

Contemporary Affairs

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Among the several new directions *Labor History's* editors have chosen for the publication is a section on contemporary affairs. This is an unusual step for a historical journal; even the politically engaged Marxist founders of the British historical journal *Past & Present*, for example, did not imagine current developments as part of their scholarly agenda. Yet, the inclusion of such a section in each issue of this journal emanates from a perspective that has always been implicit in the study of labor history: the assumption that contemporary events involving workers, their lives, and their struggles affect how we—as scholars and teachers—select our subjects, pose our research questions, and formulate our interpretations. Obviously, many scholarly studies by labor historians are also shaped by the discovery of new sources and by historiographical debates within the field (not to mention the desperate quest for original dissertation topics). Nonetheless, labor historians—as much as, if not more than, any other group of historians—choose the field and the topics they research because they care about what is happening in their own times, in this case what is happening to working people.

This has been true since the inception of the field by the economists of the Wisconsin school who hoped their study of workers and unions would have an impact on progressive labor legislation. Labor historians influenced by socialism, communism, feminism, and radical populism were also candid about their presentist concerns. Two examples come to mind. Mary Ritter Beard's *Short History of the American Labor Movement* was published in 1920, when organized labor seemed, as never before, like a "mighty power" to intellectuals and "members of the professional classes." Philip S. Foner published the first volume of his exhaustive and critical *History of the Labor Movement in the United States* in 1947, when workers and their unions exercised unprecedented power in shaping the present.

The "new" labor historians of the 1960s and 1970s were also influenced by current events like the Farm Workers' boycotts, the Memphis sanitation workers' strike, and the Miners for Democracy movement on the one hand and by their disillusionment with official union institutions and politics on the other hand. Besides this, their work was affected by the rediscovery of worker alienation in the 1970s; the involvement of feminists, black militants, and other radicals in union reform struggles in the 1980s; and the reappearance of the worker agency in heroic strikes against concessions. Recent scholarship also reflects current concerns with the international effects of capital migration, "free trade," and immigration. In sum, labor history still seems very much affected by how its practitioners view the current condition of the working class, the state of organized labor, and our prospects for creating a more just and equitable workplace.

I welcome the opportunity to edit a section of the new *Labor History* devoted to exploration of contemporary affairs that will be of interest to historians who study work and workers. I hope that various readers of this journal will contribute to this section

because I know many labor historians are not only concerned about the contemporary problems of workers and their unions; they are also active in addressing those problems as teachers and citizens, as union members and social activists, and as allies and supporters of the labor movement. These historians are in some ways kin to the progressive historians who wrote a century ago and who, according to Warren Susman, “believed the way one thought about the past had consequences for the way one acted in the present.” (Warren Susman, *Culture as History: the Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), p. 18.)

Some of us who write and teach about workers have even resumed the old progressive search for “a usable past,” a perspective on the past that will aid workers and their allies in confronting the present and preparing for the future. Indeed, active support for the struggles of workers and unions is one of the objectives stated by the Labor and Working Class History Association, formed by labor historians in 1999. Others who apply the historian’s craft to the study of employers, workers, and their interaction are skeptical about claims that historical consciousness can offer insights into the present or the future, and resist allowing presentist concerns to affect their research and writing strategies. My contact with labor historians who wish to respect “the pastness of the past” tells me, however, that they are just as interested in and concerned about current events as those of us who search for a usable past.

In any case, I trust that a wide range of subscribers will be interested in thoughtful and critical discussions of labor history in the making. I am writing this initial column as an invitation to all current subscribers to suggest topics for inclusion in this Contemporary Affairs section and to offer your own proposals for writing reports and analyses. We are looking for short essays about 1500–2000 words in length. Your contribution could be a report on a problem workers face in your university or community; it could be an account of a public forum or public history project seeking to illuminate the past in the light of present concerns; or it could be an analysis of a contemporary problem from a historical perspective.

I will also be soliciting contributions from other reporters—from union activists and scholars, from labor journalists and educators whose work focuses entirely on current affairs. Besides asking these writers to share their insights with labor historians, I hope their involvement with *Labor History* will serve another purpose. In 30 years of collaborating with other labor activists, worker educators, and writers I have observed that history is constantly being employed in their work, not only as “background,” but also as an essential key to understanding contemporary problems. The best example I can offer in current literature is William Adler’s important book *Mollie’s Job: A Story of Life on the Global Assembly Line*.

And yet those who use history in this way are often unfamiliar with the scholarship we have produced. For a time, in the 1970s and 1980s, left political journals like *Dissent*, *Monthly Review*, *New Politics*, *Radical America*, *Socialist Review* and *Southern Exposure* published articles by labor historians addressing the problems activists faced in their organizing efforts within workplaces and working class communities. Then in the late 1980s—just when labor history scholarship reached maturation point—labor history seemed to lose its activist audience. Perhaps this was due to the social distance that separated professional historians from a labor movement in crisis; perhaps it was also due to the problems Herbert Gutman lamented: the lack of narrative synthesis for social and working class history and the use of “foreign” language by its scholars.

Within labor education and union reform circles, I also noticed a lack of interest in the scholarly works of labor history. This was partly due to the academic demands of university presses and their referees. More workers and activists discovered labor

history through Howard Zinn's accessible *People's History* than all of our monographs combined. Labor educators told me that labor history seemed "antiquarian" and disconnected from the tactical and strategic questions and institutional forces with which they, like union activists, had to grapple. I suspect that some labor educators and activists also found it difficult to use the new studies of working class racism, sexism, and nativism because they seemed too negative or too divisive.

But in the past decade the gulf has narrowed as new demands have been made on historians by those trying to reform and strengthen the labor movement and who are attempting to do so by educating a passive rank and file. For example, two labor affairs journals—which I think of as sister publications—have drawn creatively on the insights of historians as their editors seek to create a dialogue with the reform forces in the AFL-CIO. *Working USA* and the *New Labor Forum* have both published a number of excellent essays by labor historians, including David Montgomery, David Brody, Nelson Lichtenstein, and Ruth Needleman. Moreover, several critical contributions by historians like Robin Kelley, Manning Marable, Susan Porter Benson, and David Roediger address problems of racism and sexism in the movement. Similarly, the *Labor Studies Journal* published for the United Labor Education Association and edited by Bruce Nissen regularly includes historical studies. I will reach out to contributors of these publications in soliciting articles for the *Labor History* section on Contemporary Affairs. I hope the effort will bring new labor writers into our circle just as our sister journals have brought us into their circle.

What will a Contemporary Affairs section in *Labor History* include? Obviously, a quarterly column, which requires months of lead time for editorial work, cannot provide up-to-date coverage of breaking events. Instead, such a feature will allow writers to identify and analyze the crucial and persistent problems facing workers, their unions, their communities, and their families. The list is easy to make.

For workers in the U.S., organized and unorganized, the problems are legion. The strategies corporate employers have been employing for decades will no doubt be accelerated in the next century. Indeed, the consequences are already evident. The replacement of the vertically integrated corporation by the "disintegrated corporation" poses obvious challenges for old bargaining strategies, as do the continuing export of industrial jobs, the expansion of lower-wage jobs employing women and immigrants, the speed up of office workers, as well as factory workers, the replacement of full-time workers with part-time workers, the growth of home work, and so on. The new section might also offer analyses of other problems facing workers: the lengthening of the work day, the crises in affordable housing and child care, the persistence of sexism and racism on the job, and the reliance on undocumented immigrants in sweatshops and all sorts of low-wage employment. The popularity of Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickled and Dimed* suggests that popular concern with these issues may have broadened considerably.

Our contributors will be asked to offer insights into these problems based on new research and on the experience of activists who are confronting these problems directly. The Contemporary Affairs section will not simply be a social problems section, however. I will ask the writer to examine how working people and their representatives are trying, and perhaps failing, to address the problem at hand.

In some cases, therefore, the contributions will focus on tactics and strategy questions about new methods of organizing the unorganized (including membership-based organizing); mobilizing incumbent members for contract campaigns; coalescing with community and religious groups; and creating and affecting media representations of

workers' issues. For example, our readers certainly would benefit from expert evaluation of the AFL-CIO's new policy on undocumented immigrants and its effort to make organizing a "civil right," including the Union Cities initiative. *Labor History* readers would be interested in perspectives on the state of living wage campaigns in our cities and on our university campuses and in the movement for global economic justice that seemed to form between the Seattle and Genoa demonstrations, and now faces very different political circumstances.

I hope this introduction will serve as an invitation to *Labor History* subscribers, old and new, to propose and to contribute short essays which confront major problems facing working people and their organizations. Please contact me by email at James.Green@umb.edu.

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