Labor, Past and Present: Twentieth Annual North American Labor History Conference

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The twentieth annual North American Labor History Conference (NALHC), held at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan, October 15–17, 1998, offered three days of intellectual forays into the history of workers in the United States, Latin America, Africa, Canada, Poland, and New Zealand. Conference participants enjoyed discussions concerning the ways in which race, ethnicity, gender, skill, nationalism, communism, masculinity, education, political economy, imperialism, and citizenship have shaped labor history from the seventeenth century through the 1990s. The following is small sample of some of the panels and events included at the 1998 NALHC.

In a session entitled "Race, Ethnicity, and the Social Construction of Labor," Beth Thomas Bates (Wayne State University), Benson Tong (Oberlin College), and Daniel Bender (New York University) explored how employers and workers themselves racially and ethnically constructed different segments of the labor force. Bates revealed that the Pullman Corporation sought out black porters to build upon the stereotype of the obsequious Negro. Tong demonstrated how leaders of the European–American labor movement, in their efforts to marginalize and isolate Chinese workers, assigned feminine characteristics to Chinese men. Bender suggested how Jewish garment workers viewed themselves as victims of unhealthy sweatshop conditions and organized to ameliorate tuberculosis and other diseases.

In a fascinating panel entitled, "Imagining the Nation, Nationalizing Labor," Latin Americanists Leslie Jo Frazier (University of South Carolina), Michael Schroeder (University of Michigan, Flint), Deborah Cohen (University of Chicago), and José Pablo Silva (University of Chicago) explored the relationship between the state, class, and ideology in Latin America. Frazier looked specifically at the military, the state, and labor in northern Chile while Silva examined middle-class left-wing nationalism in Chile from 1918 through 1938. Schroeder focused on subaltern nationalisms in his examination of Hondurans and Nicaraguans in the Sandino Rebellion, 1926–1934. Cohen explored the relationship between state ideologies, labor migration, and Mexico's modernity.

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Africanists Carolyn Brown (Rutgers University), Jock McCulloch (Deakin University), and William Freund (University of Natal) presented papers that offered new directions in African working-class history. Brown examined working-class culture and identity in the colonial West African town of Enugu, Nigeria, from 1939 to 1955. McColloch examined the relationship between labor, capital, and the state by looking at asbestos in southern Africa from 1892 to 1996. And Freund offered an analysis of both the history and present outlook of the organized labor movement in the Republic of South Africa.

Edward P. Johanningsmeier (New York University), Randi Storch (University of Illinois), and Michael J. Bonislawski (Boston College) took a new look at the Communist party and organizing in the 1930s. Johannigsmeier and Storch both focused on the Trade Union Unity League (TUUL), an organization that had been considered Moscow-directed. Johannisgsmeier argued that although the sudden shift in Communist policy that resulted in the creation of the TUUL was a result of a Comintern directive, significant support existed for that shift from the International Workers of the World (IWW) and the Communist Party USA. Furthermore, Johanningsmeier argued, that shift enabled the TUUL to develop a new type of Communist unionism that was consistent with that of later Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) organizing strategies. Storch argued that the Chicago TUUL's history is best understood as the product of the "interplay between local and international forces" rather than as determined solely by directives from Moscow. Bonislawski examined the ways in which the United Electrical field organizers made dignity and self-preservation key to their organizing drives in the 1930s and 1940s.

Panelists discussed a broad spectrum of ideological responses to the Great Depression in Canada and the United States. Samuel Weinstein (University of California, Berkeley) argued that the popular appeal of Father Charles Coughlin and Frances Townsend was in part a reflection of a mass desire to understand the economic explanations for the Depression. Todd McCallum (Queen's University) illustrated the manner in which Vancouver's policymakers sought to discipline their homeless men while providing them with minimal refuge. Lara Campbell (Queen's University) uncovered the demands made by Ontario's unemployed on their government. And Ann Brophy (Cornell University) discussed the economic and ideological context for the leisure programs established for Detroit's unemployed youth.

Lively discussion was generated by a panel on race, employment, and the state during World War Two. Marguerite Brown (University of Pittsburgh) examined the ways in which conceptions of race structured the relationship between managers and workers. Karen Ferguson (Simon Fraser University) looked at the ways in which notions of black citizenship intersected with wartime industrialization and civil rights mobilization in Atlanta, Georgia, from 1942 to 1946. Zaragosa Vargas's paper examined underemployment among Mexican-American workers just before World War Two. Audience members and panelists engaged in a lively debate concerning what the historical evidence can really tell us about historical actors' ideas of race and citizenship.

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Daniel Katz (Rutgers University), John Lyons (University of Illinois, Chicago), and Mark Soderstrom (University of Minnesota) looked at education and the politics of the labor Left. Katz made use of colorful imagery to argue that the activities sponsored by the education department of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union helped to foster the growth of interracial networks among women that in turn enabled them to develop a collective consciousness. John Lyons examined the attitude of the Chicago Teachers' Union toward public education in the 1930s. Mark Soderstrom analyzed the rhetorics of nationalism and integration among administrators and the student Left.

Stephen Meyer (University of Wisconsin, Parkside) and Lisa Fine (Michigan State University) offered conference-goers an intellectual venture into working-class masculinity. These two excellent papers worked well together: Meyer examined masculine culture on the shop floor and Fine examined the relationship between masculinity at work and at leisure. Meyer focused on the automobile industry, looking at the ways in which men's behavior at work, from the occasional fight to supportive backslapping, reinforced work relationships and fostered various types of collective action. Fine examined the sport of hunting among men who worked at the Reo plant in Michigan. She argued that deer hunting, with all the paraphernalia and expressions of dominance that went along with it, provided a vehicle through which men constituted their identities which, in turn, filtered into their conceptions of their relationships with each other and with management.

The period of the Great Upheaval was explored with respect to leadership, ethnicity, and community. Craig Phelan (University of Wales, Swansea) argued for restoring the reputation of Terence Powderly whose achievements have been dismissed in recent years. Jon Bekken (Suffolk University of Boston) explored the complex interplay of ethnic community and class politics in the foreign-language newspapers of Chicago. And Stephen R. Miceli (University of Toledo) presented a case study of Polish immigrant workers and their community response to a strike at the Oliver Chilled Plow Works.

Several papers raised questions concerning the international dimensions of American working-class formation. Mark Lausse (University of Cincinnati) traced the involvement of antebellum labor and reform organizations in the debate over Manifest Destiny and American seizure of the Southwest. R. Todd Lauden (University of Colorado) showed how labor leaders Samuel Gompers and Edward Boyce used the language of masculinity to justify dissent from American intervention in the Philippines following the Spanish-American War. Julie Greene (University of Colorado) focused on the Panama Canal. She explored the imposition of a Jim Crow system of labor control on a work force consisting of white Americans, African Americans, and Caribbeans.

Graduate employee union activists presented case studies of organizing at the schools for which they worked and attended. Susan Roth Breitzer spoke on the process of building labor consciousness among University of Iowa graduate-student workers. Carlos Mora reported on the progress of organizing graduate students into a union at the University of California at San Diego. And Robert

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Gordon focused on the fight over the issue of saving health care at Wayne State University and the resulting community built in that struggle.

History was made with the first official meeting of the Labor and Working Class History Association (LAWCHA), which convened at the conference. Co-chairpersons Julie Greene (University of Colorado, Boulder) and Elizabeth Faue (Wayne State University) began the meeting by announcing that the by-laws, constitution, and formation of LAWCHA were voted in by an overwhelming majority at this conference. Reports were submitted by the Constitution Subcommittee, Nominating Committee, Recruitment Committee, and Program Committee. Julie Greene, Shelton Stromquist (University of Iowa), Heather Thompson (University of North Carolina, Charlotte), and Roger Horowitz (Hagley Museum and Library) will preside over the LAWCHA in the interim months between the NALHC and the election of officers. The next general meeting of LAWCHA will be held at the Twenty-First Annual NALHC on October 21–23, 1999.

Overall, the panels presented at the 1998 NALHC represented the diversity in subject matter, historical breadth, and cutting-edge scholarship that we have come to expect from the annual NALHC. The addition of panels on graduate-student organizing and the new Labor and Working Class History Association indicate that the NALHC continues to reflect well the trends not only in recent scholarship but in issues that confront the labor movement generally. We look forward to the 1999 NALHC, entitled "Class and Politics in Historical and Contemporary Perspective."

The Southern Historical Association

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The Southern Historical Association's 1998 conference was held November 12–14 in Birmingham, Alabama. Consistent with long-established patterns, the conference featured panels chiefly focused on colonial-era issues: slavery, the Civil War, regional cultural and social history, and southern politics. Still, one session and several individual papers presented research in southern labor history. Reflecting the conference's location at the hub of Alabama's industrial heartland, the panel addressed coal miners' contests with organized operators, first in unionizing drives surrounding World War One and later during the long 1977–1978 United Mine Workers' strike.

In "Having Their Way: Alabama Operators Play the Race Card, 1908–21," Brian Kelly (Florida International University) explored an issue raised by W.E.B. Du Bois at the time—that employers deliberately fostered racial antag-

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onism as a union-obstructing tactic. While Kelly acknowledged that this notion is currently out of favor ("regarded as reductionist"), he also suggested that fashionable emphases on the centrality of race and the agency of the oppressed tended to elide situated power relations and their implications. Recent work, for example, arguing that Jim Crow chiefly safeguarded the interests of white workers (hence privileging race over class) obscures the advantages employers held and the gains they reaped from racial divisiveness (and conversely the significance of cross-race unity among workers).

This point can be documented in Alabama's coal mining history; between 1900 and the 1920s, Jim Crow became the mainstay in mine operators' campaigns to break the influence of the United Mine Workers (UMW) and/or to prevent further organization. Indeed, the district's early twentieth-century mine owners were "obsessed with race," creating a system of "racial paternalism" as a counterweight to unionization, backed by substantial police–military forces. The Alabama Coal Operators Association (ACOA), following a bitter 1908 strike, strove to implement a welfare capitalism adapted to the southern racial setting. Moreover, as a part of a broad-gauged drive to increase productivity, ACOA members actively recruited African-American miners, whose work force share rose from fifty percent c. 1908 to seventy-five percent by 1920. The UMW mounted a wartime organizing effort in 1917, making special appeals to black miners' grievances, which included operators' coercive efforts to prevent them from leaving the camps for better opportunities elsewhere, including up north. As African Americans joined the union in droves, owners claimed German plots were afoot and hired "patriotic" black spokesmen to warn against "the white man's union." Workers, black and white, largely ignored such propaganda.

In mining, Kelly argued, white workers did not derive benefits from the greater oppression blacks suffered. Rather, white and black miners built their unions in tandem, then struck together in 1920, threatening the foundations of white supremacy and provoking a massive employers' response (race baiting in the local press, physical force from Ku Klux Klan groups and the state militia, and lynch mob violence). The biracial UMW strikers held their lines through a six-month walkout, and even in defeat left behind what Kelly termed "a stirring example of interracial solidarity" in the face of capitalist power.

Robert Woodrum (Georgia State) flipped the calendar pages forward to the 1970s in "Wildcats, Caravans, and Dynamite: The 1977–78 Alabama Coal Strike," the longest and most militant UMW battle since the years immediately after World War Two. In negotiations, UMW national officers reached an agreement with the Bituminous Coal Operators' Association (BCOA) that compromised most of the Alabama district's contract demands. After its rejection amid wildcat walkouts, the strike proper commenced in December 1977, although operators had as usual accumulated a large coal stock in anticipation. Realizing that nonunion mines would be crucial in at least partially replenishing this supply, Alabama strikers patrolled the state in auto caravans to shut them down, generating occasional wild melees. Governor George Wallace employed the

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state police to defend nonunion sites, conduct surveillance of strikers, etc., but (interestingly) refused operators' calls to mobilize the National Guard.

As the impasse deepened, Alabama locals joined a campaign to oust the union's leadership, the administration of President Jimmy Carter undertook (failed) mediation, and the BCOA offered a slightly sweetened version of the rejected contract (voted down by the rank and file). Defying an injunction based on the Taft-Hartley Act, Alabama miners refused to return to work until their exhausted finances forced their hand after 111 days. Their militancy paid few dividends, however, despite interracial solidarity mirroring that in 1920, for the final, unwelcome contract barred wildcats and menaced longstanding health and welfare benefits. Soon the coal trades entered a deep recession and job-preservation strategies took center stage, where in large measure they remain to the present. Two of the local leaders in the 1977–1978 strike, John Stewart and Earl Brown, added their reflections to Woodrum's overview, generating a spirited discussion of union strategies, technological change, and the many pitfalls of both militancy and reformism.

In papers addressing Knights of Labor and Populist era questions, Julia Walsh (University of Illinois) and Alice Rodriguez (University of California, Santa Barbara) treated late nineteenth-century Augusta, Georgia, and Dallas, Texas, respectively. Walsh's "Strike and Be Saved" attempts to establish the relationships between a Knights-related textile mill lockout in the fall of 1886 and the city's parallel Baptist revival, both of which the enigmatic Reverend J. Simmions Meynardie sparked. Few ministers warmed to the Knights' cause, but Meynardie was exceptional among even this small cadre in that he appears to have used Berean Baptist as an organizing base for creating seven Local Assemblies in Augusta during 1885–1886. Meanwhile, through a series of revivals, Meynardie more than doubled the church's membership in little more than a year. However, after rebuffing a union petition for improved working conditions, which triggered several scattered walkouts, area mill owners (through their newly formed Southern Manufacturers' Association) engineered the lockout to "stamp out the Knights then and now," hoping that when the workers were "utterly ruined, they will turn upon and murder Meynardie." That fond hope was not met; instead, although the mill men prevailed and eradicated organizing, Berean's congregation retained its minister and supported him through the "nervous breakdown" which followed his dual union and revival efforts. Although Meynardie died in 1890, Augusta millworkers and Berean Baptists anchored the city's populist movement thereafter.

Unions and populism also inform Rodriguez's "Dallas Workingmen, Organized Labor, and the People's Party Campaign," an examination of working-class party formation in 1890–1891. Reacting to the follies of Texas mainstream parties, Dallas union workers mobilized their Eight Hour League in 1891 to press city aldermen to hear "the cries of the common people." Stonewalled by local Democratic leaders, they formed the People's Party and opened the Dallas Populist Club as a forum for reform discussions. Workers seemed initially enthusiastic, but within a year the Democrats co-opted one of the group's leaders,

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unionist Harry Golden, offering him a "safe" seat in the state legislature. Golden dumped the People's Party, took the post, and secured passage of several "minor bills" which aided labor's cause, thus weakening Dallas unions' links with populist efforts. This outcome suggests to Rodriguez that union workers were often interested only in labor reforms, taking an opportunistic route to achieving them while setting aside broader political questions.

Returning to the race and class terrain, Michael Tedegar (Santa Fe Community College, Florida) examined the harsh work life of Deep South turpentine camps, c. 1870s–1930s, in which the brutal residues of slavery became manifest in regimes of debt peonage and intra/interracial violence. Operating in south Georgia and upper Florida backwaters, naval stores was an extractive trade whose production relations recall those in prison-based labor. White managers and foremen "governed" a black work force in part recruited from regional jails, mainly by force, liberally using ax handles, whips, and guns to drive, discipline, and confine. Armed guards often patrolled camp boundaries, at times defined by barbed wire fences, their vigilance spurred by regulations that transferred "escapees'" book debts to the guards they eluded. Managers also sponsored Saturday night "juke joints," bringing in moonshine and in some cases prostitutes, while encouraging gambling against the "house," which both deepened workers' indebtedness and channeled their rage into drunken battles with one another. When operators tried to poach workers from one another's camps, white-on-white violence could readily explode. Labor historians can look forward to publication of the dissertation from which this paper was drawn, as Tedegar's research illuminates the dark recesses of a racist labor system with rich implications for understanding manhood and violence in the rural South.

Of these five papers, Kelly's posed the most explicit challenge to current debates about class and race, the wages of whiteness, and the dynamics of capital and culture, whereas Tedegar's ably reopened issues of race, labor, and the pervasive violence that went hand in hand with a culture of white supremacy. Woodrum's work showed patterns of post–World War Two regional militancy being undercut by three-way head-butting between a national union, nationally organized mining corporations, and the national state. Walsh's intriguing tale of entwined union and religious enthusiasm suffered chiefly from an evidentiary base sufficient only for a descriptive narrative, while Rodriguez's paper focused on such a narrow time–space slice as to beg for a richer contextualization. Whether these presentations accurately or imperfectly represent the state of southern labor history may be better judged in the fall of 1999 when Georgia State University will host the biennial Southern Labor Studies Conference in Atlanta. *ILWCH* readers can expect a report on it in a future issue.

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