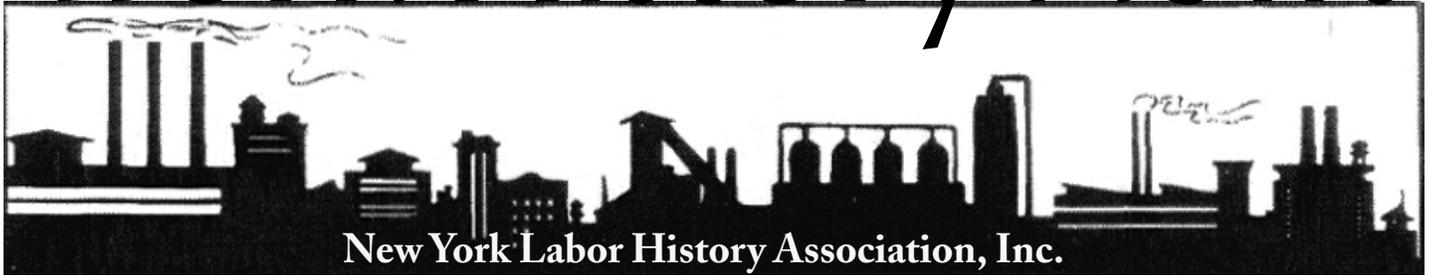


# Work History News



New York Labor History Association, Inc.

A Bridge Between Past and Present

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## Commerford Awards: “The courage to keep going”

By Jane LaTour

The 2018 Commerford Awards on Nov. 29 was a tribute to the power of first-person testimony. The novelist Jennifer Egan went into the past and the archives to find her story, and the historian, Annelise Orleck, went across the country and around the globe to examine the lives of exploited workers. The common theme of the evening was to bring to life the stories of the invisible workers who do the unremarkable jobs that underpin daily life – both today and in the past.

### Engrossing presentations

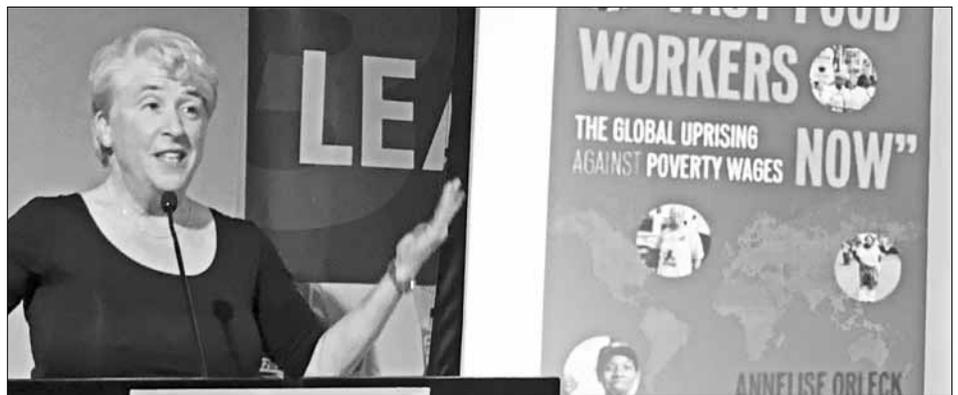
The program got off to a rousing start when Christina Jimenez sang “Cleanin’ Women,” a song from the Broadway musical, *Working*, that celebrates the women “without faces / Coming and going on a first name basis ...” Jimenez, the winner of a cabaret singing contest and a high school singing competition, set the tone for the program with her enthusiastic, youthful talent.

NYLHA board member Leyla Vural presented the award to Egan for her novel, *Manhattan Beach*. “We are honoring her for this novel which takes place in the Brooklyn Navy Yard where 70,000 people were employed during World War II. A lot of the novel is about work. Fiction helps us to imagine other peoples’ lives,” she said.

“This award is incredibly meaningful to me,” said Egan. “*Manhattan Beach* happened because of my curiosity about work in a certain time and place. I lived



Jennifer Egan



Annelise Orleck

close to the Brooklyn Navy Yard, yet knew nothing about it.” She set out on five years of research to produce her book and describe the world of her characters, including her protagonist, Anna Kerrigan, who, in a most nontraditional job for a female, becomes a diver. Egan’s presentation included photos and documents along with her description of the journey to capture the stories of the shipyard workers. This included dozens of interviews, serendipitous connections to the families of these workers, correspondence and

other archival documents, a tour of a shipyard with one of the families, and actually getting into the 200-pound diving apparatus in use into the 1960s. “Writing this book reminded me that working people had to push themselves to extraordinary lengths and this was what enabled us to win the war.”

Annelise Orleck’s award was presented by Michelle Miller, a former co-worker and union organizer. “Annelise is one of those writers who help us make sense of

*Continued on page 7*



# Upcoming events

IN THIS UPSIDE-DOWN WORLD, NYLHA members are fortifying ourselves with lessons from the past and the strength that comes from community. We hope you'll join us.

## Tuesday, April 9, 4:30-6:00 p.m. Tamiment Library, NYU

BOOK TALK: Clarence Taylor, *Fight the Power: African Americans and the Long History of Police Brutality in New York City*

## Monday, May 6, 6:30 p.m. Museum of the City of New York

The 9th Annual Clara Lemlich Awards

## Friday, May 10 – Wednesday, May 22 Workers Unite Film Festival, NYC

## Saturday, May 11, 10:00 a.m.-1:00 p.m. Tamiment Library, NYU - reception to follow

New York Labor History Annual Conference:  
*Labor and the Green New Deal*

## Wednesday, May 1, 6:30 p.m. - 8:30 p.m. Harry Van Arsdale Center for Labor Studies, 325 Hudson St., 3rd Fl. (Corner of Hudson and VanDam), Manhattan

BOOK TALK: Joshua Freeman, *Behemoth: A History of the Factory and the Making of the Modern World*

## Triangle Fire memorial

IN JANUARY, the Remember the Triangle Fire Coalition received unanimous approval from the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission to go forward with the Triangle Fire Memorial. The design has



a clear connection to the historic and tragic event in that its fabric motif suggests the material of the garment workers' craft and its height marks the path of those who jumped to their death in an attempt to escape the fire.

The Coalition has led this effort and in Jan. 2013 led an international competition, receiving over 170 entries from more than 30 countries. The Memorial will be built on the Brown (formerly Asch) Building (at the corner of Greene Street and Washington Place) where the fire took place. The tragic deaths on March 25, 1911, of 146 workers in the Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire – most of whom were young, immigrant women – was a pivotal moment in our nation's history, leading to increased union organizing, labor law reform, and fire safety regulations that continue to protect us today.

Today, there are very few memorials or monuments of any kind to women, to workers, or to immigrants. Those in the Remember the Triangle Fire Coalition believe that this is wrong and that remembering these workers and honoring their legacies is long overdue. The Memorial will serve as a permanent reminder of the crucial need for workplace safety and the fundamental obligation that all workers be treated with respect and human dignity. <http://rememberthetrianglefire.org/>.

We're collecting email addresses of NYLHA members and friends to help us stay in touch. Please send an email to Leyla Vural at [lvuralnyc@gmail.com](mailto:lvuralnyc@gmail.com) with "NYLHA email" in the subject line. Be sure to include your name.



## Work History News



*Work History News* is published twice per year to keep NYLHA members informed about our organization's work and labor history events in New York. For more information, visit us at [newyorklaborhistory.org](http://newyorklaborhistory.org).

President	Irwin Yellowitz
Vice-President	George Altomare
Secretary	Abbe Nosoff; Regina Olff
Treasurer	Peter Filardo
Reporter/Editor	Jane LaTour

# Motor City magnified – Detroit 48202

**F**ilmmaker Pam Sporn found a fresh approach for her documentary about Detroit. Her story follows the fortunes of a postal worker along his route – *Detroit 48202* – and unfurls the layers of history and the changes in this particular zip code. “The film is interesting in the way it uses the postal worker – a working class guy, as a surrogate for the filmmaker. It made the interviews more organic,” said the OSA’s Robert Spencer, one among many who attended the film showing at the Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, NYU, on Sept. 17, 2018.

## From vibrant to bankrupt

Postal worker Wendell Watkins proved to be a terrific guide to his route and the changes he has witnessed over time. The grandson of a postal worker, Watkins’ family came to Detroit in the 1920s from Tennessee. The energetic peripatetic Watkins was 56 when Pam Sporn put him to work for her – and had been on the job for 26 years. His ability to pinpoint the changes along his postal route provides a through line for the interviews with experts and residents, and other documentary evidence, such as photographs, maps and news clips, alongside the generational stories. He points to a street where “major changes have taken place over the last 30 years...you wouldn’t even recognize it,” he says. The film traces the history of the city, from the days when Detroit was a thriving business community through the destructive decisions that



leveled communities to build freeways, forcing thousands of families to move; the red lining by banks that undermined the ability of residents to acquire mortgages, predatory loans and the foreclosures – 50,000 underwater in just six zip codes – and the wall that was built to divide white neighborhoods from black. In a powerful scene, Watkins, looking at that wall, says: “Separate – but not equal.”

Julia Putnam, the principal at The Boggs School, describes the changes and lays the blame squarely on “the people who made decisions long ago.” Sadly, after all of those years of delivering the mail in the cold stormy winters and hot summer days in Detroit – a northern city across from Canada – Wendell lost all of his equity in his home. The film includes his retirement and a celebratory party. “Hello pension, goodbye tension,” he says.

Discussion followed the film. Housing activist and NYLHA board member Josh

Barnett spoke about the film’s universal message: “It’s about what’s happening across the country. It could equally be about Brooklyn,” he said. “The same things are happening to people all over. Certain people are being deprived of basic things – jobs, housing, neighborhoods.”

Pam Sporn started making films with her students in the South Bronx and she continues to use her films to promote discussions. Those who attended the screening shared their thoughts about the film. Filmmaker Greg Poole thought that “her telling of the broader historical and cultural context of African American northern migration and subsequent plight of their urban community is how I really connected to the film. That is the story that impacts so many Black families from Rust Belt cities,” he said. Miriam Frank, a former resident of Detroit, loved the film. “That Letter Carrier was a steady sweet guide to life on his streets,” she said. CUNY Professor Karen

Miller also loved the film. Sporn “did an expert job of weaving a personal story of someone who has been living in Detroit for many years with an explanation about the structural forces that shaped his life and experiences. I was really impressed!”

“As a person who has never gone to Detroit, seeing how Pam Sporn managed to successfully weave past and present Detroit through various struggles was a true education for me,” said filmmaker Sisa Bueno.

The New York Labor History Association and the Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives at the Tamiment Library, NYU, proudly co-sponsored this event. Thanks to all who made it such a success, including the filmmaker, Pam Sporn, NYLHA board members Rachel Bernstein and Josh Barnett, and NYU’s Michael Koncewitz. The film’s complete title is: *Detroit 48202: Conversations Along a Postal Route*, and is distributed by New Day Films.

–Jane LaTour

## Shining a bright light on workers

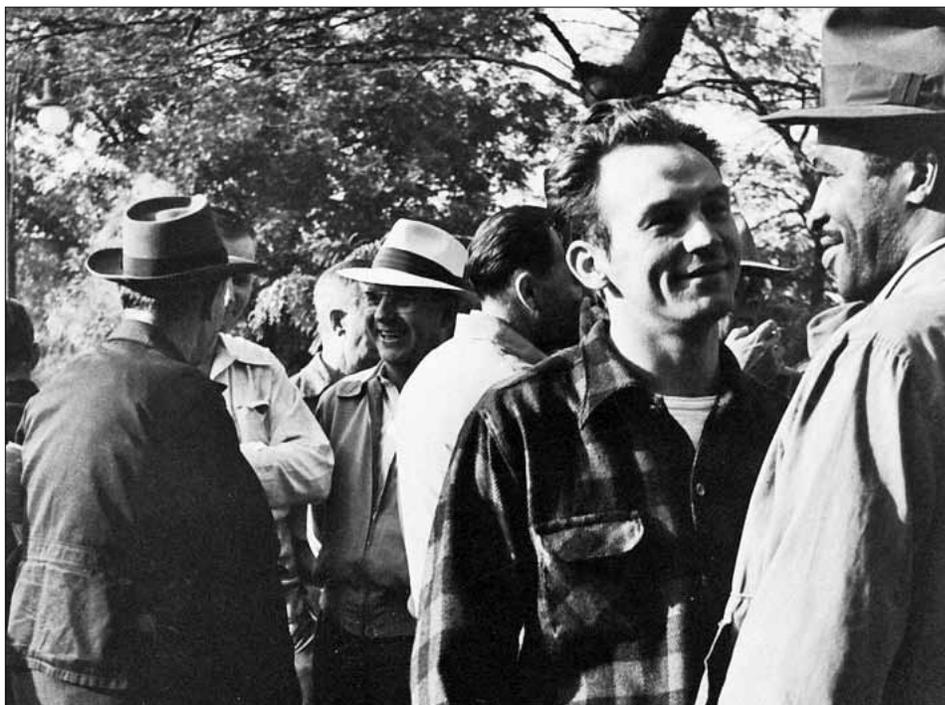
# Celebrating history and journalism at the 4th Annual Debra E. Bernhardt Labor Prize

The theme of the 4th annual Debra E. Bernhardt Award Ceremony was stories – the lives of the workers who are at the heart of every labor journalist’s beat. Archivist Keri Myers delivered the remarks in honor of the late Debra Bernhardt, who worked in so many different realms to share the hidden histories of working people. As Myer’s described, in 1997, her first job after college was to go to work for Debra at the Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, a job she likened to winning the lottery. “Archivists are the custodians of history. We collect it from those who make history. We are holding onto the threads and we are weavers, tying it together,” she said.

### Local places

The 2018 recipient of the Bernhardt Award, labor historian Toni Gilpin, described the award as “a terrific honor. My work,” she said, “shines a bright light on workers and their union.” Both Gilpin’s award-winning submission, “A Louisville Union Built Its Strength on Blacks, Whites and Took on International Harvester” ([www.leoweekly.com/2017/08/louisville-union-built/](http://www.leoweekly.com/2017/08/louisville-union-built/)) and her forthcoming book, *The Long Deep Grudge* (2019), focus on the Farm Equipment Union. “It’s about Red state workers who laid the groundwork for what we know as the civil rights movement and took place in Louisville. There are a lot of great stories about solidarity in these lower spots,” she said.

The Bernhardt Award selects prize-winning articles that further the understanding of the history of working people, and each year, a discussion takes place about the current state of labor journalism. “2018– The Year of the Teachers Strike,” included Tom Robbins, Investigative Journalist in Residence at the CUNY Graduate School, and journalist Micah Uetracht, who writes for Jacobin magazine, and author of *Strike for America: Chicago Teachers Against Austerity*.



Robbins, who agreed to fill in for Ginger Adams Otis, journalist and editor at *The Daily News*, noted that “in reference to the invited speaker, every day is an emergency at *The Daily News*. The on-going saga of the paper is a metaphor for what’s happening to labor journalism,” he said. He spoke about the fact that the teachers’ strikes in deep Red states had the big-time media scrambling to figure out what was happening, “since it didn’t comport with the usual way things happen.” He described a new and different form of journalism, and the strikes organized by teachers who had nothing to do with labor activism before they organized and took to the streets.

Robbins pointed to positive developments – such as the fact that the Columbia University School of Journalism has more students than ever. “The times are galvanizing people,” he said. Robbins talks to his students about the fact that every story is ultimately about someone who is going to work. “At the end of the day,

these are labor stories. When you are telling people’s stories, you are going to end up writing about work and working people,” Robbins said.

Reflecting on the state of labor and labor journalism today, Micah Uetracht noted that the labor media reflects the state of labor today. *The Daily News*, with its massive lay-offs last year, “is struggling to keep the lights on,” he said. Working for a Socialist magazine, Jacobin, their role is “to pick up the slack from the major media and to cover uncovered stories and labor issues.” Uetracht described some of the effects of working conditions for young journalists, currently involved in organizing their own workplaces, such as *Vice News*, *Fast Company*, a business monthly, and others.

The teachers’ strikes brought about well-funded efforts to attack them, he said. “But it’s hard to get people to dislike teachers. People know that they go into teaching because they want to teach, not to get rich.” As

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# Yearning to breathe free

By Jane LaTour

**N**ow that attention is focused on our southern border and the complex issues surrounding immigration, let's look at some history. The immigration reform acts of 1965 and 1986 had unintended consequences for Latin American immigration. The 1965 Hart-Cellar Act placed a cap of 120,000 a year on the number of immigrants from the western hemisphere. At the same time, the bracero program (imported farm labor) ended, and the ability of Mexicans to legally cross the border was sharply reduced. However, demand on both sides – Mexicans seeking work and employers seeking labor – was *not* reduced. Now, Mexican workers had to cross the border without documentation.

## Onerous new rules

In 1986, the Immigration Reform and Control Act placed the onus on employers to verify the status of their employees, and greatly expanded the U.S. Border Patrol. Consequently, without enforcement of the employers' obligations – and under the Republican administration there was little attention paid to enforcement – employers sought out undocumented workers for their low wages. The tightened borders encouraged



the undocumented to stay in the U.S., rather than travel back and forth.

Now, ask yourself: What would induce you to set out on a dangerous journey of a thousand miles or more, with your precious children? What calamities in Mexico, in Central American countries, especially Guatemala, El Salvador, Colombia, Panama, Nicaragua, have been unfolding for decades that force their citizens to flee north and seek refuge in America? Ask yourself, what role has America played in the wars, and drug gangs that are driving this exodus? How does the demand for drugs in the United States affect the drug smuggling and violence surrounding, it impact these countries? What does the

long and shameful history of exploitation of peasants in Latin America by the United Fruit Company have to do with the bananas we consume? What does the training provided by the Army's School of the Americas at Fort Benning, Georgia, have to do with the violence unleashed on countries south of our border, where graduates of this school have been linked to murder, torture, and other human rights abuses in Latin America?

## Injustice ascendant

How is it, as Edward R. Murrow asked long ago, in his 1960 TV documentary, *Harvest of Shame*, that migrant laborers and their families are good enough to pick our crops – those heads of lettuce, strawberries, and all those other foods we consume – but not good enough to experience decent working conditions or to become citizens? On several visits over the past two years to Fort Lauderdale, Florida, I watched as an affluent community relied on immigrants to clean their houses, landscape their lawns, care for their elderly relatives. Look into any kitchen in restaurants across this city, observe the men on rickety bicycles making food deliveries, and see who is doing these jobs. Witness any number of communities across the country, starting with New York City, that have benefitted from the immigrants who have come to America.

America for Americans? If you are not Native American or African American, you are an immigrant, or from immigrant roots. Today, as Lady Liberty lifts her lamp beside the Golden Door, she weeps. "Bring me your tired, your poor, yearning to breathe free?" Shame! Shall we keep faith with our better angels, or succumb to the hateful anti-immigrant voices that call for exclusion and result in such inhumane policies that this administration is visiting upon people coming to America, just yearning to breathe free.





# World War I and the fight for peace

The armistice that ended World War I was signed on Nov. 11, 1919, thus officially ending the epic carnage of that war in Europe. The New York Labor History Association honored the centennial with a program, “World War I: The Resistance,” on Nov. 12 at the Center for Worker Education/CUNY, featuring three speakers, two historians and a veteran peace activist.

So much of this history has been forgotten – the 20 million dead soldiers and civilians, the savagery of the weapons – but especially the resistance to the entrance of America into the war. The fact that there was a broad coalition fighting for peace, that for a time, this resistance was led by women, that the resisters were not isolationists; that eventually war profits were taxed, that a lengthy public debate took place, that people went to prison for speaking out in opposition, all of these facts and more were underscored by the speakers.

## Labor in opposition

NYLHA President and historian Irwin Yellowitz spoke about the labor movement and its role in these debates. The question that consumed a large segment of society, including trade

unionists, was: should American troops be committed to fighting in the war that began in Aug. 1914. For a time, Samuel Gompers, the head of the AFL, positioned labor against the war – until he switched by the end of 1915 and supported our entrance. Strikes were prevalent throughout 1916 and even more so in 1917. Production for the war impacted the economic fortunes of workers. But resistance was an important part of labor’s program and enjoyed broad, cross-country support. The IWW and the Socialist Party added a more militant approach to resistance.

Historian Michael Kazin, author of *War Against War: The Fight for Peace 1914-1918*, selected four major figures to speak about, from among the many in the cast of outsized characters who played a major role in the resistance: Senator Robert La Follette, “a progressive Republican ahead of his time;” Morris Hillquit, the Secretary of the Socialist Party; Rep. Claude Kitchin, a Democrat from North Carolina, and House Majority Leader; and Socialist Crystal Eastman. Kazin described the resistance, which, until mid-1915, as a women’s movement: skits, exhibits, parades, peace trips to Europe, all these

tactics and more were employed by these ambitious and determined women. Men led us into war, women should keep us out was one argument. In 1915, sheet music for the protest song, “I Didn’t Raise My Boy to be a Soldier,” sold over 700,000 copies.

Susan Schnall, President of the New York City Chapter of Veterans for Peace, spoke about her 50 years of experience as an anti-war activist, beginning with her tour of duty in Vietnam as a Navy Nurse (1967-1968). She described the actions of the veterans and GIs who returned from the war and “then fought for peace.” The soldiers who resisted and were sentenced to years of hard labor (the Fort Hood 3), the GI Coffee Houses, the My Lai massacre, the fact that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. called the country to account for the fact that “our nation has not yet used its vast resources to deal with extreme nationalism and militarism. And was denounced for doing so.” Schnall described the goal of the veterans fighting for peace: “to move from a war economy to a peace economy and be a life-affirming society. As she said: “If we who have known war don’t speak against it, who will?”

–Jane LaTour

## Celebrating history and journalism

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young reporters are developing class consciousness, it will shape the way that labor coverage is done in the future, Uetricht said.

The Bernhardt Award is co-sponsored by the New York Labor History Association, the Metro New York Labor Communications Council, the New York City Central Labor Council, and the Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives at NYU’s Tamiment Library, which hosted the event. Thanks are due to all who made this event such a success, including



Tom Robbins and Micah Uetricht



Toni Gilpin

the speakers, Rachel Bernstein and committee members, co-sponsors, and all who contributed their submissions.

Enter the 2018-2019 contest at: [LaborArts.org/Bernhardt](http://LaborArts.org/Bernhardt).

–Jane LaTour

# Commerford Awards

*Continued from page 1*

our world and raise the sense of possibility because of the flowering of young people who are organizing around the world,” said Miller. The historian Linda Gordon has provided the perfect description of Orleck’s book, “*We Are All Fast-Food Workers Now: The Global Uprising Against Poverty Wages*,” as “stunning in its breadth and impact, filled with vivid characters from many countries. The book is an epic achievement – it shows us globalization from the perspective of the people who do its work. It is proof that a superb historian can reveal the often hidden present as well as the past.”

Orleck spoke about her life as a child in Orchard Beach, and her immersion in the world of her immigrant family and the stories her grandmother told, which became the inspiration for her life’s work – “telling stories through the eyes of workers. The book tells the story of globalization in a personal way.” Orleck

spoke about the birth of the notion for her book, at the 100th Commemoration of the Triangle Fire in 2011. She shared vivid photographs and stories from her book, about garment workers and fast-food workers, Wal-Mart and McDonald’s – now “the second-largest employer in Brazil.” The workers who are part of the brands of the new wage slavery and bear their scars. “In this terrible time, it’s the basis of a new labor movement,” and a quote from one of the workers on the front lines: “We are the new civil rights movement.”

Professor Brian Greenberg presented the Bellush Prize, which recognizes outstanding scholarship by graduate students in labor and work history to Erin Durham, a graduate student at the University of Maryland, for her essay, “Strike for Labor Rights: Prison Reform in Maryland During the Early Twentieth Century.” “Durham’s essay, which focuses

on the labor issues in prison reform, was very thoroughly researched and well-written,” said Greenberg. Professor Greenberg and NYLHA board member Robert Wechsler judge both the Bellush and the Wertheimer Prizes. Durham was teaching that evening and unable to join us to receive her award.

Kudos go to the evening’s organizers, Leyla Vural and Rachel Bernstein, along with other contributors, including NYLHA President Irwin Yellowitz, who shared the story of John Commerford, the labor educator who provides the inspiration for these awards. This year’s event was held at the union headquarters of 32BJ, SEIU, and once again, we are in their debt for being such generous hosts. The annual fundraiser supports the activities of the New York Labor History Association throughout the year, so thanks to all of our patrons and the labor organizations that continue to support our work.

## Three books-three timely topics

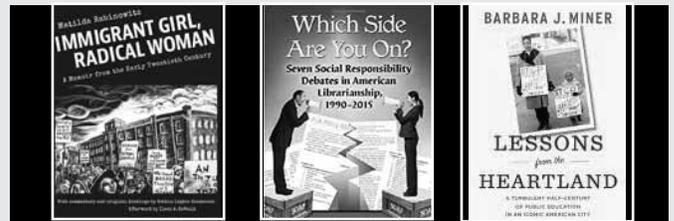
*Which Side Are You On? Seven Social Responsibility Debates in American Librarianship, 1990-2015.* By Elaine Harger

**ELAINE HARGER** documents debates that led to changes in the American Library Association (ALA) policy statements and the ways we perceive ALA’s community role. Harger, an active ALA member (and former, long-time board member of the NYLHA) and participant in the discussions reports on seven watershed debates, such as anti-apartheid actions, disputed territories with the Boy Scouts and McDonald’s, Snowden, and the climate crisis. The issues underlying these debates are contentious and not easy to grasp quickly. Harger’s essays on her route to learning about the issues and understanding their impact, along with excerpts from the debates, provide useful insights to ALA’s social conscience.

–Karen Muller, *American Library Magazine*.

*Immigrant Girl, Radical Woman: A Memoir from the Early Twentieth Century.* By Matilda Rabinowitz

**MATILDA RABINOWITZ** challenges assumptions about the lives of early twentieth-century women. In this book, Rabinowitz describes the ways in which she and her contemporaries rejected the intellectual and social restrictions imposed on women as they sought political and economic equality. Rabinowitz devoted her labor and commitment to the notion that women should feel entitled to independence,



equal rights, equal pay, and sexual and personal autonomy. Rabinowitz (1887-1963) immigrated to the United States from Ukraine at the age of thirteen. Radicalized by her experience in sweatshops, she became an organizer for the IWW from 1912-1917 before choosing single motherhood in 1918. Her book was intended as a private story for her grandchildren, Robbin L. Henderson among them. Henderson’s black-and-white-scratchboard drawings illustrate Rabinowitz’s life.

*Lessons from the Heartland: A Turbulent Half-Century of Public Education in an Iconic City.* By Barbara J. Miner

“**BARBARA MINER** has written an explosive educational biography of her hometown. The story of Milwaukee is really the multi-layered tale of how America has long avoided committing to the education of low-income students of color. A must-read for anyone seeking the real backstory of our educational policy-making.”

–Lisa Delpit, author of *Multiplication is for White People and Other People’s Children*.

NEW YORK LABOR HISTORY ASSOCIATION  
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## Work History News



**The New York Labor History Association** was founded in 1976 to bring together New Yorkers interested in the history of working people, their organizations, and their struggles for a better life and a more just society. Too often this history is left out of textbooks and

classroom education. We organize discussion panels and conferences, book talks and movie nights. We celebrate long-time activists and new labor journalists. **Learn more about us at [newyorklaborhistory.org](http://newyorklaborhistory.org) — and if you're not a member yet, please join us!**



Like us on Facebook / New York Labor History Association