

sional competitor, the Organization of American Historians (OAH). This is a reversal of recent trends, and it will be interesting to see whether OAH reacts to its older and sometimes stodgier counterpart by offering a fuller slate of labor history next year.

North American Labor History Conference

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The eighteenth annual North American Labor History Conference took place in Detroit, Michigan, on October 17–19, 1996. Detroit, with its rich legacy of labor organizing, has been greatly affected by national and global economic transformations. It symbolizes the challenges facing both labor organizations and historians. Two major themes of the conference aimed at addressing these challenges. One was the problem of historical memory—how it is produced and used. The second, related to issues of memory, was the need to expand definitions of worker and work experience. Labor history is now examining communities, not just sites of waged production, as locations in which class identities are forged. Recovery and incorporation of individual voices is essential to understanding relationships between community, identity, and experience.

Several participants explored the recovery of memory. Some discussed the methodological challenges of working with different sources, from oral histories to fiction, from graphic arts to African nicknames for colonial-era labor bosses. Their studies also raised questions about the links between memory and the effectiveness of organizing efforts. What issues, symbols, and language have resonance for particular groups of workers? Presentations emphasized diversity. Laurie Green (University of Chicago) described African-Americans in Memphis who sought to escape the plantation mentality of their rural past and infused their labor struggles with concern for broader social rights. Tony Buba and Raymond Henderson, coproducers of a documentary about black steelworkers, also found that their subjects placed labor experiences in a much larger social context. As they put it, “each interview was larger than the mill.” Like the paper of Derek Valliant (University of Chicago), their “Struggles in Steel” demonstrated that black and white workers often had very different memories. Tom Sugrue (University of Pennsylvania) found similar disparities in his

study of Detroit and noted some competition in black and white workers' recollections and visions for the future. Jane Williams' (George Mason University) study of a Janitors for Justice local also addressed the diversity of perceptions. She found some ethnic and racial divisions over the union's move to address civil rights and immigrant issues. Jon Peters' commentary on three cases in developing countries has resonance for the US examples as well. Memories and the organization of memories, he argued, allow people (and institutions) to make claims about rights. These claims serve as the basis for collective action.

Recovering and analyzing different memories, then, contributes to understanding labor struggles both historical and current. Questions about the politics of memory emerge: What is reinforced by certain interpretations? Whose memories shape interpretations? Who controls these memories? Robert Bussel (Pennsylvania State–Great Valley) found contrasts between the memoirs of male labor leaders and those of International Ladies' Garment Workers Union organizer Rose Pesotta. While the former focused on union bureaucracy and factional intrigues, Pesotta was extremely sensitive to issues of gender, race, and ethnicity, and highlighted individual workers and what organizing meant to them. Leslie Jo Frazier (University of South Carolina) and Michael Schroeder (University of Michigan–Flint) investigated outcomes of state-sponsored memory projects in Chile and Nicaragua, respectively. They described different ways in which historical memory could link state and society. Presenting a different example of the production of memory, Lisa Frank (Carlow College) described the commodification of workers as heritage items in the "Rivers of Steel" theme park planned for Pittsburgh. What these and other presentations had in common was exploration of the meanings (and sometimes manipulations) of memories, whether disseminated by the state, corporations, union leaders, or rank-and-file workers.

Frank's research in particular underscored the problem of many memories processed for public consumption: Class is erased. At the same time, much old-style labor history and organizing practices suffer from emphasizing class as the only legitimate marker of identity and insisting that it is forged on the shop floor. How, many participants asked, does one escape this elision of all difference save that of class? Their research suggested some answers: broadening the concerns of labor history to recover more voices and studying personal relationships, households, and communities as additional sites in which identities are forged. Just as several presenters demonstrated how race and ethnicity shaped experiences and memories, others underscored the importance of community and the impact of gender.

Working from the premise that memory is the foundation of meaningful political activity, David Sabeau (University of California, Los Angeles) addressed the two themes of the conference—how memory is produced and used, and how class is created and shaped by experiences outside the workplace. Challenging the argument that the middle-class creation of pub-

lic and private spheres depoliticized the home and family, Sabeau posited that forgetting kinship has been a part of social scientists' attempts at reading women out of history. Based on his anthropological study of naming patterns and class formation in early modern German villages, Sabeau argued that kinship is a place of embedded memory. Naming children was a means of creating alliances, and kinship patterns reflect a group's construction of family and community. In his view, kinship and class are intricately connected in memory and experience.

Whereas Sabeau offered a structural approach to the linkages between community and class formation, several presenters explored the importance of community in class and political identity from a more cultural perspective. Amy Swerdlow (Sarah Lawrence College) offered a richly textured autobiographical sample of remembering and constructing class and politics in her luncheon speech, "My Life as a COOPS Child." Similarly Mark Soderstrom's (University of Minnesota) analysis of the personal narratives of three men and women formerly active in the Communist party, USA, emphasized the "multiple interactions between ideological structure and experience." In deconstructing these oral life histories, Soderstrom brings our attention to how and in what ways relationships within family and community contribute to class consciousness and political commitment. In concluding that "the development of political identity originates in family and/or community," his analysis of a selective set of personal narratives is similar to Sabeau's findings in that he emphasizes the importance of the "reproductive sphere" in the creation of individual "political formation." Kathleen Brown (St. Edward's University) presented a similar argument in her study of the rhetoric and political practice of Communist party organizer Ella Reeve Bloor.

Soderstrom's reading of gender issues as shaping the experience and narration "of the childhood and party philosophy—both in language choices and in content decisions" of his working-class radicals is similar to the gendering of class and working-class politics which other presenters offered. Gender issues, gender identity, and the role gender plays in creating political identity were addressed in different ways. Rick Halpern (University College, London) and Roger Horowitz (Hagley Museum and Library) concluded from their oral histories of black packinghouse workers that for some workers, class, race, and gender were "thoroughly integrated with each other." Karen Oberdeck (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign) evaluated the constructions of motherhood in the autobiographies of Alexander Irvine, while James Barrett (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign) explored Communist party leader William Z. Foster's construction of masculinity. An excellent investigation of both the importance and limits of using gender as a category of analysis in labor history came in the panel called "Gender at Work: A Regional Perspective" from Lois Rita Helmbold (San Jose State University) and commentators Laurie Mercier (Washington State University, Vancouver) and Nancy

Gabin (Purdue University). In evaluating the memories of black and white women workers in the Great Lakes region concerning their survival and occupational strategies during the Depression, Helmbold argued that racial differences outweighed gender similarities between women. Helmbold further cautioned labor historians who focus on women's work patterns to focus on service sector employment as well as industrial employment.

Helmbold's remarks resonated with one of the final panels of the conference, "Detroit Remembers," in which a fiery debate about racism in the United Auto Workers (UAW) underscored the challenge of addressing race in both labor organizing and historiography. Several of the panelists explored the racial complexity of Detroit's labor history. Kevin Boyle (University of Massachusetts) emphasized that understanding the power of race and racism was key to the labor history of Detroit. Reinforcing the conference's concern with community, Heather Thompson (University of Michigan) linked race to labor and urban history. The history of a recomposed Detroit after World War Two was, Thompson emphasized, a history of labor decline and urban decay. Copanelist Tom Sugrue (University of Pennsylvania) also discussed Detroit's downward spiral and how anticommunism and neoclassical economics had helped remove issues of economic inequality from organized labor's agenda. However, reflecting the field of labor history itself, most of the other discussants focused on UAW history as representing Detroit's labor history, thus ignoring the service sector and workers' communities outside of UAW confines.

As workers address the economic transformations of recent decades, understanding how difference has often been translated into division is important. The conference provided an excellent forum for exploration of working-class memory and the widening concerns of labor history.

The Fight for America's Future: A Teach-In with the Labor Movement

Teal Rothschild and William Milberg

New School for Social Research

Dan Rosenberg

Adelphi University

An enthusiastic and mostly optimistic gathering of scholars and labor activists met at Columbia University in New York on October 3 and 4, 1996, in an effort to revitalize links between the academy and the labor movement.