

REPORTS and CORRESPONDENCE

SIXTH SOUTHWEST LABOR STUDIES CONFERENCE, MAY 1-3, 1980

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The sixth annual meeting of the Southwest Labor Studies Conference, comprising California and four other states in the southwest, was held at San Francisco State University between May 1-3, 1980. It was hosted by the Labor Studies Program at San Francisco State under the direction of Bob Cherny. Bob also served as the conference co-ordinator, which as usual involved a great deal of work; and he and his volunteer helpers deserve the heartfelt thanks of all who attended. Organizationally speaking the conference was again a success even though several session participants did not show up, and the space in which most of the sessions were held was a little cramped. It took place in several rooms in the basement of the student union. This had the advantage, however, that all of the meetings were virtually next door to each other, an improvement on the more frequent dispersal of sessions through many different buildings of a college campus. We also felt that there were perhaps too many sessions—thirty, held in the space of approximately a thirty-hour period from 10:00 am on Friday to 4:00 pm on the Saturday.

However, the quality of many of the sessions was high. A major theme of the conference was the worker as an individual, considered in various contexts. This theme continued the welcome trend away from the presentation of purely academic papers which has characterized the SWLSC in recent years. In several sessions, such as those on Dust Bowl Refugees, the Contemporary Relevance of Labor History, Preserving the History of Union Locals, and the Churches and Social Action, it also featured participants with expertise in the history and development of a particular industry or work situation. Thus the interface between academic study, and the experience of the real world of work—which academics rarely deal with, and often misunderstand—was explored further. For example, in the session

on the Churches and Social Action one professional historian, Ralph Shaffer, presented a very interesting paper on the social gospel of Robert Whitaker, a little-known rebellious Baptist cleric from Los Gatos, California, in the pre World War One period. He was then followed by Father Eugene Boyle, of Stanford University talking about the Catholic Church's attitudes towards unions; and by Father Saliandini, who discussed the church's role in the contemporary farm workers' movement.

There were also several more traditional academic sessions, some of them very good. In *Patterns of Work and Unionization in Three Cities*, for example, Carole Srole and David Brundage of UCLA, and Harriet Talan of San Francisco State, gave interesting accounts of Irish-American radicalism in Denver, of women clerical workers in Boston, and of the origins of teacher unionism in San Francisco in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Another conference theme concerned labor and education. There were four sessions on this, the last of them involving the showing of a film called "Right-wing Machine", with comments from the audience and an explanation by Pat Jackson. The film explored the activities of several union-busting organizations, now very much on the rise; its educational point had to do with the need to be aware of the major campaign now being waged against unions in various industries, and how it can be combatted.

More central, though, were the two sessions presided over by William Lanxner, of the national A.F.L.-C.I.O. Education Department, both of which dealt with workshops, courses for teachers of labor studies, and other programs currently being sponsored by the federation. In addition, there was a very rewarding session conducted by Helmut Golatz, of Pennsylvania State University, spelling out what in his view labor studies at the academic level should consist of. In part, this consisted of fairly familiar issues such as the nature of work, alienation, the impact of technological change, etc. But it also included an insistence that students of the subject must accept the fact that the needs, demands, and lifestyle of the individual worker as such are worthy of study in their own terms, and not just as elements in an academic equation. This theme was further developed in a session which dealt with the *Contemporary Relevance of Labor History*, in which Frank Stricker presented an interesting paper comparing the impact of the Great Depression of the 1930s with the economic problems of today, and in which William Dyle looked at the contemporary significance of the Taft-Hartley Act, first passed in 1947. A session on *Problems Facing Retired Union Members* also had something of the same quality.

But the sessions which one of us, at least, found most stimulating were two which dealt with what as labor historians we call working class culture, but which enabled us to get a glimpse of various aspects of that culture in the world of today, and to compare it implicitly with times past. One of the two sessions involved a discussion of the efforts of the Waterfront Writers, the Vancouver Industrial Writers Group, the Toledo Poets Center, and of Tom Wayman, (poet-in-residence at the University of Ontario) to capture or recapture the mood, feeling, and life-style of workers in various different contexts. But the most interesting and moving ses-

sion along these lines was the one in which Tillie Olsen, a well-known working class novelist, spoke of her experiences as a woman and as a political radical; and of how she had committed this experience to paper in her novel *Yonnondio: From the 1930's*. Calling all women writers "Survivors," she gave us a unique insight into the relationship between work, family, and labor struggle, which was the most convincing example of the need for, and value of, exploring real-life experience.

One further development flowing from this SWLSC conference should be noted. This was the decision of the Executive Committee to authorize the adoption as the official journal of the organization, the publication *Southwest Economy and Society*, under the editorship of Norma Pratt, of Mount St. Antonio College, California. This journal has been published for five years, and was formerly edited by Lawrence D. Weiss of Albuquerque, New Mexico. It has specialized in articles on the life, work, and culture of Chicanos and Native-Americans in the southwestern states of New Mexico, Arizona, and elsewhere. The journal will maintain these interests, but will also try to broaden its range to include studies of ethnic history, regional economic development in the southwest, socio-cultural experiences of women and minorities, poetry, and other cultural developments. It will solicit articles from trade unionists, and working people generally, not just academics. It will also include annual reports of the activities of the SWLSC, and provide news of other labor-related activities and conferences on the west coast.

Persons wishing to submit manuscripts for publication, send in news items, etc. should contact Norma Pratt, who will be at the following address until June, 1981: American History, Sarah Lawrence College, Bronxville, N.Y. 10708. Those wishing to subscribe, please write to Frank Arnold, Secretary-Treasurer, Southwest Labor Studies Association, 3293 Aramis Drive, San Jose, California, 95127.