

The committee's purpose is to promote labor and working-class history in schools, community colleges, colleges, universities, and unions.

Check out the LAWCHA website for –

- *Teaching Labor's Story*: a sourcebook of primary sources with supporting teaching guides, plus contextualizing essays. TLS entries are designed to be readily incorporated into existing curriculum so that experts and non-experts alike can re-infuse labor's story into the historical narrative.
- *Teaching Labor's Story Awards*: recognize excellence in applied research, specifically as that research contributes to teaching resources that promote understanding of labor and working-class history as an integral part of the American Story.
- *National History Day*: labor history-focused questions and primary source bibliography for NHD projects. NHD reaches over 500,000 students every year who conduct historical research to discover the past, understand the present, and be the future.

Activate your LAWCHA membership by –

1. Using the Teaching Labor's Story sourcebook of primary sources and contextualizing essays.
 2. Authoring a TLS primary source entry with teaching guide; all entries eligible for a TLS prize.
 3. Authoring a TLS contextualizing essay; all essays eligible for a TLS prize.
 4. Recommending the TLS and NHD resources to others.
 5. Hosting a TLS writing workshop for colleagues or grad students
 6. Joining the Teaching Resources Committee.
- Contact committee chair, Nikki Mandell. mandelln@uww.edu

Special Announcements –

National History Day invited LAWCHA to contribute a labor history-focused essay to its Theme Book for 2026-2027. This is a high-profile honor and opportunity. The Theme Book is used by teachers and students across the country and the territories.

TLS Essay Award –

Congratulations to Janine Giordano-Drake for her essay "Innovation at Work: Fighting for Fair Pay and Shorter Hours." Janine wrote this essay on behalf of LAWCHA for the 2027 NHD *Theme Book*. It's a master class in re-framing NHD's 2027 theme of "Innovation" from a celebratory and beneficial development to a series of challenges and losses that sparked innovative labor organizing, strategies, and politics.

LAWCHA to Partner with Newberry Library Labor History Seminar

For decades, the Labor History Seminar has been an anchor of the Newberry Library's Scholar Seminar series. The setting, whether in-person or virtual, has long been a place open to scholars of all ranks where participants read, discuss, and critique works in progress. Authors come away with rich, attentive, and invaluable feedback that they often find difficult to obtain at academic conferences. Under the leadership of Liesl Orenic, Colleen Doody, Peter Cole, and Elizabeth Tandy Shermer (until she recently moved to the University of Georgia), the Labor History Seminar has set the standard for a generous yet critical community of labor historians.

Earlier this year, LAWCHA's Presenting Labor and Working-Class History Committee launched its own call for a new works-in-progress series. The committee hopes to attract participants who seek feedback on a wide range of works in progress, including but not limited to pieces (up to 8,000 words) intended for scholarly audiences, public-facing essays or other short-form scholarly works, digital exhibits, podcast episodes, or documentary proposals. We especially welcome submissions from early career and contingent scholars.

This past spring, the two groups agreed to combine efforts and launch the Newberry/LAWCHA Labor History Seminar. Under the agreement, the Newberry Library will host two sessions in the fall. The LAWCHA committee will host two sessions in the spring.

The Newberry is pleased to announce its fall program.

September 18: Gavin Moulton, University of Notre Dame, (with the Religion and Culture Seminar) -- "Boomtowns: Corporate Control and Slavic Churches in Company Towns (1891-1913)"

November 13: D. Caleb Smith, Mount Holyoke College -- "From Strikes, Marches, and Pickets to Title VII Precedents: 'Bloody' Bogalusa"

Both sessions are virtual and begin at 3:00 p.m. Central Time. For more information and to register, visit the [Newberry Library's Scholarly Seminar page](#).

The LAWCHA committee has extended its deadline for proposals to November 1st. For consideration, please submit a 250-word abstract of a work in progress through this form. Be sure to include your name and affiliation. The committee also seeks volunteers willing to facilitate any of the works-in-progress sessions. Those interested in doing so should please contact Steven Reich (reichsa@jmu.edu) and include your affiliation, availability, and areas of interest or expertise.

We hope that this new partnership attracts a robust and regular turnout. Scholarly endeavor too often becomes a lonely and isolating enterprise. Mark your calendars and make plans to join and sustain a generous and supportive community for the creation and dissemination of new knowledge in labor history.



Submit an abstract for consideration below:
<https://bit.ly/LAWCHA2026-27WIP>

CALL FOR PARTICIPANTS

LAWCHA

The Labor and Working-Class History Association

 **2026-2027 Works in Progress Workshop**

The LAWCHA: Presenting Labor and Working-Class History Committee is pleased to announce the 2026-2027 Works in Progress Workshop Series, which will convene virtually this coming Fall, Winter, and Spring.

We are seeking both participants interested in workshopping their projects and participants willing to facilitate discussion around the pre-circulated works in progress.

We welcome participants who seek feedback on a wide range of works in progress, including but not limited to pieces (up to 8,000 words) intended for scholarly audiences, public-facing essays or other short-form scholarly works, digital exhibits, podcast episodes, or documentary proposals. We especially welcome submissions from early career and contingent scholars.

For consideration, please submit a 250-word abstract of a work in progress by August 1, 2026 through the form linked below. Include your name, affiliation (if any), and your preferred session (Fall, Winter, or Spring).

If you would like to volunteer to facilitate any of the works in progress sessions, please contact Steven Reich (reichsa@jmu.edu) and include your affiliation, availability, and areas of interest or expertise.



Submit an abstract for consideration below:
<https://bit.ly/LAWCHA2026-27WIP>