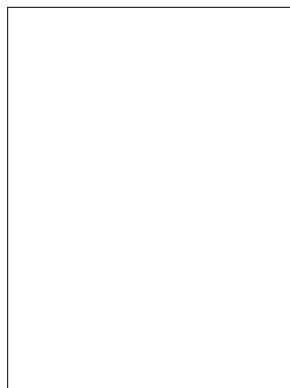


Teaching Labor History

Understanding work now means seeing it in relation to leisure, community, education systems, and civic ceremonies.

Martin H. Blatt



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Over the past twenty years, American history has been reconfigured in dramatic new ways. According to historian Eric Foner, “Inspired initially by the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s—which shattered the ‘consensus’ vision that had dominated historical writing—and influenced by new methods borrowed from other disciplines, American historians redefined the very nature of historical study” (1). If anything is characteristic of the recent study of American history, it is the careful examination of the experiences of previously neglected groups, not simply as an addition to historical scholarship but as a fundamental redefinition of what constitutes history.

Labor history is a vital part of the “new American history.” The definition of “labor” itself has expanded well beyond paid labor at the work site or the exploration of only unionized groups of workers. It now includes, for example, unpaid labor in the home (thus opening up completely new avenues in women’s labor history), the labor of slaves on plantations, migrant farm workers, nurses and midwives, and department store employees. Creatively incorporating social and cultural analysis, the new labor history has, by necessity, explored immigration, African-American, and women’s history. Understanding work now means seeing it in relation to leisure, community, education systems, and civic ceremonies. Industrial relations, urban geography, and popular culture have also become key subjects. Leon Fink writes: “Historians over the past generation have rediscovered the American working class. In doing so, they have focused less on official labor organizations (although such studies have played their part) than on the larger processes of social and economic change as these affect workers” (2). Following the work of E.P. Thompson and Herbert Gutman, many practitioners of the new labor history have sought to understand how workers have responded to situations and circumstances not of their own choosing.

The articles and lesson plans gathered in this issue are varied expressions of the new labor history. There are many excellent practitioners and, thus, only a representative sampling is presented. I sought to gather contributions that would demonstrate different practical methods for the teaching of labor history and also show the

diversity of issues within the new labor history.

For those readers who wish to pursue labor history in greater detail, I would recommend two bibliographic overviews, one authored by Leon Fink and the other by John Schacht (3). Journals which focus specifically on labor history include *Labor's Heritage*, *Labor History*, and *International Labor and Working Class History*. Also, the *Journal of American History* regularly includes listings of the latest articles, books, and dissertations in several subject areas, including labor history. An extensive book review section consistently includes new works in the field.

Several states have labor history societies. One of the most ambitious programs is that of the Illinois Labor History Society. There are other such projects in Rhode Island, New York, and a nascent effort in my home state of Massachusetts. For information on local labor history projects, I would suggest that you contact your local labor studies program or state federation of labor. A few state historic preservation organizations, such as Pennsylvania's, have a serious commitment to labor history.

Working with the National Park Service, I have a special appreciation and interest for how the study of an actual place or landscape can enhance one's historical perspective. The NPS has a program, "Teaching with Historic Places," which includes two packages relevant to labor history, one on Lowell National Historical Park and one on the Botto House, a National Historic Landmark which figured prominently in the Paterson, New Jersey silk workers strike of 1913 (4). Working with the Newberry Library of Chicago, the National Park Service is soon to complete a labor history theme study, which will produce the following: nominations for new labor history National Historic Landmarks; a series of essays relating labor history sites to work themes and the historiography of labor history; and a package of recommendations for enhanced National Park Service programming at labor history sites across the country.

In the lead essay of this issue, James Green cogently makes the case for teaching labor history. In concluding my brief introduction, I want to leave you with the piece that I most frequently employ at the beginning of a labor history presentation to stimulate students, school age or adult, to ponder issues from another point of view which is often not obvious or immediately apparent. It is the poem, "Questions from a Worker Who Reads," by Bertolt Brecht (5):

Who built Thebes of the seven gates?

In the books you will find the names of the kings.

Did the kings haul up the lumps of rock?
And Babylon, many times demolished
Who raised it up so many times? In what houses
Of gold-glittering Lima did the builders live?
Where, the evening that the Wall of China was finished
Did the masons go? Great Rome
Is full of triumphal arches. Who erected them? Over whom
Did the Caesars triumph? Had Byzantium, much praised in
song
Only palaces for its inhabitants? Even in fabled Atlantis
The night the ocean engulfed it
The drowning still bawled for their slaves.

The young Alexander conquered India.
Was he alone?
Caesar beat the Gauls.
Did he not have even a cook with him?
Philip of Spain wept when his armada
Went down. Was he the only one to weep?
Frederick the Second won the Seven Years' War. Who
Else won it?
Every page a victory.
Who cooked the feast for the victors?
Every ten years a great man.
Who paid the bill?

So many reports.
So many questions. □

Endnotes

1. Eric Foner, "Introduction," in *The New American History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), vii-viii.
2. Leon Fink, "American Labor History," in Foner, ed., *The New American History*, 233-4.
3. Leon Fink, "American Labor History," in Foner, ed., *The New American History*, 233-50; and John Schacht, "Labor History in the Academy," *Labor's Heritage* 5 (Winter 1994).
4. Martin Blatt, "Learning About Labor History: The Botto House National Historic Landmark," *Cultural Resource Management* 16 (1993).
5. John Willett and Ralph Mannheim, eds., *Bertolt Brecht Poems, 1913-1956* (New York: Methuen, 1976), 252-3.

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