

REPORTS AND CORRESPONDENCE

Labor History at the American Historical Association

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Few sessions at the 1992 AHA meeting were devoted entirely to working-class history, but numerous sessions included papers centered on labor issues. Labor history, while perhaps less cohesive than a dozen years ago, has clearly become widely recognized as a vital path of inquiry for a broad range of historical studies.

A session on "Racial Politics and Foreign Labor on the German Homefront, 1939–1945" dealt with Nazi Germany's forced foreign labor program. Edward L. Homze (University of Nebraska–Lincoln) reported that some historians estimate the war may have lasted two extra years because of the program. Foreign workers constituted more than one-quarter of Germany's labor force by August 1944. Homze argued that war industries' demanding physical labor made male foreigners preferable to German women and that the Nazis and their racist ideology controlled the capitalists, not vice versa. John J. Delaney (SUNY–Buffalo), argued in "Rassenpolitik on the Homefront" that the Nazis could not control the attitudes of all Germans. Bavarian peasants treated their Polish slave laborers as "fellow Catholics," integrating them into the community through common religious worship, generous treatment, and antiracist preaching by priests. Robert Gellately (Huron College, University of Western Ontario) found in "Enforcing Racial Policy in Wartime Germany" that German civilians provided almost half of the tips concerning "forbidden contact" between Polish civilian workers and Germans. However, informants were motivated less by ideology than by selfishness.

A panel on "Workers' Response to Economic Challenges in the Dutch Republic, 1650–1800" focused on the transformation of the Dutch economy from feudalism to capitalism. In her paper, "Guild or Union? A Case Study of Rural Dutch Weavers, 1682–1750," Joyce M. Mastboom (Cleveland State) asserted that the arrival of merchants did not necessarily do away with independent guilds and cause early capitalism to develop with a dependent worker class. Weavers in a town in the eastern Netherlands responded to merchants' threat to take their custom to peasants desperate for work by getting their guild charter reissued with new, craft-union aspects. Unlike restrictive medieval guilds, this 1682 charter required that all

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those engaged in weaving, including the surrounding peasants, be included in the guild and that merchants deal only with guild members. The weavers thus succeeded in slowing the tide of capitalism well into the eighteenth century. Karel A. Davids (Rijksuniversiteit Leiden), in "Artisans, Urban Governments, and Industrial Decline," argued that guilds and other regulatory bodies succeeded only in stifling innovation and entrepreneurship. Overregulation prevented several industries (woolens in Leiden, linen and silk in Haarlem, clay tobacco pipes in Gouda, and faience in Delft) from adapting to changing market conditions in the eighteenth century. Household servants were assertive workers, or "Insubordinate, Unruly, and Audacious Creatures," as Marybeth Carlson (University of Dayton) discussed them. Servant–master relations were based on self-interest, not patriarchal values. Masters tried to control their servants, who resisted and worked together to ensure that their labor was well recompensed.

In a panel on South African history, Robert Shell (Princeton) discussed "An Unthinking Decision?: The Introduction of Slavery and Serfdom into South Africa, 1652–1838." Shell argued that coerced labor in South Africa resulted not from Dutch East India Company policy but from myriad settler choices in an environment with abundant land and scarce labor. Because Dutch settlement inexorably alienated native peoples from the land, settlers saw land as "free" while labor was scarce. Shell argued that increasingly entrenched family and slave labor precluded free wage labor.

Madeleine Hurd (Harvard) presented "Alcohol, Respectability, and the Worker" at a panel on social control. She discussed the use of "respectability" and moral outrage as anti-elite weapons in Hamburg and Stockholm, 1870–1914, arguing that moral discipline and self-control were essential to socialist self-definition. Workers used so-called "bourgeois morality" in class-conscious ways, both to help consolidate the mass organizations on which socialist parties depended and to demonstrate their political maturity.

World War II was a time of enormous and sometimes reluctant change for American workers, as shown in a session on "Winning the War on the Home Front: From Policy to Implementation." In "Continuity or Change: the Second World War at Home," Carolyn Vacca (Rochester) argued that rural Monroe County, New York, community leaders discouraged outsiders and women as workers. They reasoned that less disruption to the system would make it easier to get back to normal after the war. Buffalo had more industry and thus faced more radical changes, as Gretchen Knapp (SUNY–Buffalo) argued in "Community Responses to Social Problems during World War II." Buffalo's aircraft and steel companies attracted about 70,000 in-migrants during the war. The black population increased from 4,000 to 25,000 and faced employment discrimination, which the federal government fought in court. Women workers (51 percent of the labor force in March 1944) were another source of stress. When recruiting

for women began, billboards advertised for 30,000 women “without small children” who would not need day care.

A joint session with the North American Conference on British Studies, “Culture, Class, and Colonialism: Rethinking the Remaking of the English Working Class,” covered over a century of British history. Susan Thorne (Duke) discussed “Missionary Imperialism and Social Reform,” asserting that the foreign missionary crusade of 1790–1815 became a useful tool for social control. Most working-class children attended Sunday School but later fell away from the church. Missionaries exhorted the working class to participate in British domination of the colonized. Indeed, any resentment of foreign missions did not translate into class solidarity but into racist resentment of the objects of missionary zeal. In “The Devil and Me We Can’t Agree,” Pamela Walker (Carleton University) said the Salvation Army was a neighborhood religion with working-class leaders. It succeeded in part by bringing music-hall conventions into the mission hall. In “Loyal Subjects of His Imperial Majesty,” Laura Tabili (University of Arizona) argued that most blacks in Great Britain were integrated into working-class communities, largely through marriage. After the 1919 race riots, blacks appealed for tolerance, stressing their Britishness. Ethnically and racially diverse working-class communities lived in relative harmony in the interwar years.

In a session on the New Deal and state formation, Daniel Kryder (New School for Social Research) discussed “Mobilization, Racial Friction, and State Response in the United States, 1941–1945.” In the North, where war industries relied heavily on black labor, racial conflict typically arose among civilians. Therefore, northern federal policy—through the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC)—promoted concessions to black workers to defuse tensions. In the South, racial conflicts usually involved black soldiers and white civilians. Business interests neutralized the FEPC, and federal policy in the South relied on repression (mostly notably of black troops), not conciliation, to deal with “racial friction.”

The session “American Workers and Social Order” addressed the impact of politics on occupational structure in twentieth-century New York City. Larry Greene’s (Seton Hall) paper, “Social Structure and Ideology in Harlem,” stressed changes in three kinds of African-American ideology: integrationism, nationalism, and socialism/communism. They waxed and waned at each other’s expense, so it was difficult to build an effective and influential protest movement. As part of the Democratic party, integrationists got patronage jobs for the elite, but blacks lacked sufficient political clout in the first decades of this century to force integration in public-service jobs (transportation, utilities, police and fire departments). That came later, when a black middle class, measuring racial advancement by economic status, grew in size and demanded greater occupational opportunities. Mainstream political priorities affected job opportunities available to blacks, as Alana J. Erickson argued in “Domestic Workers and 1965: A

Turning Point in Ethnic Succession.” Civil rights legislation and job-training programs helped African-American women leave domestic service in the 1960s. A booming economy and equal opportunity initiatives enabled many African-American women, like pre-World War I and post-1965 immigrants, to move into more desirable service and public-sector jobs.

Links on the Chain: Labor at Century's End

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In October Rhode Island College sponsored a month-long general education series that considered labor's historic past, examined its current position, and helped project its future course. “Links on the Chain: Labor at Century's End” encompassed a variety of events with broad appeal in the academic and labor communities. The series coordinated several diverse programs including an exhibition of labor photography; films on the life of the worker; and panel discussions on the future of enterprise compacts, European and Latin American labor movements, community organizing, and occupational safety and health. Moreover, the program featured two regional conferences. The University and College Labor Education Association (UCLEA) held its Eastern Regional conference during the month as did the New England Historical Association (NEHA). This well-attended series brought labor leaders, community organizers, members of the Providence community, academics, and students together to discuss various issues facing workers and organizers.

The series opened with photographer Earl Dotter's exhibition “Images as History: A Worker's Life in Mine and Mill.” Dotter's exhibit focused on living and working conditions in southern coal and mill towns but also reflected his current interest in child labor and occupational safety and health, especially among health-care workers. Dotter's incisive photographs underscored his lifelong commitment to “highlight individuals doing their best to improve their lot with self-respect and dignity.”

The UCLEA conference hosted a series of workshops on the theme “In Diversity Strength.” The keynote speaker, historian Jacqueline Jones, provided the historical context of organized labor's troubled past on race relations but highlighted its accomplishments and indicated that the union movement remains the single best hope for workplace equality. She pointed to employer manipulation, institutional segregation, and the media's equation of class with race as critical factors in perpetuating hostility and prejudice among American workers.