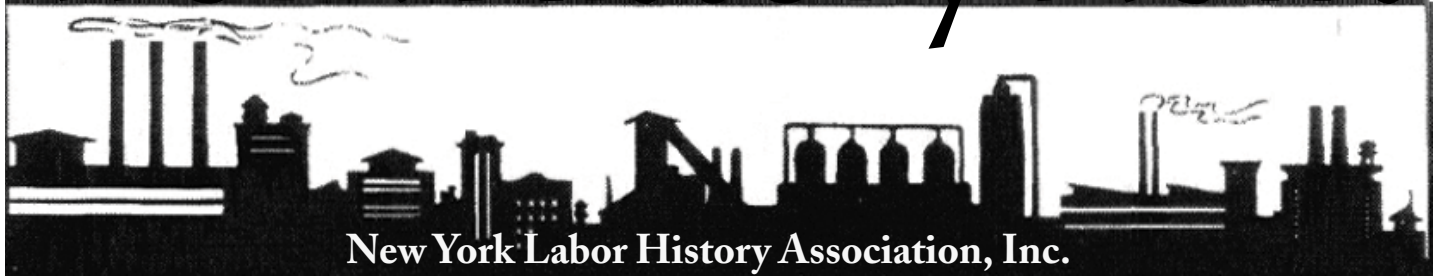


Work History News



New York Labor History Association, Inc.

A Bridge Between Past and Present

Volume 38 No 2 Summer/Fall 2021

Clara Lemlich awards for social activism

By Abbe Nosoff

In Praise of Older Women:

The Clara Lemlich Awards celebrates these incredible women who changed the world with their activism: Barbara Dane, Suelika Cabrera Drinane, Debby King, Wilhemina Perry, Muriel Tillinghast.

The awards event presented via Zoom included inspiring music and speeches hosted by Labor Arts and the Remember the Triangle Fire Coalition, supported by the Museum of the City of New York, the Puffin Foundation and the 21st Century ILGWU Heritage Fund.

Begun by chanteuse Cara Noel of SEIU 1199 singing “Wind Beneath My Wings” to call attention to our heroes, these 5 activists were honored on May 10. We were further entertained by the NYC Labor Chorus singing “The Union Makes Us Strong/ Solidarity Forever.”

We were presented with a short history of the youthful activist and labor organizer, Clara Lemlich, who famously said, “I have something to say!” and did she ever. Her words still reverberate today.

MURIEL TILLINGHAST, began as an activist in Mississippi volunteering in voter registration drives. She was a



Muriel Tillinghast



Barbara Dane



Suelika Cabrera Drinane

movement organizer. She discussed the struggles of Black people denied their voting rights. What an inspiring and uplifting story of doing the right thing. She questioned whether this is being echoed today in denying democracy and voting rights.

BARBARA DANE, almost 94 years young, regaled us with her history as a singer on the picket lines in Detroit. Music could move people as she played her guitar on the lines. Her takeaway to young singers: Don't stop, keep doing it. We're listening. Use your voice and music to propel your ideals. Poetry and music enlightened us all.

SUELIKA CABRERA DRINANE believed that integration of black and Hispanic seniors was essential to union activism. She confronted the New York State governor

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Clara Lemlich awards for social activism

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by literally demanding “no more peanuts” for seniors. Now she rallies for home care workers and asks for our support for higher pay and rights in NYS legislation.

DEBBIE KING, an 1199 worker who became an activist in the 1970s, moved to Ireland with her husband and taught courses at a Jesuit school there. She’s now working for nannies, health care and domestic workers to be covered under labor law and anti-discrimination law. In our city, human rights laws must include these workers.

DR. WILHEMINA PERRY, LGBT Convener, who worked with homeless gay youth to make the connection between churches and these youth. By using her sources at local churches, she provided shelter to these youth in underused spaces there. She motivated her friends to provide food, linens and other services for these youth. Although



Debbie King



Dr. Wilhemina Perry

downsized over the years, there remains a permanent shelter for these youth, providing small but vital services.

This event was sponsored by National Writers Union, the New York Labor History Association and Tamiment Library.

Abbe Nosoff is secretary of executive board of the New York Labor History Association, retired school teacher and union activist.

MAY DAY program in Albany

By Art Fleischer, Solidarity Committee of the Capital District

THE SOLIDARITY COMMITTEE of the Capital District along with several other labor, political, environmental, educational, anti-war, social justice and gender equality groups held a May Day teach-in on Friday, April 30, and a rally, march and celebration on Saturday, May 1.

The teach-in was on Zoom with four speakers from around the USA. Attorney Heather Benno of the Party for Social Liberation was the moderator. The theme of the discussion was “Which Way Forward For The Working Class?” Jarribu Hill, Education Director of the Worker Center in Jackson, Mississippi, stated there needs to be a Labor Party and a more aggressive AFL-CIO for working people to move forward. Author Michael Zweig posited the view that the American working class needed to hook-up with workers from around the world as they did in the 1930’s. Journalist Monica Cruz talked about the recent Amazon election in Alabama where RWDSU was defeated, the need to pass the PRO ACT, and that labor unions must expand their fight



for housing, education and anti-racism. The last speaker was Fareed Michelen, Director of Organizing for NYSNA, the nurses union in New York State and the leader of the fight in Albany, New York for a contract for 2000 nurses who won a 2-1 election three years ago. He spoke to the necessity of the working class to assert their rights against a ruling class that has pushed them further behind a decent standard of living.

On a beautiful May Day, hundreds gathered in front of Albany Medical Center demanding a contract for the nurses, better staffing and more safe

standards during the pandemic. Some staff nurses spoke along with labor leaders, politicians and clergy. NYSNA provided a small band that led marchers a few blocks to Washington Park where people congregated around tables that provided information on several different groups and a stage where singers, poets and speakers held forth. At a review session two weeks later, committee members vowed to make the two decade May Day celebration in the capital district another exciting event.

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.

President	Irwin Yellowitz
Vice-President	George Altomare
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Editor	Jane LaTour

Reinventing solidarity: Black-led antiracist unionism-the legacy of the IWW's Ben Fletcher

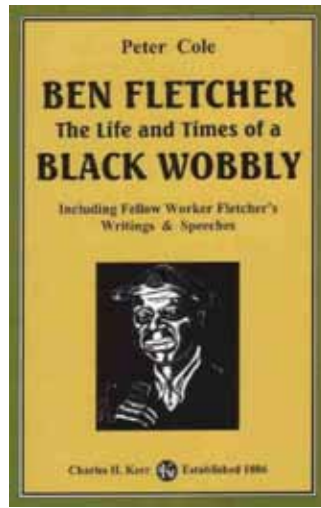
By Jane LaTour

On February 4, the New York Labor History Association co-sponsored a fascinating discussion between CUNY Professor Kafui Attoh and the historian Peter Cole about the subject of his book, *Ben Fletcher: The Life and Times of a Black Wobbly*. Fletcher has been “totally forgotten,” said Cole. He is making the case to correct this omission. “If you’ve heard of Stokely Carmichael, or A. Phillip Randolph, or Fred Hampton, Ben Fletcher should be in that list,” he said. Cole compares Fletcher to Hampton. Both were “young organizers, who worked across racial boundaries,” he said. Hampton is having a moment now, with the popular movie, *Judas and the Black Messiah*. Like Fletcher, Hampton was a gifted orator, a Chicago revolutionary, and the head of the Illinois Black Panther Party. Born in 1948, he was assassinated in December 1969. Cole, through his research, book and related work, is making the case for Fletcher’s legacy.

Who was Ben Fletcher

“Let’s begin with the basics. Who was Ben Fletcher, asked Professor Attoh. “He was an Afro-American, born in 1890 in Philadelphia of working-class parents who had fled the South,” said Cole. In 1920, he joined the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and made common cause with the dock workers along the city’s waterfront. “This was arguably the most racially diverse and integrated institution of its time, and for the next decade, the most powerful, militant union. For this, it was praised by both A. Phillip Randolph and W.E.B. DuBois,” said Cole.

“Give us a sense of that organization that Fletcher was part of and how they fit into the landscape – what did it mean to be a Wobbly, asked Professor Attoh. “It meant that you put a target on your back,” said Cole. “Fletcher



eventually served time in Leavenworth Prison.” While the AFL had “huge blind spots,” and concentrated on organizing skilled white workers, the IWW was “institutionally anti-AFL. It was anti-capitalist; anti-nationalist and welcomed all workers. It did what the AFL chose not to do,” said Cole.

The author described the city that Fletcher was organizing in as “an industrial city that exported everything from battle ships to button hooks. Thousands of men worked on the waterfront under abusive conditions. Workers were played off each other. They had to pay bribes to get hired. Wages were low and labor was weak,” Cole said. Into this cauldron came Fletcher.

As Cole described, “The IWW ended ethnic-based groups through integration from below. 51 years before 1964, and the passage of the Civil Rights Act legally ended segregation by race, the radical union put an end to the racial divisions amongst this casual labor system – precarious and weak.” Famously, the IWW never signed contracts and used direct action tactics. “Ben Fletcher was central to the movement that gave rise to the strikes that won better conditions and to Local 8, which abolished the dreaded “shape-up”. Without Ben Fletcher, it’s hard to imagine Local 8 being born,” said Cole.



Ben Fletcher

The difficulty of tracing Fletcher’s contributions is a familiar story. “Working-class leaders like Fletcher don’t often leave a paper trail. The historian has to try to interpolate their history, with all of the inherent limitations. Fletcher was an intellectual, a charismatic speaker, who had a good sense of humor,” said Cole. He has spent decades trying to piece this story together. “I learned about Ben Fletcher in graduate school,” said Cole. One source of information was derived from the government investigations of Fletcher. “They invested all of these resources and we get the benefit,” he said.

In a fascinating look at how the book was put together, Cole notes that part of the fun of reading it comes about because “the reader can be an historian. It’s a very different organization for a biography.” Professor Attoh agreed: “It’s very unique and provides a further incentive to check out the primary sources. It has a Brechtian quality,” he said, “to see the labor that goes into a narrative – it has a very cool dialectical quality.”

Kudos to the sponsor, the CUNY School of Labor and Urban Studies. Link here, to listen to the program and hear the rest of the content-rich discussion: <https://slu.cuny.edu/public-engagement/public-programming/past-events/>

More books to raise children's awareness

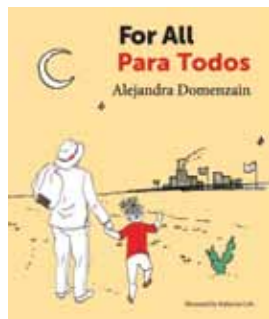
By Marcia Newfield

Still on the quest for picture books about important issues for our youngest audiences, I find that, once again, Hardball Press obliges with two new books.



Down on James Street by Nicole McCandless, illustrated by Byron Gramby (2021), builds on an actual event in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania in the 1930s when racial segregation was still the law. George, who is white, and Dorothy who is black, come from different neighborhoods to meet at a dance hosted by the Young Workers League. They are having fun with the Lindy Hop, but because it is an interracial gathering, police break it up and hurt the black dancers. The author based the story on a plaque on the still-existing building which states “police closed up a dance sponsored by the Young Workers League because of mixed people, colored and white.” It’s told from

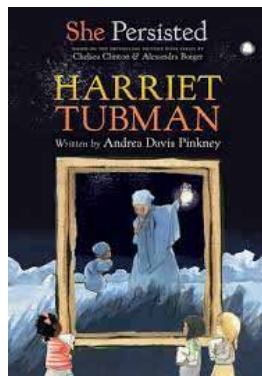
the point of view of George, but the heroine is Dorothy, an expert dancer who inspires George to dance in public and then gather the young people from the neighborhood to defy the police and continue the dance at Dorothy’s house. In the era of segregation, it is a brave act which readers can’t help but admire and reflect on, thanks to the accompanying discussion questions. The illustrations capture the lively momentum of dance and the era’s style.



For All, Para Todos by Alejandra Domenzain, illustrated by Katherine Loh (2021), counters today’s temptations to cruelty and judgment towards immigrants. Bilingual and in rhyme, it tells the story of Flor, who is forced by poverty and the death of her mother from chemicals she inhaled at a factory “in a country right next to this one” to take a difficult journey with her father to a land called “For All.” The book recounts the struggles and

strength to adapt to a not-so-friendly new environment. As she advances in school, Flor gets more courage (and influence) by using her green pen to share the stories and needs of other immigrants. The line drawings by Katherine Loh are stunning for their economical use of color and gesture.

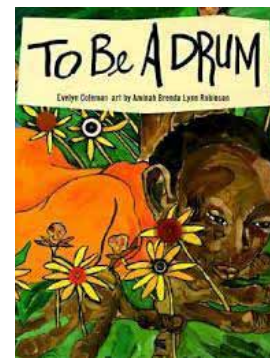
Parents and teachers may disagree as to whether or how much children should be exposed to harsh realities; however, since we can’t stop children from picking up whatever is out there, we might as well advocate for truth, compassion and benevolence whenever we can.



Harriet Tubman by Andrea Davis Pinkney, illustrated by Gilian Flint (Philomel Books, 2021) is a spinoff from *She Persisted*, a series of biographies of inspiring women by Chelsea Clinton and Alexandra Boiger. It includes a depiction of what slavery was in terms so

simple that even a six-year-old can understand its evil. “Minty (Harriet’s nickname), her parents and her eight siblings were owned by the Brodessa family. Minty and her parents were considered property, in the same way people had objects like a tea kettle or a hammer that belonged to them. That’s what slavery was – white people owning black people. ...and just like objects, enslaved people could be bought, sold, or traded.” At the age of six or seven, Minty was forced to wade into icy water to catch muskrats snagged in riverbank traps. Incidents like this were excerpted from stories that Harriet orally recounted in 1869 and 1886 (she couldn’t read or write because blacks were not allowed to go to school). The vividness of these stories make it easier to feel her as a real person and appreciate her monumental accomplishments.

To Be A Drum by Evelyn Coleman, illustrated by Aminah Brenda Lynn Robison (Albert Whitman & Company, 1998) is a visual and verbal depiction of the spirit ground for the courage of the African-American people told by a father to his children through



the story of the drum. He describes the vibrations of the drum as the earth’s heartbeat which infuses the hearts and hands of the people even after the drums were taken away from them by slavery and oppression: “men from another continent came, shackled us, tore us apart, didn’t allow us to speak our own language, and took our drums away... The earth’s spirit pushed itself through us anyway and we became the drums. When we worked in the fields, we made our feet drums... when we stitched our quilts, we made our hands drums...” The story ends with “You, too, can be free – become a drum.” I consider this book a poem and a prayer. It should be reprinted. An added treat is that there is a free YouTube reading of the book by the mellifluous actor James Earl Jones. The illustrations, by the distinguished McArthur Award winner African

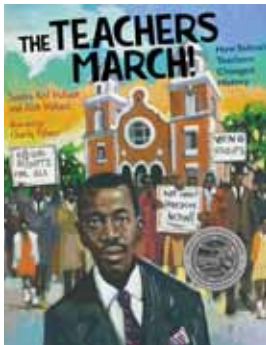
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Books to raise children's awareness

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American artist, now deceased, incorporate painting, hogmawg (a mixture of mud, clay, twigs, leaves, lime, animal grease and glue), and found objects, collages of cloth scraps, and homemade dyes and paper, is extraordinary. Every page is a treasure.

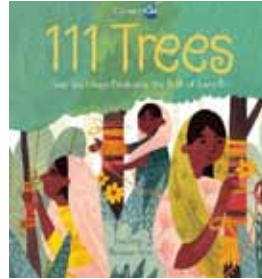
The books that follow are testimonies to the human spirit that embodies the courage to go against the grain, to challenge the status quo, to make change. They are cast as stories but are based on actual events.



The Teacher's March to Selma by Sandra Neil Wallace and Rich Wallace, illustrated by Charly Palmer

(Calkins Creek, 2020) relates the story of how Reverend F.D. Reese who taught science at a local high school persuaded a group of teachers to risk arrest to exercise their right to vote. He invited Martin Luther King to speak at his Chapel; the Reverend said people shouldn't be afraid of being arrested, they should go to jail by the thousands to defend the right to vote. Inspired, one hundred and four teachers signed up and showed up, "clutching paper bags filled with sandwiches for jail." Dr. King said that this march inspired other black professionals to join in the movement that resulted in the passage of the Voting Rights Act. The authors based this book on interviews with Reverend Reese and other leaders, all of whom were awarded Congressional Gold Medals. The accompanying bibliography includes

film and audio references. What an engaging way to learn history; Palmer's powerful paintings deepen the experience.



111 Trees, written by Rina Singh and illustrated by Marianne Ferrer (Kids Can Press, 2020) conveys a message of transformation in two areas: gender equality and environmental justice. Based on a true story of the changes in Piplantri, a small village in India, it celebrates the reforms initiated by Sundar Paliwal when he became sarpanch, the head of the village. When he was a child, Sundar's favorite time was when he accompanied his mother to fetch water for their family of eleven who lived in a

mud house. At that time, the birth of a girl was considered a burden while the village celebrated sons as blessings from the gods. Girls were not allowed to attend school at that time and the land was abused by the owners of a marble factory. Sundar changed all that with the connections he made between daughter, water, and trees. Resonant and spacious illustrations complete this magical world.



Race Cars by Jenny Devenny, LCSW, edited by Charnie Gordon (Quarto Publishing, 2021), is the most challenging and probably the most controversial, tackling the subject of white supremacy head on.

Couched in an abstract story about two race cars, a white car and a black car, the plot is pointed and the context is relevant in that the sport has been totally dominated by whites. Louis Hamilton and Darrell "Bubba" Wallace are the first and only winners in various competitions in fifty years. Discussion questions for every few pages are proposed by the authors. Would it be appropriate to begin to initiate these discussions with kindergarten or pre-school children before they have ever heard of discrimination or white privilege? The authors maintain that by ages two to four children can internalize racial bias. It will be interesting to hear parent, teacher and children's reactions to these conversations.

Marcia Newfield is a member of the NYLHA Board, a retired BMCC-CUNY adjunct lecturer and PSC activist. She is the author of several books for children.

Crossword Answers

23. Yogi.
24. Addams.
27. Youngstown.
29. Evans.
30. Asian.
32. Labor.
35. Taylor.
36. British.
41. Tan.
6. Hard.
7. Court.
8. Disc.
9. Transport.
10. Sitting.
13. Bezos.
14. Moscow.
15. Strasberg.
17. New.
21. Lucy.

39. Town.
40. Pro.
42. Fass.
43. Hayes.
Down
2. India.
3. Pesotta.
4. Italian.
5. Salinger.

20. Song.
22. Kirchwey.
25. Campion.
26. Gary.
28. Ridgeway.
31. O'Hair.
33. Jonathan.
34. Alabama.
37. Pankhurst.
38. Reed.

Across
1. Paris.
8. DeSantis.
11. God.
12. Ambassador.
14. Mask.
15. Strand.
16. Contractors.
18. Wright.
19. Sea.

January 6th is part of the long history of mob violence to suppress black votes

By Clarence Taylor

The Republican Party's effort nationwide to bring back Jim Crow has been well documented. The passage of voter suppression laws in Georgia, Florida, Texas, and the introduction of other such bills in state legislatures, has received a great deal of attention. Stacey Abrams, head of Fair Fight, an organization created to protect the right to vote, has called the latest effort of voter suppression "Jim Crow in a suit and tie." Abrams' reference to Jim Crow is linking the current effort by the GOP with the late nineteenth-century period where southern states adopted a number of legal measures to deny black Americans their constitutional right to vote.

However, another part of the campaign to enforce Jim Crow is the amount of violence that was used by white southerners to assure that blacks could not vote, could not have access to public accommodation, an adequate public education, and rights as citizens. The January 6, 2021 storming of the United States Capitol was part of the story of white supremacists' use of violence to stop people of color from their right to vote.

Organized for insurrection

Although there were many people at the Nation's capital on January 6, who were there because they were in financial despair and believed that Trump would relieve their economic pain, others were there because they saw him as the champion of white supremacy. The January 6 insurrection was a well-organized white supremacist coalition, consisting of the Proud Boys, the Oath Keepers, the Three Percenters, the Boogaloo movement, Neo-confederates, Neo-Nazis, Q-Anon believers, and loads of other racist white militias. Hundreds of insurrectionists, violently forced their



way into the building, looting, breaking into the offices of Congressmen and women in their attempt to overturn a presidential election. One insurrectionist said to a cop, you did not take back the building, we gave it back to you. The President of the United States, who refused to call out the National Guard to stop the rebellion, told the insurrectionists that he loved them and said that they were "special."

Soon after the violent takeover, that resulted in the death of five people, the media, Democratic elected officials, and the President-elect Joe Biden, compared how Black Lives Matter protesters were treated by law enforcement to the lack of police action on those involved in sedition. However, many also contended that the event was unique, an aberration. One popular argument heard was the event was "not who we are."

No one should be surprised about January 6 because the violent attempts to deny people of color the right to vote is not new. In 1898 Phoenix, South Carolina after a strong supporter of black voting rights placed ballot boxes in black areas in order to allow blacks to vote, a prominent white man was shot and killed after he attempted to remove the ballot boxes. On November 9th, blacks were lynched while hundreds of whites watched. The following day in Phoenix, two more blacks were killed in order to stop blacks from voting. On November 10, 1898, a white supremacist mob of thousands in Wilmington, North Carolina launched a successful coup of a duly elected government of

biracial-members of Black Republicans and Whites who were members of the Populist Party who had teamed up to create the Fusion Party. In November 1920 white supremacists, upset about blacks voting, led an attack on the black community of Ocoee, burning houses, businesses and forcing many to flee for their lives. During the Red Summer of 1919 there were 38 white supremacist attacks on black communities.

One of the motivating factors for some of these racial assaults was white anger over blacks attempting to vote. For example, in Knoxville, Tennessee, blacks who helped elect a mayor who supported black voting rights and had denounced racist attacks, were warned by white supremacists not to vote in the upcoming election. After a sheriff sneaked a black man accused of killing a white woman out of the jail to the next town, a crowd estimated at 5,000 ripped the jailhouse apart in their search for the accused man. The mob then turned on the city's black community and with the help of the national guard they destroyed homes and businesses, forcing many blacks to flee for their lives.

Wilmington, Ocoee, and Knoxville are just a few examples of the history of organized white supremacist groups carrying out vicious assaults to assure that black people could not vote.

After a number of people in and near Syracuse, New York where I live, were arrested for their participation in the insurrection, it raised the question, what does that tell us about racism in this country? Racists are not just southern rednecks or toothless hillbillies. They are Olympic swimmers, realtors, police officers and others in law enforcement. They are in the military reserves and retired military officers. The insurrection demonstrated that people are not just fearful of their economic situation, they are fearful of being replaced in their position on the racial hierarchy.

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A labor history collaboration gets off the ground

By Keith Danish

On March 18, 2021, a “Virtual Forum” was presented via Zoom as the first public offering of the Collaboration of Labor History Organizations, or “CLHO”. This group was formed early in 2020 with the NY Labor History Association proudly serving as a founding member. It is a network of U.S. and Canadian labor history associations, academic entities, historical sites, museums, and other institutions with an interest in labor history. Its goals include the study and promotion of labor history (especially in schools), networking in order to exchange information and best practices, and presentation of public programs. The first such program, as aforementioned, was titled “U.S. and Canadian Labor”.

A history of working together

The program was well-organized and well-received, with over 200 pre-registrations and 113 in attendance. The moderator was Larry Spivack, who heads the Illinois Labor History Society. The panelists were Alvin Finkel, a Professor Emeritus of History from Athabasca University, Canada and President of the Alberta Labour History Institute, and Sara Nelson, President since 2014 of the Association of Flight Attendants (CWA, AFL-CIO). Professor Finkel gave us an overview of comparative U.S. and Canadian history with regard to unionization and social-welfare



Alvin Finkel

enactments, noting that while the U.S. took the lead in pro-union and social welfare laws, by around 1970 Canada had outpaced it, aided by labor and/or social democratic parties such as the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation and the New Democratic Party. Accordingly, as reported by the OECD, the unionization rate for Canada in 2018 was 25.9% compared with only 10.1% in the U.S.

Sara Nelson (who had just returned from Alabama where she supported the movement to unionize Amazon workers) recounted her personal history as a flight attendant and then a union official, and implored us to remember and learn from history, including Mother Jones’s observation that employers organize, so why shouldn’t employees, and Mother’s warning that there will never be labor-management peace. Nelson is a fighter, and her union does not shrink from conflict, including the use of “CHAOS” (“Create Havoc Around Our System”), what it calls a “trademarked strategy” of



Sara Nelson



Larry Spivak

intermittent, limited-scope strikes and other non-traditional work actions, first used in 1993 against Alaska Airlines. Nelson’s call for a “General Strike” probably contributed to the end of President Trump’s government shutdown in 2019.

So, the first flight of the fledgling labor history collaboration went well, undoubtedly aided by the presence of an experienced flight attendant! We look forward to its future programs.

Keith Danish is NY Labor History Association’s liaison to the Collaboration of Labor History Organization.

Mob violence to suppress black votes

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The end of Trump does not mean the end of Trumpism. Among Republicans, Trump has an 85 percent approval rating. Seventy-seven percent of Republicans think the 2020 election was stolen. So,

when I hear unity and compromise the first question I have is what are you willing to give up in the process of compromise? If Biden and the Democrats push unity and are willing to make compromises that will not benefit the millions of people who

came out to support them, then expect another Trump in four years.

Clarence Taylor is professor emeritus of History at Baruch College in New York City and author of books on racism, religion, and civil rights in the 20th-century.

146 WORKERS: *The Triangle Shirtwaist*

By Sherry Kane

Each year, on March 25th, hundreds of union members, health and safety advocates, and students gather on the corner of Greene Street and University Place in New York City to commemorate the tragic Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire that killed 146 workers in 1911.

This year, commemoration organizers decided that, rather than risk meeting in person during the pandemic, they would create a dynamic, moving webinar that both remembers the past and honors today's workers, focusing especially on the contributions of essential and frontline workers in this challenging year.

The vibrant 50-minute presentation, which can be seen at www.rememberthetrianglefire.org, includes music from the Resistance Revival Chorus, Rachel Perez and Rosanne Cash, short videos about the Triangle Fire and the 1982 Chinatown Strike, and testimonies from health care, nail salon, and Amazon warehouse workers. The tradition of "saying the names" is presented as a slide show with 146 people from around the

world, each holding a hand-made sign with the name of a Triangle fire victim.

The videos of the history of the fire and the 1982 strike, in which mostly women workers in Chinatown garment factories struck in order to force their employers to sign the union contract, grounded the ceremony in the past.

"Women workers have been organizing in the garment industry for years," said Ruth Sergel, the artist who produced the video. "And in this period of anti-Asian violence, we felt it was important to highlight this historic event. We were honored to have multi-media artist Betty Yu, whose mother worked in the garment industry, create the video."

Frontline workers talked about the challenges they face, describing understaffing at nursing homes, lack of health and safety equipment in nail salons, and long hours and low pay at Amazon.

"It breaks my heart when I go in in the morning and I see so many call bells going off and [there are] not enough hands on deck to really answer these calls," explained Linda Silva, a Certified Nursing Assistant and member of 1199SEIU, who works in a nursing home and says they need more staff.

In order to combat wage theft and unhealthy working conditions, nail technicians formed the *Nail Salon Workers Association* whose member Araceli Torres said, "In the nail salon industry, there has been a lot of wage theft and we don't have the proper [health and safety] equipment... We're fighting to pass a law that holds the salon owners responsible – the Nail Salon Accountability Act. After 100 years, where over 146 women workers died... we see that conditions haven't changed. We continue fighting. It's time for a change."

Amazon worker Jennifer Bates, who was active in the ultimately unsuccessful organizing drive in Alabama, called on us to remember that current labor struggles are built on the past.

"We remember all the workers who came before us," she said. "We remember their struggles, their strengths and their sacrifices and we remember the workers who perished in the Triangle fire."

The story of the Triangle Fire can be approached in many different ways – as labor history, Jewish and Italian history, women's history, as a fight for immigrants' rights, health and safety, and better conditions in the workplace. Public

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Factory Fire Commemoration 2021

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outrage at the loss of life led to changes in labor law and fire safety regulations that continue to protect us today and spurred the growth of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union. The building was eventually landmarked for its cultural and historical significance.

For family members Suzanne Pred Bass and Bill Swersey, the fire continues to impact their lives. Because Mr. Swersey's great grandfather, Louis Rosen, died in the fire, his father began designing medical equipment, especially to help burn victims, and Bill works at HAIS, an organization that supports refugees.

Two of Ms. Pred Bass' great aunts were Triangle factory workers, Rosie Wiener who died in the fire and Katie who survived. A member of the Remember the Triangle Coalition, which is currently spearheading the building of a memorial at the site of the original fire, Ms. Pred Bass explained its significance.

"[The memorial] starts at the 9th floor where most of the people died and goes down [the building] in a ribbon," she said. "The names of all of the victims will be etched in a panel...and the light and sky will be reflected. This memorial is a reclaiming and a remembering of this horrible tragedy that spawned great changes in the lives of workers, but tragically, it also stands as a reminder of the work that's still ahead of us."

Organizers hope that schools will use different parts of the video, which is available on YouTube.

"These short videos are a great way to introduce labor history and current labor issues in the classroom," said NYLHA board member Kimberly Schiller, who teaches middle school on Long Island and brings her students to the ceremony every year.

"We've all seen a lot of Zoom programs this year, but this was really beautiful," said Donna Ristorucci, former editor of the Teamsters Local 237 *Retiree News and Views*. "I was so moved, I teared up."

The video is available on YouTube and can be accessed on the Remember the Triangle Fire's website www.rememberthetrianglefire.org.

Sherry Kane is Program Director for the Workers United Education Program/CWE, an adult education program for union and community members. Previously, she spent many years as Communications Director for a local of the New York City garment workers' union.



Profiles in Activism – *Kimberly Schiller*

Since the pandemic began in March 2020, teachers have been front and center as essential workers, coping with tending to their students and finding new ways to connect. We are profiling two teachers, Kimberly Schiller and Joe Doyle, both members of the NYLHA board; Joe a stalwart of many years, and Kimberly a relative newcomer who continues to make significant contributions to our mission of sharing labor history.

It seems like only yesterday that Leigh Benin brought Kimberly Schiller to a board meeting so we could all meet this exceptional young woman. Kimberly joined our board in 2013 and since then, has worked tirelessly to promote and preserve labor history. Kimberly's profession as a teacher keeps her busy. Like Joe Doyle she is also an active union rep, and has served as district vice president from May 2016 to the present. In that role for the Associated Teachers of Huntington (LI), she organizes programs to strengthen the union. She serves as a delegate to the annual union conference, and supports other initiatives on the political action front.

A love for history

Kimberly is an eighth grade English teacher at the J. Taylor Finley Middle School, where she combines her love of labor history with her English lessons. She has developed interdisciplinary projects with a focus on history, unions, suffrage, and the history of working people and immigrants. She organizes annual trips to the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire commemorations, the Uprising of the 20,000, and to the Lower East Side's Tenement Museum for her students. She serves as a mentor for students taking part in the National History Day and supervises their projects.

Kimberly's work for the NYLHA alone could keep her busy: A member of the Commerford Award Committee; the moderator of the NYLHA Facebook page; organizer of several film programs as part of the Workers Unite Film Festival; contributing articles for the *Work History News*; and photographing our events. LaborArts has also benefitted from her contributions, in their efforts to increase teachers' awareness and involvement in the organization. She has developed curriculum materials and professional development sessions – and so much more.

In addition to all of these activities, since joining our board, Kimberly became a mother, first, to Annalee Jane, and then Billy. She continues to introduce her children to the wonderful world of art and books, museums and history. Kimberly's latest endeavor



is as an author. She recently contributed an essay, "Teaching the Triangle Fire to Middle School Students," to *Talking to the Girls: Intimate and Political Essays on the Triangle Fire*, due to be published in March 2022 (New Village press).

Since the pandemic emerged,

teaching has been challenging, as she describes:

"Last year's distance learning amidst a pandemic was extremely stressful. As an eighth grade English teacher, engaging students is already challenging and having to do that virtually made things harder. My school used a hybrid model, combining at-home and at-school teaching. For the at-home students, I have been live-streaming my lessons through Google Meet. I've had to alter my lessons to have technology as the sole route to take for teaching in class. I can't include pen and paper tasks, and group work is rare. In the past, I've always tried an arts and crafts activity, and have the students write out their ideas, rather than jump directly to the keyboard. Additionally, the kids were out of practice with their skills. They've experienced a lot, as have the faculty and staff over the last nine months.

It's been quite a balance between planning lessons/assessments, staying in contact with kids and their families, and maintaining records of everything turned in online, along with revising how to hold the kids accountable. There have been some disappointments – I was not able to take my students to the site of the Triangle fire as I have over the last 10 years, but I went there on my own and left flowers and chalked for Caterina Maltese, one of the oldest victims of the Triangle fire. And joys – one of my former students, now a freshman at Vassar, spoke on a panel on the anniversary of the Triangle fire, where she discussed how the fire is remembered by a new generation, 110 years later. To hear Julia, an amazing young woman, speak about something that I taught her five years earlier, was such an honor."

Kimberly also brought a special labor history program into her classroom during May, Labor History Month. Based on a play called "Layer the Walls," it involved the development of characters based on primary sources, and students got to do their own "time-traveling" as a character they created. "I've never done anything like this before, but I wanted to immerse the students in something real, since so much of the year has just been in front of a screen," she said.

Profiles in Activism – Joe Doyle

No short profile can do justice to Joe Doyle. He has spent decades dedicating his love of history toward documenting the stories of New York's diverse population. Chief among these are the Irish and Irish-Americans, maritime workers, and the working-class communities in New York City's Chelsea neighborhood, as well as the Chinese and Chinese-Americans.

Doyle has contributed to the NYLHA in numerous ways: serving as *Work History News* Editor; organizing a 2012 program, "Murder on the Waterfront" and leading a walking tour of the Chelsea waterfront. As Editor of the *New York Irish History Journal*, he produced major contributions that promoted research, and scholarship about the 300-year history of the Irish in New York City. For example, Vol. 9, 1995, of the *Journal* is a rich compendium of original essays and primary sources.

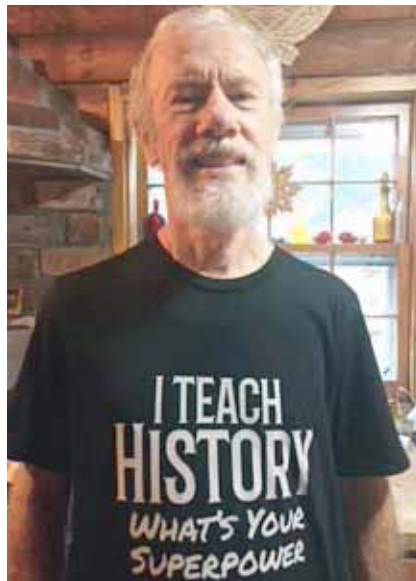
Preserving history (maritime workers), studying history (numerous Gilder Lehrman Foundation seminars, and other residencies), inform his ability to make history come alive for his students.

In addition to his many contributions, Doyle serves as a UFT Chapter Leader. He has received numerous awards, and as all who know him can testify, is a sweet-natured, low-keyed passionate promoter of history that matters: the lost stories of New York City's working-class that contribute to our knowledge of labor history.

Doyle's day job is teaching history at Newtown High School in Queens. Since 1997, he's worked in several capacities to transmit his passion for history to the students. The pandemic brought with it major challenges for teachers, but even greater hurdles for the students, as Joe Doyle described:

"I escaped intact last March when the COVID-19 pandemic struck New York City so hard. But my school, Newtown High School, wasn't so lucky. For weeks, in March and April 2020, Elmhurst Hospital was Ground Zero for the pandemic – the worst-hit neighborhood in the world.

I had my students write journal entries. Their stories were hair-raising. One poor kid was living with relatives. Her parents were on the other side of the world. She was sick with COVID-19. The relatives she was staying with were so sick they were hospitalized. She didn't know if they were alive or dead. And she had heard about the refrigerator tractor trailers, full of dead bodies, parked outside Elmhurst Hospital. Funeral homes



were overwhelmed. They couldn't handle all the grievers begging them to bury their dead. Worst of all, my students told me, the ambulance sirens never seemed to stop – night and day.

The principal of my high school wrote to us about driving by Our Lady of Sorrows Catholic Church, half a mile away, and seeing a line for the church's food pantry ten blocks long. One of my students wrote in her journal that week that her mother went out hoping to get a food parcel from Our Lady of Sorrows – but gave up when a representative from the food pantry – giving out numbers in line – said they only had food for 1,000 families. Her mother got out of line so families more desperate than her own could get something to eat.

Students wrote in the wellness check-in I had them do every Wednesday – they were "frightened and miserable." I reached out to my principal and to the student's counselor several times when students reported they were fighting off suicidal thoughts. One student said he wouldn't be fighting off suicidal thoughts if he could only get out of his apartment and get some exercise.

Helping each other

My high school has a number of students who have had almost no formal education. Most students at Newtown High School are from Latin America or Asia. Only 5% speak English as their first language. Some of our Newtown students are indigenous people who don't speak languages NYC emergency food banks understand. A half dozen ESL teachers from my school (English as a Second Language teachers) personally delivered food parcels to those students. Alumni from my school banded together to raise money for the Our Lady of Sorrows food pantry.

Our school spent years writing grants and hoarding money in budgets to buy laptop computers for students to use on projects. The week classes were suspended in NYC, we gave out more than 300 of those hard-won laptops for students to take home to use. NYC, in a single week, transitioned to remote education.

But there was a cost. Half a dozen gym teachers from my school got dreadfully sick from COVID-19, during the three days they had us teachers come in to school to cram the essentials of Zoom and remote learning. Apparently the gym teachers were all hanging over each other trying to see a single computer in the cramped P.E. office. They were trying to learn Google Classroom. One of the P.E. teachers was coughing and they all got sick.

It now seems like a lifetime ago."

In search of John Commerford and other departed labor and populist leaders

By Keith Danish

For many years, the NY Labor History Association has been honoring the memory of 19th Century labor leader John Commerford, of the General Trades' Union and National Trades' Union, but we knew little about his personal life, including his final resting place. As a result of some informal detective work, aided by historian Sean Wilentz, we now know that Commerford was born in Hackensack, New Jersey in 1800, he died in New York City in 1878, and was buried in Brooklyn's Green-Wood Cemetery. (Professor Wilentz had known of our Commerford awards program and is grateful to us "for keeping his name alive".

Good news – bad news

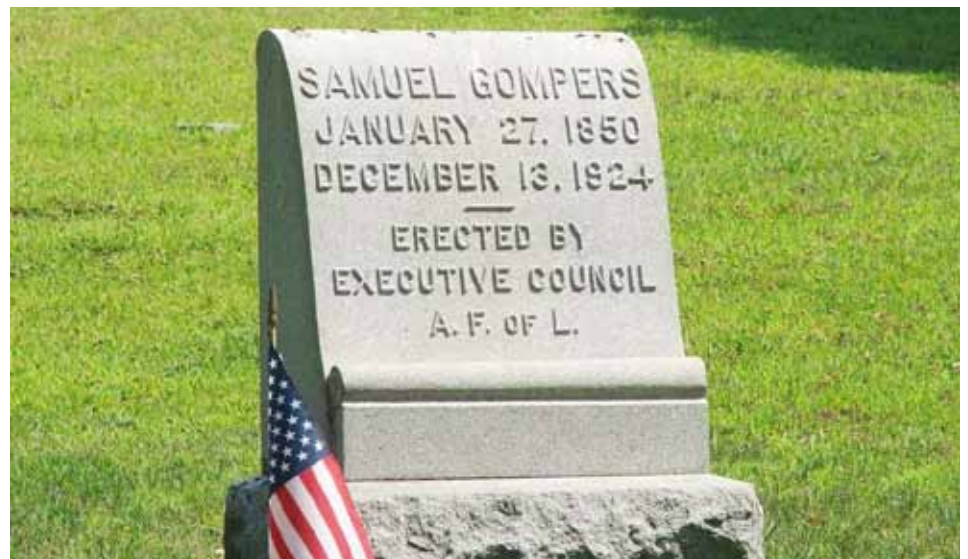
Your correspondent visited the Commerford plot (see accompanying photo) and was saddened to discover that there is no tombstone or other monument in place. I am attempting to contact his descendants living in northern New Jersey (where John's grandson is buried), hoping to obtain a photograph and other details of his life, inviting them to attend our awards ceremony, and encouraging them to erect a grave marker for their historic ancestor.

The aforementioned investigations prompted me to survey the final resting places of other American labor leaders and advocates of workers' rights. For example, the burial sites of other 19th Century union builders include Terence V. Powderly (Knights of Labor), in Rock Creek Cemetery, Washington, D.C.; Samuel Gompers (Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions, predecessor of the AF of L), in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery, Sleepy Hollow, NY, where he lies close to Andrew Carnegie's grave; Eugene V. Debs (American Railway Union), in Highland Lawn Cemetery, Terre Haute, Indiana; and William H. Sylvis (National Labor Union), in the Fernwood (PA) Cemetery.

In this article, the term "buried" is used to encompass all permanent resting places, including those above ground, such as the Westchester Hills Cemetery mausoleum where the remains of "Amalgamated" founder Sidney Hillman are maintained. Some remains are in a transitory or ephemeral state, such as the ashes of the longshoremens' leader Harry Bridges, which were appropriately scattered in San Francisco Bay, and those of Walter Reuther, which were scattered over his union's Black Lake UAW Family Education Center, in Michigan. The body of Marvin Miller, whose strategies took major league baseball players to



John Commerford's plot – Green-Wood Cemetery



Samuel Gompers' grave stone – Sleepy Hollow Cemetery

unimagined levels of wealth and power, was donated to a New York City hospital for medical research.

Multiple burial sites

Can someone be buried in more than one place? Activist and songwriter Joe Hill, executed in 1915 following a questionable murder conviction, had arranged for his ashes to be divided and sent to many IWW members in the U.S. and overseas. "Big Bill" Haywood's ashes are divided between the Kremlin Wall Necropolis in Moscow and a site close

to the Haymarket Martyrs' Monument (as well as the graves of Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and Emma Goldman) in Chicago's Forest Home Cemetery. American Communist unionist William Z. Foster is interred at the Kremlin Wall and has a memorial stone at Forest Home. In the vicinity of the Haymarket monument one can also visit Albert Parsons, who was hanged in 1887 following the mysterious Chicago bombing, his widow Lucy Parsons, whose unrelenting radical advocacy carried on until her death in

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In search of John Commerford

continued from previous page

a 1942 fire, and Voltairine de Cleyre, the anarchist theoretician who opposed capitalism, marriage and the state.

The most notorious of the unknown grave sites for labor notables surely must be that of former Teamsters' chief Jimmy Hoffa, who disappeared some 46 years ago. His remains may have been buried in an oil can in the New Jersey Meadowlands, but maybe not!

America's most famous national cemetery, Arlington, is the resting place of Arthur J. Goldberg, the attorney who helped merge the AFL and CIO, served in national roles as Secretary of Labor, Supreme Court Justice and U.S. Representative to the United Nations. Also in Arlington is former President Taft, who, "with considerable hesitation", signed the enabling Act for the U.S. Department of Labor on his last day in office, March 4, 1913. The first Secretary of Labor, former coal-miner and UMW official William B. Wilson, lies in Arbon Cemetery, Blossburg, Pennsylvania. The first female Secretary of Labor, Frances Perkins, is buried in Glidden Cemetery, Newcastle, Maine.

An honored co-founder of our association and its long-time supporter, Philoine Hillman Fried passed away at age 102 after a lifetime of service to labor,



Clara Lemlich Shavelson's headstone – New Montefiore Cemetery

and now rests in peace in Mount Judah Cemetery, Ridgewood, Queens, New York. New York area cemetery interments include many of the young female victims of the 1911 Triangle Fire, but also of women who were able to live out a full life of service, including Rose Schneiderman, long-time President of the Women's Trade Union League, in Maimonides-Elmont Cemetery, Elmont, New York, and Clara Lemlich Shavelson, who, at age 25, called for a general strike of the New York City shirtwaist makers, precipitating the "Uprising of the 20,000". She lies in New Montefiore Cemetery, West Babylon, New York.

Benjamin Fletcher, called a "Black Wobbly" by his biographer, rests in The

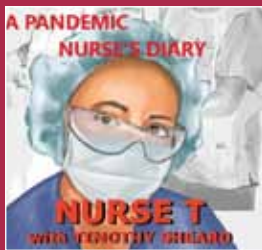
Evergreens Cemetery in Brooklyn. He helped to found and lead the dockworkers' Local 8 in Philadelphia, which was said to be the most successful interracial union of its era, but would then be imprisoned following the massive federal onslaught against IWW leaders in 1917-18.

Last but not least in this non-exhaustive survey is the "mother" of all labor organizers and activists, Mary Harris "Mother" Jones, who is buried in the Union Miners Cemetery, Mount Olive, Illinois.

I hope that this focus on the dead and their places of repose will not seem unduly morbid. I find cemeteries to be like outdoor history museums, with the inhabitants coming back to life when we visit, if only for a short time, and with monuments providing us with genealogical data. There is also the great beauty of the classic "rural style" urban cemeteries like Green-Wood, Woodlawn, and Newark's Mount Pleasant. But for all labor leaders or any others who elect a traditional burial, we hope that it will be facilitated by hard-working union members such as those in the Cemetery Workers locals of the S.E.I.U.

Keith Danish is an executive board member and the Book Review Editor for the New York Labor History Association.

A PANDEMIC NURSE'S DIARY



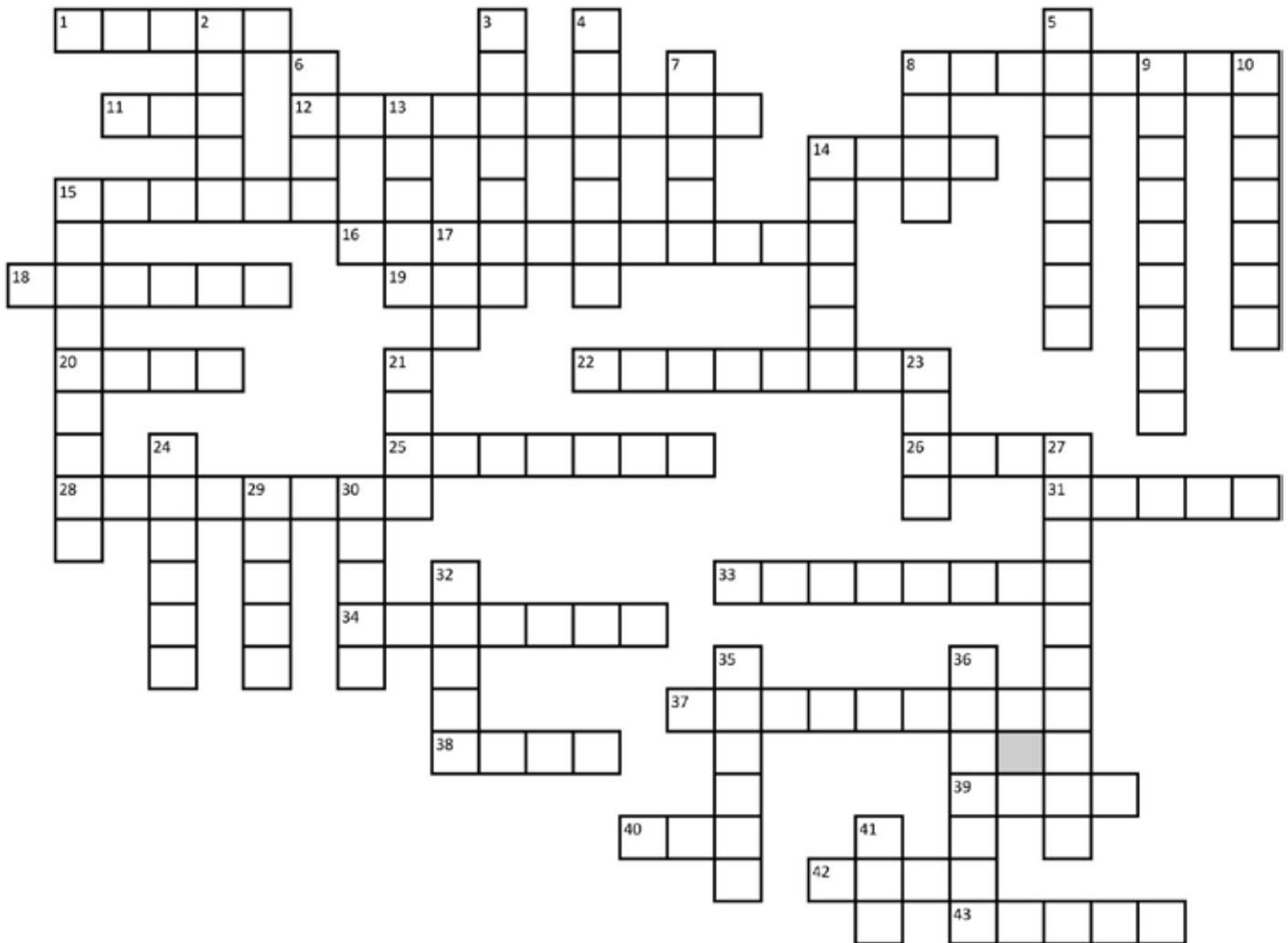
READING THE GRIPPING *A Pandemic Nurse's Diary* is like immersing yourself in a big-screen film. Getting through the entire book in a single two- or three-hour sitting is ideal, though the faint of heart might prefer it in smaller doses because *A Pandemic Nurse's Diary* is a true horror story.

Through the anonymous author Nurse T's eyes, we have an inside view of the initial explosive outbreak of the Covid pandemic in New York City in March and April 2020. She is a 20-year veteran Intensive Care Unit (ICU) nurse working in a less-than-state-of-the-art hospital. The facility treats mainly poor people, immigrants, and people of color in New York City. (All of the workers and patients mentioned are anonymous and the hospital is not identified.)

The author conveys the frenzied pace of Nurse T and her co-workers' work, and the terror of their patients. Exhausted and afraid, dedicated healthcare workers summoned their bravery to adhere to their oaths to do everything they could for their patients as the latter struggled to breathe. They worked without adequate personal protective equipment (PPE), through shortages of essential medications, and with inadequate hospital ventilation and infrastructure to minimize spread of the deadly virus. This book is available at <https://www.hardballpress.com/worker-writers.html>

Progressive Crossword Puzzle

by Kelsey Harrison



Across

1. Twenty thousand students protested in ____, France on November 11, 1940 in the first illegal demonstration against the Nazi occupation.

8. Florida Governor Ron ____ has the distinction of initially denying that the COVID-19 Virus could be spread from person to person, suppressed health statistics

on the virus and ignored scientist's recommendations.

11. During the Uprising of the 20,000 Garment Workers in 1909 in New York City one religious judge told a striker "You are on strike against ____."

12. In June 1968 Senator Robert Kennedy was assassinated in the kitchen at the ____ Hotel in Los Angeles.

14. One of the best ways to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 Virus is to wear a ____ on your face.

15. In March 2021 workers protested outside the _____ Bookstore ("Over 18 Miles of Books") over the owner, Nancy Bass Wyden, laying off 188 workers and only hiring back one-third of them despite getting a \$1 million loan from

the Federal Government's Payroll Protection Program.

16. In 2020 Proposition 22 was the most expensive proposition in California history – it allowed gig companies like Uber and Lyft to classify their employees as "independent _____." The tech companies spent \$205 million to take away basic workplace rights.

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18. In April 2021 Police Officer Kim Potter mistook her gun for a taser and killed Daunte _____ in Brooklyn Center, Minnesota.

19. Even though it didn't become a meme on Instagram, it's believed that Moses, the first Jewish Labor Organizer, parted the Red _____.

20. "_____ of Solomon" is one of Toni Morrison's most famous books and won the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1978.

22. Freda _____ edited *The Nation* from 1933 - 1955 and was active with the NAACP, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom and the League of Woman Voters.

25. Jane _____ directed the Oscar-Nominated film "The Piano" and won the Oscar for Best Screenplay.

26. In 1919 85% of _____, Indiana steelworkers went on strike against U.S. Steel as part of a national steel strike. The U.S. Army imposed martial law and entered the city with mortars, hand grenades and machine guns.

28. James _____, the Washington correspondent for *The Village Voice* for thirty years, died at the age of 84 in 2021. He also edited *Ramparts Magazine* from 1970-1975 and while at *The New Republic* in 1964 he exposed the dangers of American-made cars with a then-unknown source named Ralph Nader.

31. Madalyn Murray _____ founded the group American

Atheists in 1963 and later won a ground-breaking Supreme Court decision that kept mandatory bible-reading and prayers out of the public school system.

33. _____ Swift made "A Modest proposal" in 1729 to poor Irish people to sell their children as food to the rich.

34. Amazon employed many sleazy tactics to defeat a unionization attempt by the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union in 2021 at its Bessemer, _____ (state) warehouse.

38. Musician Lou _____ took "A Walk on the Wild Side" in the 1970s.

37. Emmeline _____ founded the Women's Social and Political Union in 1903 as a more militant organization in the women's suffrage movement in England. Women won the right to vote in 1928.

39. Stuyvesant _____ was the subject of the 2021 book by Dan Garodnick and the fight against Tishman Speyer and BlackRock to destroy tenant's rights.

40. The _____ Act will support immigrants and prevent sleazy companies from using anti-union tactics.

42. Bob _____, a pioneer of free-form radio at WBAI, died in April 2021 at the age of 87.

43. Chris _____ is a progressive weeknight host on MSNBC.

Down

2. In 2020 this nation, _____, hosted the largest strike in

human history. 250 million people walked out, led by farmers, labor unions, student activists and industry and transportation workers.

3. Rose _____ led an I.L.G.W.U. strike by the newly-formed Local 96 in Los Angeles in 1933. 4,000, mainly Latina dressmakers, walked off the job and eventually won the 35-hour work week and enforcement of a minimum wage in the industry.

4. In May 2021 _____ workers at the port of Livorno in L'Unione Sindicatle di Base refused to load weapons onto ships headed to Israel during the Israeli bombardment of Gaza.

5. J.D. _____ was a loner and world-famous writer who will have his unpublished short stories and novels issued posthumously over the next decade. He spent his time in self-imposed isolation in 17 down.

6. "_____ Times" is Charles Dickens' 1854 novel attacking factory-owners and the process of industrialization.

7. The 2013 Supreme _____ Case United States vs. Windsor overturned Bill Clinton's Defense of Marriage Act that declared marriage is only between a man and a woman (Should the United States have taken marriage advice from Bill Clinton?).

8. Compact _____ sales have dropped from almost one billion per year in 2002 to just 31.6 million in 2020 (think music).

9. The _____ Workers Union insisted on a

mask mandate on public transportation in New York City before Dr. Fauci or the CDC required it. They were ignored and 137 MTA workers died from COVID-19.

10. _____ Bull (1831-1890) became a leader of the Hunkpapa Lakota and was finally assassinated during an arrest attempt in the Standing Rock Indian Reservation in South Dakota.

13. CEO Jeff _____ (and his mistress) personally earned over \$70 billion during the first eleven months of the COVID Crisis (think of the head of a major online retailer).

14. "_____ Mitch" refused to appropriate more than ten percent of the requested money to monitor the 2020 Presidential Election because he approved of foreign interference in American elections.

15. The Group Theater was formed in New York City in 1931 and featured such teachers as Lee _____, Stella Adler and Harold Clurman.

17. _____ Hampshire was the first state to pass a state law declaring the ten-hour day (1847).

21. _____ Parsons was an editor, orator, founder of the I.W.W. and the Haymarket widow of Albert Parsons.

23. A new stamp coming out in 2021 commemorates long-time Yankees catcher _____ Berra.

24. Jane _____ founded what became the International League for Peace and Freedom in at

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DEBRA E. BERNHARDT LABOR JOURNALISM PRIZE 2021 – Call for submissions 2020-2021

THE DEBRA E. BERNHARDT AWARD for Labor Journalism is a prize of \$1000 given for an article that furthers the understanding of the history of working people.

Articles focused on historical events AND articles about current issues (work, housing, organizing, health, education) that include historical context are both welcome.

The work should be published in print or online between **August 31, 2020** and **August 30, 2021**.

The 2020 prize went to two articles: **Josh Eidelson**, "How the American Worker Got Fleeced," with data analysis and graphics by **Christopher Cannon**, *Bloomberg Businessweek* July 2, 2020 and **David Unger**, "Which Side Are We On: Can Labor Support #BlackLivesMatter and Police Unions?" *New Labor Forum*, July 6, 2020. The October 2020 Forum featured labor journalist and author, Steven Greenhouse and Culture Workers Education Center founder Natasha Bunten.



TO ENTER: visit <http://www.laborarts.org/Bernhardt> **Deadline: Sunday August 30, 2021.**

The winner will be announced at a virtual forum on labor journalism with NYU's Bobst Library on **Tuesday October 12, 2021, 5:00-6:00 p.m.**

Sponsored by the New York Labor History Association and NYU's Tamiment Library/Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives with LaborArts, Metro New York Labor Communications Council, and the NYC Central Labor Council, AFL-CIO.

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an International Congress of Women at the Hague in 1915.

27. The "Little Steel Strike" of 1937 included 28,000 workers in Massillon, Canton, Warren and _____, Ohio. The workers lost the strike and three strikers were killed and five wounded but the Steelworkers Organizing Committee eventually won union recognition.

29. Photographer Walker _____ worked for the Farm Security Administration and documented the effects of the Great Depression.

30. Anti-_____ discrimination and street incidents have increased seven-fold from 2019 to 2020 in New York City, reaching a total of 200 incidents in 2020.

32. In WWII in response to

the U.S. Government's anti-worker War _____ Board, one of the biggest waves of strikes, mainly wildcats, occurred in U.S. history –14,471 strikes by 6,774,000 workers.

35. In February 2021 Georgia Congresswoman Marjorie _____ Greene was stripped of her committee assignments by the Democrats due to her support of lunatic conspiracy theories.

36. The French and Indian War resulted in Canada being transferred from French ownership to _____ ownership in 1763.

41. Amy _____ wrote the ground-breaking novel "The Joy Luck Club" in 1989.

Answers on page 5

Send a girl!

THIS MARCH, Women's History Month, a new picture book for children was published. *Send a Girl! The True Story of How Women Joined the FDNY*, by Jessica M. Rinker and illustrator Meg Hunt, tells the story of Brenda Berkman and the women who broke through many barriers to become the first female firefighters in New York City. We caught up with Brenda to explore her take on making history – labor history – in 1982, when she and 40 women finally forced the New York City Fire Department to comply with the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Q: You have often spoken about the need for role models for little girls ... Why is this so important?

A: Billie Jean King is famously credited with saying: "You have to see it to be it!" In my growing up years – the 1950s and 1960s – the visible roles for women outside of mother and homemaker were very limited. I yearned for options! As *Send a Girl!* makes clear, I was infuriated that I was barred from doing things – Little League, shop classes – not because I lacked talent or interest but simply because I was born a girl. Billie Jean King came along to inspire me in my teen years. Today there are many options visible to girls and young women but with some roles – firefighter, skilled trades, and certain subcategories of jobs like combat military or surgeon – women in these roles are virtually invisible because of

very small numbers and lack of media attention. It is probably not an exaggeration to say that girls are more aware of women astronauts than women firefighters. It is so important to make visible every role because jobs have no gender.

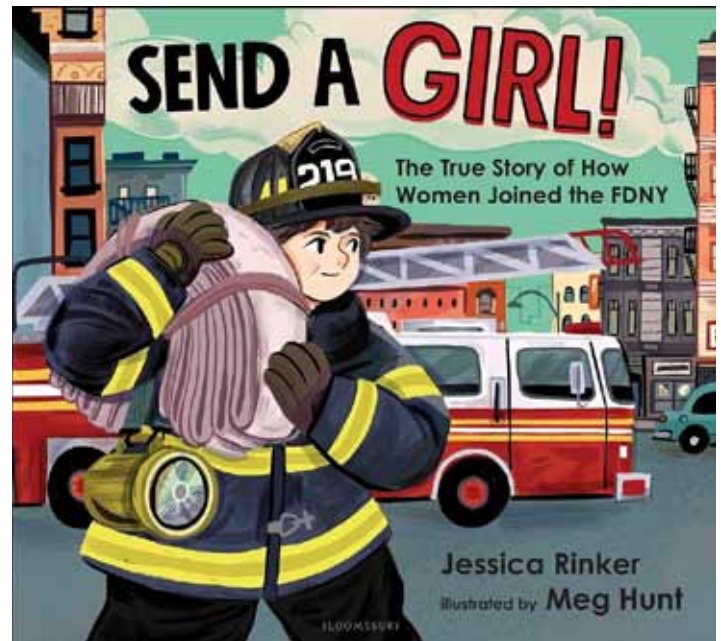
Q: How did this book project come about?

A: The author, Jess Rinker, sent me an email and said she wanted to write a children's book about me. I was very apprehensive as I wanted any book about me to be both historically accurate and to convey messages of inspiration, the difficulty of social change, and what a great career firefighting is for women. But without any formal editorial rights, all I could do was make suggestions and hope for the best. I advised both Jess and the illustrator, Meg Hunt.

Q: What are your hopes for this book?

A: I literally had no idea what the final book would be like until it was published. Fortunately, I am pleased with the book and want it to reach as many children (and adults) as possible. The book provides both women's history [and labor history] and inspiration/encouragement at a time when every age group really needs – maybe even craves – these things. The "lessons" of *Send a Girl!* go far beyond my life or even women in firefighting.

Q: It's been a long time since 1982 when women joined the FDNY and now – 2021. Are there some significant



milestones within these 39 years? What has changed for the better?

A: Milestones: Change in the entry level firefighter physical abilities exams. The struggle to force the FDNY and other fire departments to use a job-related physical did not end with the first lawsuits in the 1980s but continues to this day. Why? Because much of society and the fire service continue to believe – despite all empirical evidence to the contrary for more than 45 years – that women are not up to the task of firefighting physically or emotionally. But gradually testing and training have changed to enable more women to become firefighters.

Although more women slowly came on fire departments around the country, the national percentage hasn't really risen above 4 percent. Some departments have increased their percentages of women, including the FDNY, which went from 3/10s of a percent to about 1 percent between 2005 and 2021 (largely as the result of the Vulcan Society

winning a race discrimination lawsuit.

Women getting promoted to higher ranks.

"Fun Fact:" The book's title *Send a Girl!* actually appropriates the anti-women bumper sticker that FDNY men put on their cars when women came on the job – "Don't send a girl to do a man's job!" Probably only the original group of 41 women "get" that reference. I love it.

Q: As a pioneer – a woman who has made history, what does this legacy mean to you?

A: How about "trailblazer?" I am just trying to carry forward a long legacy of "pioneers" who went before me – women and men who struggled to create a more just future. As a student of history, I have always known that achieving social change is a marathon and that anything worth doing is going to be hard. But my parents taught me that we are not on earth to just take up space. People need to try to leave the world better than they found it. Courage has no gender and bravery comes in many forms.

Radium Girls– a story close to home

By Mike Matejka

Imagine ingesting a known carcinogen onto your lips, hundreds of times daily, all part of your work routine.

In central Illinois the “Radium Girls” at the Radium Dial Company in Ottawa was a well-known and tragic story. Young women were hired to paint radium onto watch and clock faces, so they would be visible at night.

Recently, a new film, *Radium Girls*, tells the story of the unfolding tragedy and how young working class women finally found a voice to stand up to their bosses.

A recipe for disaster

Ten years before the Ottawa court cases exploded in the news, 100 young women at the U.S. Radium Corporation in Orange, New Jersey, painted the clock faces, paid approximately one and one-half cent for each dial completed. The plant opened during World War to provide luminous watches for the military. The women used fine camel hair paint brushes and were encouraged to maintain a fine point on the brush by twirling it on their lips. Chemists and managers avoided the radium and used lead shields but there was no protection for the young female workers. The company did not end the hand painting of clock faces until 1947.

In this semi-fictionalized film, Italian immigrant daughters, Josephine (Abby Quinn) and Bessie (Joey King) Cavallo work at the plant. An older sister, Mary, who also worked at the plant,

had already died. Josephine is becoming anemic and beginning to lose her teeth, a common malady of the plant workers. Because they were told the paint was safe, the young women often paint their nails and faces with the toxic poison. Both girls are wrapped up in a 1920s fad, studying ancient Egypt. As Josephine sickens, naïve but earnest Bessie starts to ask questions. The workers are photographed by Walt, a young Communist who develops a relationship with Bessie and exposes her to the wider world’s injustices. Josephine is reclusive and virginal – a company doctor comes to examine her and gives the same diagnosis he labels every sick woman from the factory with – syphilis.

With the help of the Consumers League, the women find a lawyer in 1928. Bessie is harassed for her efforts and shunned by other women, fearing for their jobs. The media descends on the courtroom and the women’s affliction gathers favorable media attention. The film ends as the real case ended, an out-of-court settlement for \$10,000 each for the five women plaintiffs (about \$150,000 in today’s dollars).

As the story in New Jersey unfolded, Ottawa workers were told that the New Jersey plant had viral infections and the paint was safe. Ten years later the Ottawa women were in court, ravaged by radium and seeking justice.

The film is worth the watch for two reasons – first, to realize the corporate



malfeasance and treachery that is a too common story but also, to see young, isolated working class women find their voice and fight injustice.

The film was originally scheduled for theatrical release

this year but was delayed because of COVID. It is available on Amazon for rental for \$4.99 at <https://amzn.to/2L4CLWL>. The film’s executive producers are Lily Tomlin and Jane Wagner.

RADIUM GIRLS – This new movie calls attention to the workplace ravages rampant throughout our economy. “Death on the Job: The Toll of Neglect, 2020”, is the 29th year that the AFL-CIO has produced a report on the safety and health protections for America’s workers. It includes national and state information on workplace fatalities, injuries, illnesses, the number and frequency of workplace inspections, penalties, funding, staffing and public employee coverage under the Occupational Safety and Health Act. It also includes information on the state of mine safety and health, and the COVID-19 pandemic <https://aflcio.org/reports/death-job-toll-neglect-2020>.

On April 28th, unions and worker organizations celebrated Workers Memorial Day, the 50th anniversary of the Occupational Safety and Health Act. Each year, thousands of workers are killed and millions more suffer injury or illness because of their jobs.

As a companion to Mike Matejka’s movie review, we include a link to an interview with the author Kate Moore, whose book, *The Radium Girls: The Dark Story of America’s Shining Women*, a *New York Times* bestseller is a lyrical, powerful, and heartbreaking account of this history <https://www.theatlantic.com/notes/2017/03/radium-superfund-legacy/519408/>

Mike Matejka is Vice-President of the Illinois Labor History Society and a long-time community activist. He is currently preparing a museum exhibit on asbestos exposure in Illinois.

Labor and the media

By Jane LaTour

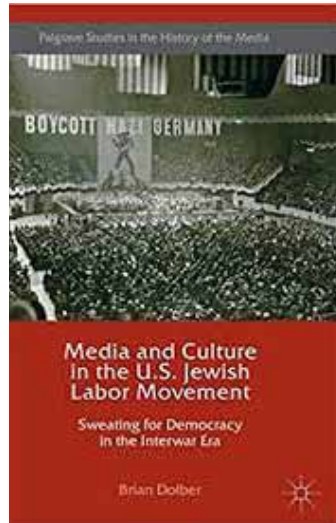
On May 20, the NYLHA, along with several co-sponsors, hosted a Zoom program,

“Labor and the Media: Labor Adapts its Message to Changing Media Environments.” It proved to be a perfect blend of history and what’s happening now. Irwin Yellowitz welcomed participants and invited them to join the labor history association. Board member Keith Danish, who initiated and organized the program, noted that this is a topic close to his heart, since his father, Max Danish, edited *Justice*, the paper of the ILGWU, for over thirty years.

A hunger to be informed

UCLA Professor Tobias Higbe kicked off the discussion with a fascinating look at early 20th century readers and their hunger for reading material and how this was fed by radical labor organizations. The presumption in the United States is that reading is for the educated elites. However, at a time when fewer than 5 percent of the population were college graduates, and only 25 percent had completed high school – when it was common for working-class children to leave school by the age of 14, the working-class was “unschooled but not uneducated,” Professor Higbe said.

“There was a great demand for newspapers and pulp novels; there was a vibrant alternative media in the pre-WWI period, with both English and non-



English publications; and all of these reached a broad audience,” he said. Materials such as pamphlets and flyers were read, shared, and circulated. “There was an impulse for self-education and it generated a world of organized labor education programs and at least 5 residential labor colleges.” Reading was central to labor unions and their work to develop future representatives forward into a world of books and leisure, where knowledge was power and collective aspirations undergirded the process of self-education, he concluded.

Professor Brian Dolber, author of *Media and Culture in the U.S. Jewish Labor Movement: Sweating for Democracy in the Interwar Era*, sketched out the landscape of the Jewish Left, who “kept alive the traditions of community, culture, and social unionism,” according to reviewer Professor Brain Greenberg. http://newyorklaborhistory.org/web/?page_id=1948.

Professor Dolber’s talk focused on the rise of a new technology – radio – and the potential of broadcasting as a working-class medium – a popular medium. This was a fascinating look at the 1920s – the nadir of the labor movement and responses to the attacks on labor.

The question was: how to use radio to sustain the working-class culturally. Professor Dolber looked at New York City’s WEVD, Chicago’s WCFL., and the role of the *Forward*. The tumultuous history of this period holds many lessons for labor today.

Elana Levin, Program Director at New Media Mentors, was the bridge to some of these lessons in her discussion of how social media presents such rich opportunities to put labor’s messages in front of people and to expand the base. She noted that, “suddenly, blogging was appearing in spaces that would be read, and you didn’t have to ask for permission.” Levin’s educational mission is to help people share their own words, and she has seen a huge shift since she took up this work. One example she offered was *Teen Vogue*, which regularly features a labor column.

Making information easily available

The ability to produce work that reaches a popular audience came about because it was able to demonstrate

that there was a huge hunger for information about workers, she said. This in turn led to more content. Ms. Levin discussed the use of Facebook in organizing and the popular use of memes to communicate labor messages in an appealing, fun way. She offered many examples along with graphic images. One popular sample: The recent, infamous photo of former America’s Mayor with hair dye dripping down his face. The message? “Why you should hire a professional hairdresser.”

Another popular example is the farmworkers in the UFW and their campaign called: We Feed You – with farmworkers documenting their own lives. “With social media, you are able to get information to someone who is not looking for it – to get it in front of them,” she said. While labor was slow to embrace the new technology, it has now taken hold. “Clear, straightforward messages with good images can open up great opportunities. And memes are a part of the legacy of political cartooning,” she said. “They offer terrific opportunities to share labor’s stories and feed the demand for them.”

Kudos to our co-sponsors: The CUNY School of Labor & Urban Studies; The International Labor Communications Association; The Metro New York Labor Communications Council; The United Hebrew Trades; and the New York Jewish Labor Committee.

Haymarket – a history of workers in America

Haymarket: The Bomb, the Anarchists, the Labor Struggle, directed by Adrian Prawica, documentary, 83 minutes, 2021, Filmadria.

By Marc Stern

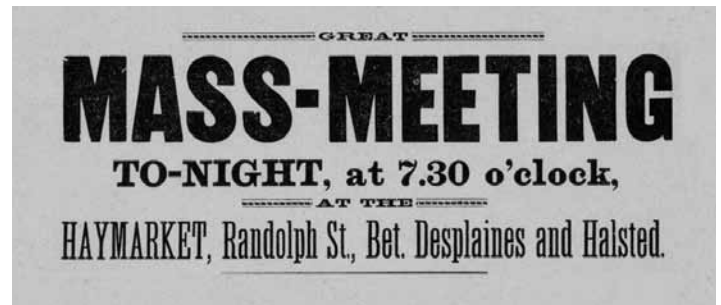
Americans' collective sense of history is weak at best, and their knowledge of labor history is frequently non-existent. Though most Americans work, the institutional labor movement struggles to survive, and as the recent defeat at Amazon in Alabama suggests, faces an uphill struggle even when working conditions seem to cry out for collective action. In this context, then, filmmaker Adrian Pawica's documentary look at the Haymarket Affair is an important telling of a key moment in American history. It takes us into some of the conflicting historical views of this event while it attempts to place it into a broader understanding of the moment. It will prove a valuable resource for both classroom use (largely for discussion after out-of-class viewing) and by people attempting to understand the complexities of American working-class history.

How to tell the history

Haymarket relies on a diverse set of sources. It includes interviews and comments from historians with differing opinions although it does not directly pit them against one another. It also relies on a rich trove of photos, newspaper and

magazine graphics, and photos of the day's papers to give the film a dynamic visual sensibility. Movies, of course, are not of the day, but a few early 20th century clips make it into the film to provide a sense of Chicago's urban dynamism, although I found them somewhat jarring. In any event, I felt the film was well-carried by its story and the characters it presents, including August Spies, Albert Parsons, Lucy Parsons, and their anarchist comrades. *Haymarket* focuses on the event and its meaning in the moment and for an anarchist vision that accepted the likely imperative of violent resistance to oppression by a capitalism bent on destroying workers' organizations and, through corruption, the ability to work within any sort of democratic framework.

Late nineteenth century America saw the rise of the new and increasingly integrated industrial order linked via railroads and telegraphs, with production rooted in the immense productivity of the factory system and, increasingly, consumption at a national level. Workshop production by master and journeymen artisans often shifted to more divided, large-scale, managed, mechanized factories. Not surprisingly, railroad, industrial, and commercial nodes like Chicago grew quickly, attracting immigrants from both rural America and Europe. Chicago



alone doubled in population to over one million residents during the 1880's.

The great wealth of the robber barons who owned and manipulated this growth coexisted with great privation. Both existed within an unstable economic environment. Workers faced intense cycles of boom and bust and, for many, extreme vulnerability to labor markets and mechanized production. Hours were long, conditions were often fraught with danger, and wages were subject to the vagaries of labor and product markets and productive innovations that challenged and often reduced worker control.

Protecting union jobs

Working people struggled to understand the implications of these changes and, as a result of their experiences and observations, moved in a variety of directions. These included a range of organizational forms including both craft and industrial unions and political groupings designed to work within and outside electoral politics. Some worked both inside and outside these different forms, while others cleaved to one

model or another. Anarchists usually rejected electoral politics as a sham.

On May 4, 1886, as the great national May 1 strike for the Eight Hour Day surged forward, a bomb killed seven Chicago policemen sent to break up a peaceful rally of about two-three thousand workers protesting the killing of two strikers at Chicago's McCormick Harvesting Machine Company factory the day before. The McCormick strike was not for the eight-hour day; rather, it was by skilled workers fighting to keep their union and protect their standing as skilled workers, something the film does not clarify. The violent police response that followed the bombing at Haymarket killed at least three civilians. The bomb thrower has never been identified, although historian Timothy Messer-Kruse argues the bomb maker's identity was one of those charged and offers another suggestion as to the bombardier. Other historians remain wedded to the possibility that the bombing was the work of an agent provocateur. Although

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A history of workers in America

continued from previous page
the Eight Hour Strike faltered in the wake of this bombing and the antiradicalism it engendered, labor activity continued, another subject the film does not develop.

The arrest of 8 anarchists connected with the rally's call or as speakers or just for being well-known anarchists led to charges of conspiracy. In the context of lurid press coverage and a Red Scare-like environment, the trial and eventual conviction were followed throughout the United States and around the world and, despite worldwide protests, led to the exceptionally brutal 1887 hanging of four of the accused. One, the defendant identified by Messer-Kruse as the bombmaker, committed suicide before the hanging, another was sentenced to fifteen years in prison, and Illinois's Governor Richard Oglesby commuted two sentences to life in prison. **Two hundred thousand** Chicagoans marched in the funeral procession.

The three survivors were pardoned in 1893 by Governor John Peter Altgeld in 1893 in consideration of trial irregularities. The Second International's designation of May Day as the international worker's holiday commemorated both the strikes for the Eight-Hour Day and the Haymarket Martyrs. That eight-hour goal languished until the New Deal and has, sad to say, returned to the status of an ambition for many American workers today, as workdays frequently average more than "8 hours for work, 8 hours for sleep, and 8 hours for what we will."



Haymarket, the film, is at its best when it examines the rise of anarchism, the bombing as an event and the trial, executions, and the proceedings that followed. The participants come alive, their struggles are made comprehensible, and whatever the analytical differences amongst historians, righteous demands of the eight-hour movement and strike, the martyrdom of the accused, and the impact of capitalist industrialization become palpable and understandable. These are no mean feats.

There are, however, some problematic issues in *Haymarket*. The complexities and unevenness of industrial

development are smoothed over. Skilled work and workers all but disappear, their gains and standing obliterated in the dialectic of industrialization.

Even more importantly, the labor movement itself is entirely absent from this narrative. There are no Knights of Labor, a powerful organization with a complex ideological identity and almost 800,000 national members and a strong presence among both skilled and less-skilled workers in Chicago in 1886. The smaller trades unions are absent as well, although the call for a May 1, 1886 action by the AFL's predecessor organization

helped spark the nationwide strike. Both the K of L and the AFL formally opposed anarchism and violence, but both included anarchist and socialist members and had member unions/lodges that embraced socialism. Parsons himself had been an important Knight in Chicago and was a long-time activist in the eight-hour movement even as it was disparaged as reformist by purer anarchist comrades. Though the Knights Grand Master Workman, Terrance Powderly, attacked the anarchists and rejected the eight-hour strikers after Haymarket, many Knights remained committed to these strikes and condemned the trial. The AFL denounced the bombing, but Sam Gompers also inveighed against the executions of the accused conspirators, and many union members and their organizations saw the trials as shams.

These were, indeed, complex and powerful times in the history of American labor and radicalism, and *Haymarket: the Bomb, the Anarchists, the Labor Struggle* brings these issues and years to life with verve and thoughtfulness. It will prove a valuable resource as we attempt to move forward towards a more just society.

Marc Stern is Professor of History, Bentley University (Waltham, MA) where he has taught labor and economic history for 32 years. Producer and host of Radio With a View on WMBR-FM and at <https://www.mixcloud.com/radiowithaview/>

Working Class New York revisited – The past and future of struggles for progressive change

By Joshua Barnett

Symposium on Joshua B. Freeman's *Working Class New York*, CUNY School of Labor and Urban Studies, April 23, 2021.

For anyone who grew up in New York City, nostalgia is a never-ending game, bordering on blood sport; the “real” New York, the best times, the most vibrant neighborhood, was, naturally, whenever you were growing up there. It involves acknowledging that change is inevitable but change is, of course, always negative when gauged against your experience. But change is more than the switch from nickels to subway tokens, disappearance of phone booths, difficulty finding an egg cream (google it) or even the endless shifts in the ethnic or racial composition of the old neighborhood. For the working class, it can mean the loss of an all too rare commodity in a capitalist society: influence. Influence over lives, jobs, politics, working conditions, housing, culture.

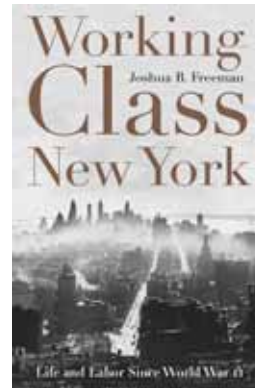
Documenting change

That change, the rise, and decline of a rare working class influence, was the subject of historian Joshua B. Freeman's groundbreaking 2001 history, *Working Class New York, Life and Labor Since World War II*. Needless to say, since mainstream history is rarely viewed from a working class perspective, books like this, much less one that strikes a

rare balance between being sympathetic and clear-eyed, don't come along very often.

The consensus at the symposium “Working Class New York Revisited: The Past and Future of Struggles for Progressives Change” held April 23 at the CUNY School of Labor and Urban Studies (virtually) was that the work was more than rare, and on the occasion of Professor Freeman's retirement, warranted a serious discussion of the work, and his work, at an all day series of presentations by two dozen labor and class historians (many of them his former students).

The more glaring changes between working class New York and gentrified New York were pointed out by many of the speakers: the severe decline in union presence, going from a city of over 1,000 locals, as Samir Shonti pointed out, including a vibrant left, to a city where informal workers are, as Premilla Nadasen noted, the norm. Aldo Lauria Santiago expanded on the themes in *Working Class New York*, pointing out how the Young Lords tied in to Freeman's discussion of Puerto Ricans in the city and how union struggles against mob controlled unions benefitted from alliances with Black workers. That was one of the most powerful threads throughout the symposium, as speakers added the growing insights from diversity-based historiography to the original work. Lashawn D.



Harris brought a riveting perspective to the interior lives of working class people and a sharp focus on the broader themes in Freeman's work with an account of his family's devastating history. Johanna Fernandez elaborated on the nuances of the powerful unions that shaped the city as described in *Working Class New York*: often socialist or communist influenced, but also often insular, racist, sexist, even while fighting for access to what the working class needs, health care, housing.

The historians speak

The final session, including remarks by Frances Fox Piven, Eric Foner, Ruth Milkman and Freeman all noted (not that anyone needed to be reminded) that we're now in Trump's New York, a city where working class and union power is far more potential than actualized. That as Marta Gutman pointed out the New York City described in Freeman's book was like a laboratory for urban progressive ideas (although have to note that's as far as American cities go; cities like

Red Vienna in the 20s and the post-WWII European social democracies and the outright socialist countries raised the bar much higher).

It's impossible to do justice to all the speakers, each of whom brought depth of working class and diverse perspective to the discussion, but it is possible to note the strongest themes throughout the event: the evident deep appreciation for Freeman's incredible book and work, the willingness to bring additional insights into how diversity, gender studies, LGBTQ+ studies, and other real urban elements also factored into working class New York, which Freeman clearly appreciated; and the inspiration that this still is, in a real way, working class New York. The city may have shifted from macro breweries like Schaeffer to micro breweries serving artisanal beer, MOMA may cost twenty five bucks and Harlem may be mostly white. But it's still a working class city, our city, and the working class influence so effectively described in Professor Freeman's book is neither so unique nor so distant that we can't take it back, so working class New York won't be the history so effectively described in Freeman's book and incredible symposium, but current events.

Joshua Barnett is an affordable housing activist and works as an architect for the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA).