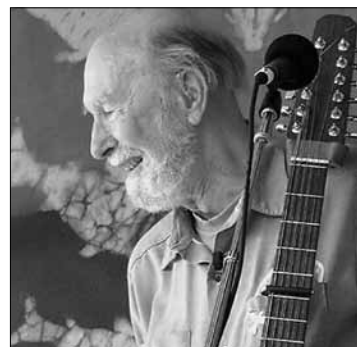


# So Long, It's Been Good to Know You

**PETE SEEGER, LEGENDARY TROUBADOUR** for labor, died on January 27 at the age of 94, of natural causes. Seeger leaves behind a long history of social activism. Singer, songwriter, environmental activist, anti-war opponent, Seeger was blacklisted from appearing on network TV for 17 years. He returned to appear on the Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour on CBS in 1967, whereupon his anti-war anthem, "Knee Deep in the Big Muddy," was censored. When it aired the following year, the song was credited with solidifying public opinion in opposition to the Vietnam War.

Seeger was a member of the New York Labor History Association. In 2009, he played his five-string banjo and other instruments at the 90th birthday celebration of his friend and comrade, Henry Foner. Oral historian Studs Terkel said that Seeger

was "America's tuning fork. His songs capture the essence and beauty of this country." Seeger sang "So long," with the folk music group, The Weavers, which he organized after World War II. For more than five decades, Seeger's singing lifted spirits on picket lines, in migrant labor camps, and all across the land. The words of the song that became his anthem, "The Hammer Song," summed up his life and its commitments. He did indeed hammer out a warning and he will be missed, but his legacy is strong.



## Working Group Profile: Courtney B. Francis

**C**ourtney Francis was born in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. Her only connection to labor unions comes about through her brother, a member of Sheet Metal Workers Local 28. But her interest in history runs deep. At age 12, she read the *Autobiography of Malcolm X*. "I understood from this book that there was more going on in the world, than just me and my own little world, to say the least. It made me think," she said. "Malcolm X educated himself in many different things while in prison, which I thought was interesting. I never liked schooling or formal education, at least not the way it's currently set up. I wanted to be like him, so I started reading and educating myself in history, philosophy, economics and politics."



working people throughout history have fought against oppression. The class looks at organizations like the Industrial Workers of the World, the Knights of Labor, the Ancient Order of Hibernians, the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union, and others, looking at their goals and how they organized," she said.

For Courtney, "labor history, like all history, is a guide for action today. Working people just can't afford to lose anymore. While Forbes adds 200 more billionaires to their list in the last year, so now there are 1,426 in the world, with 44 in the U.S., the number of households living on \$2 or less in income per person, per day in a given month increased to 1.46 million in 2011, a 130 percent growth from 1996. A better world for working people starts with leadership and organization of the people, to truly represent their interests. That leadership and organization has to work toward a goal of a better world for the majority of the people on the planet, not just for a handful of the wealthy."

Courtney Francis is a member of the NYLHA Working Group and is a full-time volunteer organizer for the Women's Press Collective. To read her complete interview, visit the NYLHA website or the Facebook page of the Working Group.

Now Courtney shares her knowledge with others through a labor history class she teaches at the Women's Press Collective in Brooklyn. "It's a three-part class, starting from colonial times up to 2005. ...The purpose of the class is to look at the approach of how

## Introducing the NYLHA Working Group

**THE NYLHA WORKING GROUP** is an energetic group of and young people who have been holding monthly meetings since January 2013. They organized a night of short films on contemporary organizing drives for the very successful Second Annual Workers Unite! Film Festival in May 2013.

Their latest project is a poster now being widely distributed among students, unions and labor history groups. The aim of the poster is to attract a new generation of labor activists.

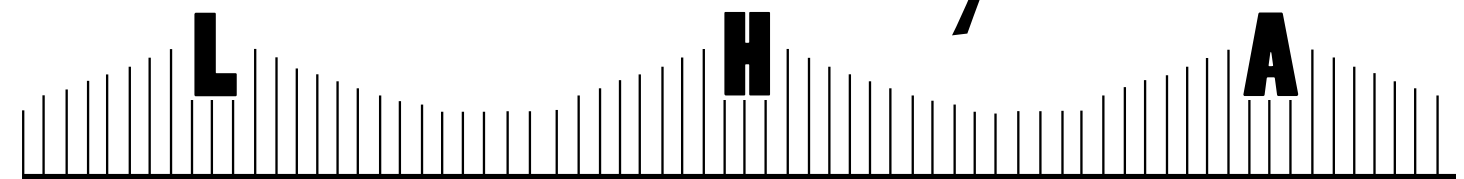
Together they continue to work to create programs and opportunities to learn about the hidden history of labor.

Currently, they are working on organizing walking tours, setting up a book club, and organizing an evening of films for the upcoming Third Annual Workers Unite! Film Festival.

Interested? E-mail them at [nylhaworkinggroup@gmail.com](mailto:nylhaworkinggroup@gmail.com), or join their Facebook group: New York Labor History Association Working Group.



# Work History News



New York Labor History Association, Inc.

A Bridge Between Past and Present

Volume 31 No 1 Winter | Spring 2014

## Historian Eric Foner and PSC President Barbara Bowen Honorees

By Joe Doyle

**T**he Commerford Awards this past December 2nd was notable for the eloquence of its awardees, Professional Staff Congress/CUNY president Barbara Bowen and Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Eric Foner. Bowen and Foner delivered acceptance speeches that won cheers from a standing-room only audience at the Local 1199 penthouse on 42nd Street in New York City.

Brian Greenberg, of Monmouth College, NJ, presented N.Y.U. student Sarah "Sadye" Stern NYLHA's Barbara Wertheimer Prize for the best undergraduate essay on a labor history topic. Stern dug deep into the Wayne State UFW archives to write a fascinating essay, "We Cast Our Lot with the Farmworkers: Organization, Mobilization, and Meaning in the United Farm Workers' Grape Boycott in New York City, 1967-70."

### Fighting for professorial ranks

NYLHA executive board member Steve Leberstein, retired executive director of CUNY's Center for Worker Education, introduced Barbara Bowen. Bowen's Commerford Award is "for outstanding commitment to the trade union movement." Leberstein praised Ms. Bowen's tireless efforts to restore salaries and restore raises—and for her successful campaigns to win 80% pay for sabbaticals, and a first-time ever "paternity leave," for fathers with newborns [maternity leave was



Barbara Bowen

won some time ago]. Leberstein reminded the audience that the same tidal wave of union activism that swept in John Sweeney to the helm of the AFL-CIO in 1995, swept Barbara Bowen into the presidency of PSC/CUNY five years later.

This year's Commerford audience felt a surge of energy as Barbara Bowen took the microphone: "The only way we can advance the labor movement is when we advance all workers." Bowen is thrilled by the fledgling efforts of low-wage workers, fast-food workers, and "carwash-heroes" to win a living wage and job security. She praised nail salon women, as well. "They are starting to look up and organize in a very gendered profession."

Bowen appealed to the Commerford audience on behalf of 3,000 low-wage workers currently working for City University of New York. And part-time



Eric Foner

adjunct professors fit that description now more than ever before. Bowen laments that we're grappling in America with a "reform industrial complex" and a "testing industrial complex"—"colonized by money" and demanding a hefty slice of the \$81 billion currently spent on public education. Education corporations add to the menace. They are currently seeking to cash in on higher education.

Bowen says: "Public educational institutions are under assault... We are in the fight of our lives at CUNY"—where 74% of students are people of color. "They're amazingly brave. Many of them are the first members of their family ever to go to college." Some leave a CUNY campus where they are succeeding—to go home "to a parent who is furious with them for getting an education."

(Continued on page 10)

Photos: Kimberly Schiller

# The Celestials

By Bette Craig

Karen Shepard's novel, *The Celestials*, is based on an incident in labor history. Set in the same formerly industrial town of North Adams, Massachusetts, where Maynard Seider's documentary film, *Farewell to Factory Towns?* takes place in the present, *The Celestials* looks back to 1870, when 75 Chinese workers were brought to town by Calvin T. Sampson to break a strike being waged at his shoe factory by the Knights of St. Crispin.

Recruited in San Francisco, the young Chinese men (one as young as fourteen) traveled by rail with their English-speaking foreman, Charles Sing, to serve as interpreter. The photograph you see above was made the day of their arrival at the Sampson Shoe Factory.

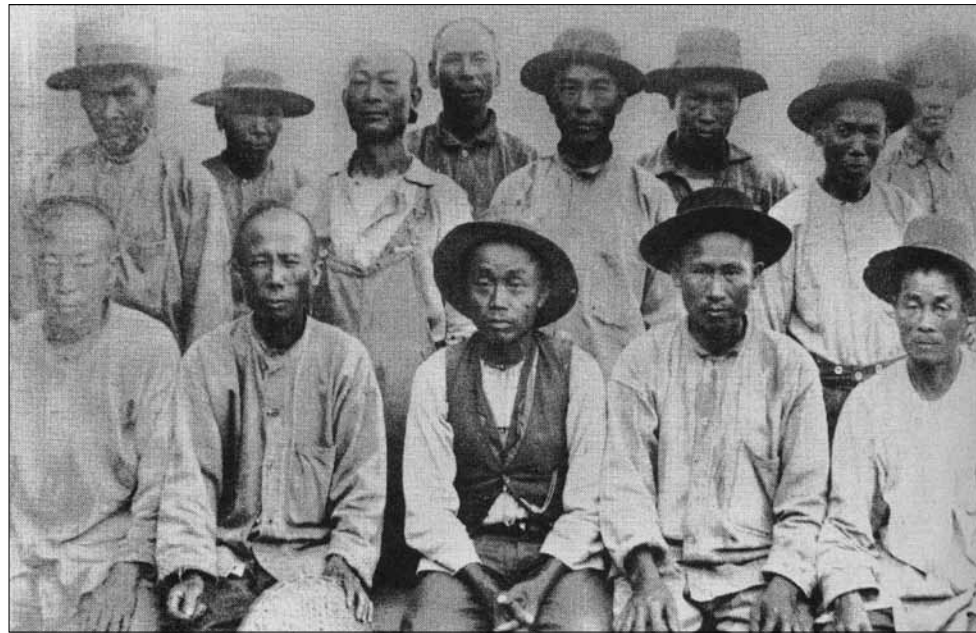
The union members set up a rival cooperative shoe factory in North Adams, but it didn't last very long. A few years later, the Knights of St. Crispin, which had lodges in several cities totaling about 50,000 members in 1870, no longer existed.

There was a great deal of interest nationally in Calvin Sampson's "Chinese experiment" from other manufacturers looking for cheap labor as well as native-born Americans seeking to keep their jobs. It probably helped prompt the Chinese Exclusion Act, which was signed into law in 1882.

## Novel rooted in compelling history

*The Celestials* builds upon these few facts to create a rich world of a New England industrial community's encountering 75 of "the other." Author Karen Shepard, who had a Chinese mother and an American father, says, "I wouldn't want to write a novel around an historic event that was well documented because there would be no room for "story truth." I imagine a specific person in a specific place—grounded in the earth—but then I like to think associatively."

Shepard, who teaches writing and literature at Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts—the next town over from North Adams—first encountered her subjects when she attended a North Adams Historical Society lecture by art



historian, Anthony Lee, which featured photographs of the Chinese workers (see information about his book right).

Shepard said, "I started thinking what did it mean in human terms for those 75 people to arrive here? I didn't want categories of victims and perpetrators. I started thinking about the parallels between the Chinese workers and women of 1870 and how much their lives were circumscribed by other people's power over them. And then I saw a photograph of an interracial baby. Calvin Sampson and his wife, Julia, were childless, and I thought, 'what if?' I think of my characters in terms of what do they want and what are they willing to do to get it."

The "story truth" that Shepard wove around these historical characters has Julia Sampson bearing a long-awaited child fathered by Charlie Sing, the Chinese foreman. Calvin Sampson eventually accepts the child and raises her as his own. Along with the invention that keeps the story moving are many beautiful passages of writing describing everything from the landscape of the Berkshires to its people and context.

*The Celestials*, by Karen Shepard, 361 pp. Tin House Books, 2013. \$15.95. (paper)

*A Shoemaker's Story: Being Chiefly about French Canadian Immigrants, Enterprising Photographers, Rascal Yankees, and Chinese*

*Cobblers in a Nineteenth-Century Factory Town* by Anthony W. Lee. 312 pp. 136 half tones and 1 color illustration. Princeton University Press. 2008. \$52.50 (cloth)

Karen Shepard attended a book club meeting devoted to *The Celestials* in Williamstown where Bette Craig recorded some of her comments.

## Work History News



*Work History News* is published two times per year to keep NYLHA's members informed of labor history events, activities and tours.

For more information and brochures contact:  
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# Wertheimer Essay Award Winner Inspired by Missing History

By Jane LaTour

Searching for a senior thesis topic in the History Department at New York University, Sarah "Sadye" Stern consulted with her thesis advisor, Professor Linda Gordon. A double major (History and Spanish), Stern wanted to investigate "overlaps between the labor movement and the 1960s social movements...in particular, a moment of overlap between the labor movement and the women's movement to get a feeling for how individuals who potentially belonged to both movements were organizing and expressing themselves at the time."

Preliminary research led her to the work of the scholar Margaret Rose, which focused on the important role Chicana organizers played in the success of the United Farm Workers' grape boycott. "Rose argued that the Chicana UFW organizers appealed to the public using both feminist and maternalist language, and united women on the basis of being empowered wives and mothers devoted to working men. I loved her discussion of language, and was excited by the idea that the UFW movement united people of such diverse backgrounds—across race, ethnicity, religion, age, and socioeconomic level."

Stern did the research for her prize-winning thesis, "We Cast Our Lot with the Farmworkers: Organizing, Mobilization, and Meaning in the United Farm Workers' Grape Boycott in New York City, 1967-'70" at the Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, at the Walter Reuther Library in Detroit and at the Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives at NYU.

Stern was inspired in her love of history by her U.S. history teacher in her senior year of high school. "He would place students in a particular moment in the past, burden them with the knowledge of public opinion and the pros and cons of various decisions, and then ask them to argue for or against a certain course of action. This intense proximity with historical decision-makers—being forced to consider how the agency of historical decision-makers was influenced by external social,



Sadye Stern and Professor Brian Greenberg.

economic, and political factors—was what first made history really exciting for me. It wasn't just any story—it was the story of real social actors, and it could be intensely relevant."

As Stern explained in an interview, "As soon as I learned what social history was, I knew it was for me. It made sense that most official history written through time—prior to the rise of social history—had been primarily a chronicle of the most powerful members of society. What was missing, of

course, was everyone else's story. I became incredibly interested in finding and telling the story that hadn't been documented, and in understanding how control over language and history is linked to visibility and power. I also learned that when people get involved in the documentation of their own history, it could be instructional and empowering."

*Sadye Stern is the most recent addition to the Working Group of the NYLHA. To read the complete interview, visit the NYLHA website.*

## WORKERS UNITE! FILM FESTIVAL 3

**NYC-2014**      **Cinema Village & TBA**  
**MAY 9TH TO 18TH 2014**

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[www.workersunitefilmfestival.org](http://www.workersunitefilmfestival.org)

## Historian Eric Foner and PSC President Barbara Bowen Honorees

(Continued from page 1)

“It took a public referendum to form CUNY in 1849—an experiment to create a college education for sons of workers. Yet we find ourselves today rationing education. CUNY administration presses us to speed our students through. Who cares what kind of education they get? While they lavish money and laptops on a privileged few students who you see in the subway advertisements.”

Bowen had very gracious words for Henry Foner’s *Songs and Poems for Better or Verse*. (“If I was better prepared I would have sung one for you.”) She praised Wertheimer Award winner Sarah Stern for reconceiving the UFW grape boycott as a grassroots struggle that engaged the entire American working class. Bowen praised the labor history outreach work of NYLHA, its president Irwin Yellowitz (“who invariably sees the world through workers’ eyes”) and her former PSC/CUNY colleague Eric Foner, with whom she shares the Commerford Award this year: “The great honor of the night is to be mentioned in the same breath as Eric Foner. Our PSC retirees’ reading group is just finishing *The Fiery Trial*.”

Before she finished, Barbara Bowen asked all PSC members present to stand “so we can admire them.” [They got a big round of applause.]

### Clarion call to organize

She ended her address with a rallying cry: “When workers are exploited by the same corporations around the world—we have to unite globally. How we do so will require new forms of organizing workers... we [must] rethink organizing to remake the labor movement—as a movement—and not a set of institutions.”

Historian Eric Foner received two introductions, the first by his uncle Henry Foner. Henry Foner proudly reeled off his nephew Eric’s Pulitzer Prize, Bancroft Prize, Lincoln Prize, his presidencies of the Organization of American Historians, the American Historical Association, and the Society of American Historians.

Irwin Yellowitz added a second introduction, warmly recalling Eric Foner as a colleague at CUNY for 10 years. Yellowitz singled out Foner’s 1988 *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* as a paradigm of the historian’s craft, a comprehensive work which “encapsulates voluminous sources, [Foner] had to interpret what took place—and explain why—demolishing past interpretations and setting up a standard for other historians to follow.”

Eric Foner was presented the Commerford Award “for his life-long commitment to scholarship in labor history.” Professor Foner said, “I have never thought of myself as a labor historian—but the labor movement and working people [have deeply influenced my life]. My uncle, Henry was president of New York’s Fur Worker’s Council. My uncle, Moe was education director at District 65 and Hospital Worker’s Local 1199. My father, Jack was also a historian, although not of labor.”

Foner recalled that in his undergraduate and graduate work, the History Department at Columbia of the time confined itself almost exclusively to political and intellectual history. “Dan Leab offered a course on labor history. No one else did.” A highlight of his studies was being able to work with faculty member



NYLHA Pres. Irwin Yellowitz (l-r.) with Board Member Stephen Leberstein and Local 375 Pres. (Retired) Lou Albano.

Richard Hofstadter. A lowlight was being unceremoniously chucked out after my first stint at Columbia, but then “Herb Gutman rescued me from the bread lines” inviting Foner to teach at CUNY.

### Unlikely fan for first book

Foner had the house laughing, recalling that his first book *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men* was referred to “by a figure you all have heard of, Karl Rove, as my favorite work of history.” Foner’s second book, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America*, described the world of artisans—“the cutting edge of radicalism in the Atlantic world.” Foner’s third book, *Reconstruction*, dealt with African Americans and their labor history—examining a period Foner called, “perhaps the most misunderstood period in American history. The key question of Reconstruction was—what sort of labor system will replace slavery.”

Professor Foner recalled meeting W.E.B. Du Bois in 1960. (In 1935 Du Bois wrote *Black Reconstruction in America*.) “My brother and I told [Du Bois] we were taking part in picketing and sit-ins to protest racially-segregated lunch counters. Du Bois told us: “I’d like to go out and picket, too, but Shirley [Du

Bois’s wife] won’t let me.”

Foner seemed to be embracing the title of labor historian near the end of his talk: “It’s impossible to understand the history of the United States without understanding labor unions. Labor unions were key to something like the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom... Today the labor movement is probably the most integrated movement in America. It’s impossible to foresee an improvement in American life without a revitalization of the labor movement.

Foner ended with a prediction: “Every few years I give a class on the history of American radicalism. Something interesting happens every time I do. [Two years ago] my students were involved in the shanties set up on our campus quadrangle, and campuses across the country—in opposition to campus investments in companies doing business with South Africa. In the mid-1990s, when the campus secretaries went on strike, some of my students started a *hunger strike to support them*.” [Two years ago Foner’s students got involved with the Occupy Wall Street movement.] “I’m giving the class again two years from now, get prepared.”

## Triangle Fire: Legacy and Lessons [Part II]

By Jane LaTour

Typically, little labor history gets incorporated into the curriculum for middle school students. But the students in Kimberly Schiller’s 8th grade English classes actively engage with materials, projects and field trips that make labor history come alive. Novels, primary documents and outings to the Triangle Fire Commemoration and the Tenement Museum on Manhattan’s Lower East Side make vivid the lessons and lives of immigrants who toiled in city sweatshops and forge a connection to contemporary struggles of factory workers at home and abroad.

Schiller’s curriculum includes *Uprising*, by Margaret Peterson Haddix, a novel told from three different points of view—two immigrants and one upper class woman—is an extended flashback that chronicles the Uprising of the 20,000, the strike that preceded the tragedy of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire. A second novel is *Ashes of Roses*, by Mary Jane Auch, which places two of the main characters inside the factory on March 25, 1911, the day of the fire.

### Going to the sources

Schiller employs creative exercises, along with primary documents, including “Life in the Shop,” by Clara Lemlich, “My First Job,” by Rose Cohen, “Days and Dreams,” by Sadie Frowne, “Among the Working Girls,” by Wirt Silkes, all from the Cornell website, as well as the chapter on “Working Girls of New York,” from Jacob Riis’s classic tale, *How the Other Half Lives*. Some of the activities Schiller uses in her class



are posted at <https://sites.google.com/site/teachingthetriangle/>. The students create projects based on the Triangle Fire, inspired by the history they’ve absorbed.

Michelle D’Alessandro was inspired to learn more about the topic. “Not only was it a momentous event in history, but it still has effects today ... Just because we don’t wear shirtwaists anymore, does not mean that these issues have died off along with the fashion,” she said.

For his project, William Banilla created a model of the building located in the heart of Greenwich Village at Washington Place and Greene Street, the site of the fire that killed 146 workers, mostly immigrant women and girls. “The Triangle Fire was a devastating experience, yet similar things still go on today,” Banilla said.

For Danny Collins, “the fact that so many young women died needlessly, because of reasons that were avoidable, is appalling. It inspired me to learn more about the terrible conditions in factories that were abolished after the

fire, but are still found in today’s workplaces.”

Sarah James noted the passion with which Ms. Schiller teaches the material: “Although I don’t have any relatives that had firsthand experience in this horrific event, I know that it was a pivotal moment in American history. Having the honor of being at the commemoration and standing in the very area where it occurred, the weight of the event hit me. I know that it taught Americans a lesson. For example, now buildings have fire codes, fire escapes, and human life is more secure in many workplaces as a direct result of the reform movement that followed in the wake of the fire.”

Jacob LaBarge does have a family connection to the tragedy: “I felt compelled to work on the issue because someone on my mom’s side of the family and many other people were so exploited but could barely survive with the money given to them for their labor.”

After reading *Ashes of Roses*, Katy Dara wanted to know more: “The Triangle Fire was terrible, but it sparked an amazing reform

movement. But there is still a lot of injustice in the world. In countries like Bangladesh and China, people still suffer and die from low wages and unsafe conditions and tragedies like the Triangle Fire are still happening today.”

“People that were my own age died in the Triangle Fire,” said Michael Carnesi, “and the significance for me is that innocent people were taken advantage of who did not deserve to die.”

“It makes you think about the perspective of a working American back then,” said Sean Paton, “and how they risked their lives by working in horrific conditions in order to earn a living.”

Gabriella Bartley noted that, “there are still garment factories that are repeating what happened long ago. Hopefully, the efforts to set new standards will be successful.”

Lauren Sage pointed out that “so many conditions could easily be fixed, yet employers chose to ignore them, and people got hurt or worse, killed.” Cloe Stevens concurred with that assessment: “The Triangle Fire connects to the world we live in today. Still, in some places, there are awful factory conditions and people are dying because of it.”

Billy Garfinkel summed up for his classmates: “By reading about this and going to the commemoration, people become aware of the struggles that have been and are being fought.”

*Kimberly Schiller is a recent addition to the NYLHA board, an active participant in the NYLHA Working Group, and a member of New York State United Teachers.*

# Stella! Art Installation Comes to New York City to Rave Reviews

Susan Eisenberg, journeywoman electrician, poet and author (*We'll Call You If We Need You: Experiences of Women Working Construction...* The New York Times 10 Best Books, 1998), brought her mixed media art installation to New York City this past fall. "On Equal Terms," featuring "Stella," an artistic representation of a generic pioneering tradeswoman, was on display from Sept. 29 to Nov. 1 at the Clemente Soto Velez Center on the Lower East Side. The installation combines realistic and fanciful works of art with personal testimonies to bring viewers into the experience of the first tradeswomen who worked on construction sites.

The installation arrived in New York City in a truck and a crew of New York City tradeswomen and friends helped to unload and set up the exhibit—hanging banners, building stud walls, and installing panels. The opening launch on Oct. 3 was attended by 150 people who gave it a warm



and welcoming reception. That evening's program featured three generations of tradeswomen—pioneering Local 3 IBEW electrician Melinda Hernandez, Sheet Metal Local 28 training director Leah Rambo, and apprentice carpenter Rudy Mulligan (who got a loud cheer when she said she was 'the apprentice.'). Local 3 IBEW Business Manager Chris Erikson argued that a labor movement that's under attack cannot afford to harbor discrimination. Diallo Shabazz of the New York City Department of Education

spoke about fair access to all careers.

NYLHA Board Member Rachel Bernstein attended the ceremony. "It was extremely well attended by a huge number of women in the trades and by male civic and labor leaders who pledged their support for the women. It was really impressive," she said. Bernstein's LaborArts.org website features an on-line exhibit of "On Equal Terms"...visit it to experience Stella, learn about the experiences of women working in the trades, and read some of Eisenberg's poetry.

The exhibit at the Center was made possible due to the financial support of the New York Labor History Association and four other sponsors, including the ILGWU 21<sup>st</sup> Century Heritage Fund and the Berger-Marks Foundation.

The month-long stay in New York City wrapped up on Nov. 1 with a poetry reading by Eisenberg, with selections from her several books of poetry. What follows is one timely offering suitable to the temperatures outside!

## Working Outdoors

January:

working early morning hours  
against frosted moonlight/  
artic wind

stabs through clothing/  
fingers numb ears  
so cold they

burn/

July:

working midday hours  
under dizzying sunlight/  
muggy air  
languishes in the lungs/

fingers swell  
initiative  
wilts/

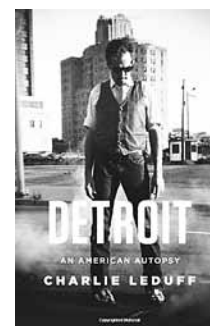
winter/the body

not warm summer/the mind

not clear.

Thanks to Susan Eisenberg's blog: <http://susaneisenberg.wordpress.com/2013/10/17/nyc-on-equal-terms-on-the-lower-east-side/> and Brandeis University, Women's Studies Research Center, [OnEqualTerms@brandeis.edu](mailto:OnEqualTerms@brandeis.edu).

# Detroit: An American Autopsy



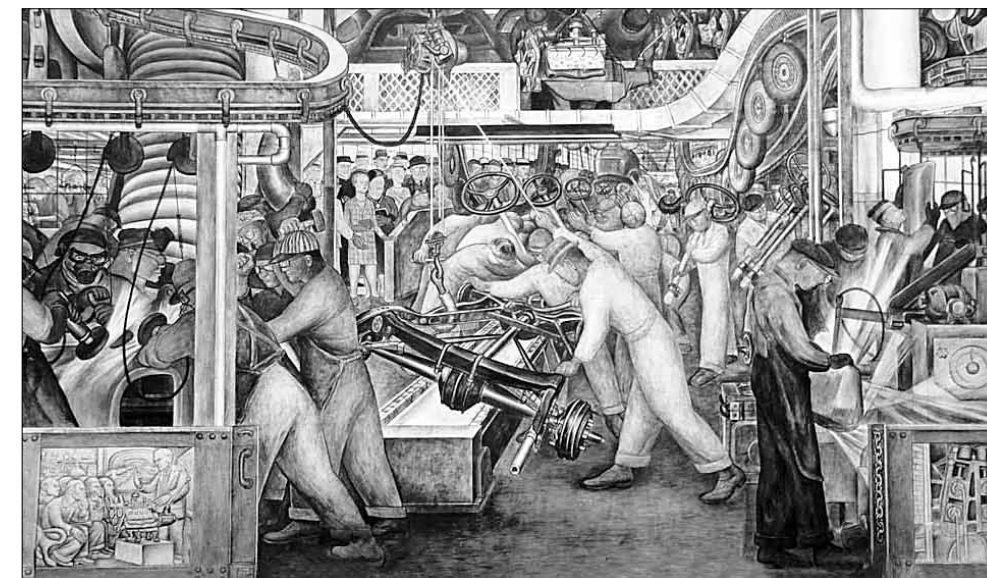
*Detroit: An American Autopsy*  
By Charlie LeDuff  
ISBN: 162231204X

Reviewed by Bruce Kayton

This is a great book that had the good fortune to be published just before Detroit declared bankruptcy and dominated the news cycle. Well-written and well-researched, it expertly weaves both the personal and political in the downfall of Detroit, which has lost over half of its population since 1950. Mr. LeDuff is a character in this story as well (and be sure to check his YouTube clips on the web if you don't believe me) as he grew up in Detroit, left for twenty years, quit a job with the *N.Y. Times'* L.A. Bureau, and returned in 2008 right in the middle of Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick's corruption scandal (Mayor Kilpatrick was a gift from God to any journalist arriving at the *Detroit News* as he would be in and out of jail several times).

Mr. LeDuff personalizes the tragedy of Detroit as he chronicles an anonymous body frozen to death in an elevator shaft of an abandoned building (one of over 70,000 in the city) owned by a billionaire. The police don't respond for over 24 hours and this becomes an even bigger scandal when Mr. LeDuff reveals that the dead man no one cares about was famed soul singer Otis Redding's second cousin and might have been laying there for weeks in a cold and indifferent city.

Detroit is now a city in which the police don't have enough patrol cars (officers sometimes respond, if at all, in their own cars), the fire department lacks basic equipment while tens of millions of dollars of appropriated money "disappears" and the government is continually run by corrupt Democratic Party politicians and bureaucrats who line their own pockets. The auto



*Detroit Industry Murals, frescos by Diego Rivera, Detroit Institute of Art.*

industry is at the center of the story as Mr. LeDuff notes that Henry Ford's magnanimous \$5 a day wage in 1914 is three cents more, when accounting for inflation, than a newly hired autoworker at \$14 per hour makes today. But Mr. LeDuff shows how Detroit's collapse started in the 1950's when a Packard Plant closed and the unemployment rate in Detroit hit 20%, due to the early days of foreign competition and increasing automation of the factory floor.

The personal comes into play for Mr. LeDuff as he sees two family members killed

both directly and indirectly by drugs and alcohol in a crime-filled city. His brother Frankie's house drops in value from \$70,000 to \$15,000 in ten years, and yet he still cannot find a buyer at the cheaper price. After all, who wants to live in Detroit? Overall this book reads like a good mystery, only the mystery has been exposed and Detroit's decline continues.

For more information about Detroit's labor history and the Rivera Murals visit the Michigan Labor Society website at <http://mlhs.wayne.edu/>.

## THE NYLHA'S WEBSITE REVISED!

Visit <http://newyorklaborhistory.org/> to find out about upcoming activities, read about the 2013 Commerford Awards honoring the historian Eric Foner and Professional Staff Congress President Barbara Bowen, the latest Wertheimer Prize Winner, Sarah "Sadye" Stern, the NYLHA Working Group and their plans to connect a new generation to labor history, resources and more. And now you can join the Association, or renew your membership, on-line through PayPal!

Also, look for announcements about upcoming activities, including a discussion at Tamiment Library, NYU, on the life and times of Morris Schappes.

# Made in the USA: Farewell to Factory Towns?

On October 10, the New York Labor History Association organized a viewing of Maynard Seider's film *Farewell to Factory Towns?* as part of the fall program. The film viewing brought together a diverse group of people at the OSA in midtown Manhattan to discuss the film as well as manufacturing in the United States today. The program began with Jane LaTour who welcomed and thanked Maynard Seider for allowing us to show his film.

*Farewell to Factory Towns?* is a documentary that follows the development of the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art or MassMoCA. The museum is located within the same building that once housed Sprague Electric, a sprawling American company that helped to give life to North Adams, Massachusetts. Prior to Sprague Electric, Arnold Print Works was a vital component of North Adams, employing 3,200 people at its peak in 1905. Then, after over eighty years of success, Arnold Print Works closed its doors, and the town of North Adams hoped for a similar opportunity. Shortly after, the quiet valley town's hopes became a reality. The thirteen acres was bought by Sprague Electric and the new company transformed the old textile mill into an electronics plant. After the internal renovation, the state-of-the-art equipment allowed for more employment opportunities and consistency that would last generations.

Soon, Sprague employed physicists, chemists, electrical engineers, and skilled technicians to help create and build high-tech weapon systems during World War II for the U.S. government. This boom was what the town needed, and by 1966, Sprague employed 4,137 workers in an 18,000-member community. Sprague Electric was the cornerstone of the community because it seemed that every family had a tie to it. The work was steady, the paychecks consistent, and the camaraderie among the employees was unwavering. This consistency gave way to a dependable life for many. Later, in 1970, there was a ten-week strike, where over two-thousand union members struck. Rather than fighting on their own, the comradeship swelled. Strikers received help from other workers in the form of food and moral support. After ten weeks, the strikers won, returning to work, and returning North Adams to the consistent life they had come to know. However, competition from abroad caused Sprague to gradually reduce the size of plants and "a new word, 'deindustrialization' entered [the town's] vocabulary." The eventual cessation in 1986 caused employment to soar over 14%, which was double the national average.

## Parallel universe of poverty

In his film, Seider explores the promise MassMoCA made to salvage the hard-working community, but their promise has fallen short. While MassMoCA has seen success,



Tree Logic, 6 upside-down blaze maples installed in MASS MoCA's Scaturro Courtyard by Australian artist Natalie Jeremijenko. Photo: Doug Bartow

Seider asks, "What does it take to save a town?" Its success has not transformed the community of North Adams, but created a "parallel universe" according to Reverend Jill Graham in the film. Since the installation of MassMoCA, unemployment has not dwindled, only increased, while poverty has skyrocketed above 20% and homelessness continues to grow in the North Adams community. Graham witnesses the dichotomy between the MassMoCA artists and the growing need of meals from local churches and food pantries first-hand in North Adams each day. During the viewing, a cynical round of laughter broke out when economist Stephen

Sheppard said, "No American can walk past their [own] car," when he explained why MassMoCA was not bringing life and business to the rest of the beleaguered community, posing the notion that "any economy that includes poverty is doomed to fail."

As Seider's poignant document wraps, the audience understands that its purpose is less about MassMoCA and more about the devastating effects of deindustrialization and the attacks on labor. Seider compels the audience to look at the bigger picture, instead of one project as a type of "magic potion." With this in mind, Seider explores what the community is doing to

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# Farewell to Factory Towns?

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change the state of North Adams. Recently, a grassroots campaign has begun with the North Berkshire Community Coalition, other political activism, and local neighborhood organizing. Community members understand that they can't wait for national policy, so they know they must amend their local policy.

After the viewing, the audience was curious about all aspects of *Farewell to Factory Towns?*. Attendees inquired about the "unrealistic" expectation of MassMoCA on North Adams, the use of MassMoCA as an organizing tool for grassroots campaigns, and how the town is

surviving in general. During the discussion, Rob Linné inquired about the state of North Adams since the filming ended and Dr. Seider explained that there have been "all kinds of cutbacks, even though Massachusetts is a wealthy state." Philoine Fried pointed out that this story has unfortunately taken place in many towns including Flint, Michigan and North Camden, New Jersey, to name a couple. While Andrew Tilson added, "This is every story... It starts with education." Dr. Seider, a sociology professor for 32 years and president of his faculty union for seven years at MCLA, agreed. For several years, Dr. Seider

taught a course titled "Social History of North Adams" where oral histories were conducted by his students. His students also performed a play based on labor history and they bussed in elementary students to watch and

understand "what their parents and grandparents had done." Maynard Seider and his film left the audience with one final thought that anyone can make a difference with help, desire, and motivation.

## Save the Dates

Wednesday, April 2, 6 pm, The Fourth Annual Clara Lemlich Social Activist Awards, Museum of the City of New York, sponsored by LaborArts.org.

Wednesday, April 9, 6 pm, Tamiment Library, NYU, Presentation on Morris Schappes: His Life and Legacy, featuring Paul Washington, Medger Evers College, CUNY, with Timothy Naftali, Tamiment Director, Moderator; and Professor Stephen Leberstein, Commentator.

Watch for the NYLHA's Annual Conference in May – This year's topic: *Public Sector Unions: Under Attack!*

## From Forge to Fast Food: A History of Child Labor in New York State.

### Volume II: Civil War to the Present

Bernstein, Richard B.; And Others

**THIS VOLUME of essays and activities is written for use in the eighth grade course "United States and New York State History." The volume follows the chronology from the Civil War to the present, emphasizing child labor during those years. The essays are intended for teachers but can be mastered by many students. The activities focus on child labor and social history and are suited to the peer orientation of middle school students. The book is divided into four sections: (1) "Child Labor in the Gilded Age: 1865-1900"; (2) "The Struggle for Child Labor Reform: 1900-1933"; (3) "The 'High-Water Mark' of Child Labor Reform: 1933-1960"; and (4) "The Resurgence of Child Labor: 1960 to the Present." Guiding questions for the volume are the inter-related questions of: (1) "Which children should work?"; (2) "What work should children do?"; and (3) "Under what conditions should children work?" (EH)**

## Ludlow Clock Tower

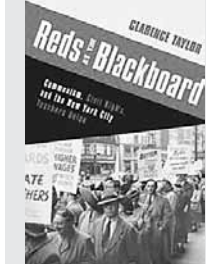


Jane LaTour

"THE LUDLOW CLOCK TOWER is the most prominent architectural feature of the town of Ludlow, Massachusetts. The tower is part of the Ludlow Mills complex, and is depicted as part of the town seal. The tower was constructed as part of the complex in 1886, by the Ludlow Manufacturing and Sales Company. The company produced jute yarns, twine, and webbing. It helped to shape the town by providing housing, a library, schools, playgrounds, and even a clubhouse for the increasingly diverse community. Ludlow Mills ceased operation in the 1960s and moved to India, where it is now known as Ludlow Jute and Specialties of Mumbai."

Thanks to Wikipedia.

# Reds at the Blackboard



*Reds at the Blackboard: Communism, Civil Rights, and the New York City Teachers Union*, Clarence Taylor, Paper, 384 pages, 10 illus. ISBN: 978-0-231-15269-3

By Robert Parmet

AMERICA'S TEACHERS have long struggled to gain respect and satisfactory working conditions. Toward that goal, in 1916 the New York City Teachers Union was formed. Modest in its objectives, the organization essentially sought decent salaries and recognition for teachers as professionals. However, during the 1920s Communist critics promoted a more militant agenda. In 1935 the leftists gained control of the union and pointed it in a direction influenced by the Soviet Union and the American Communist Party.

In his study, Clarence Taylor explores the nature and extent of the Communist influence. Relying on thorough research and presenting much detail, he finds that the Teachers Union indeed adopted policies of the Communist Party, but without abandoning the interests of the teachers they led. Though the TU was handicapped by its blind support for the Soviets and the American Communists, it advanced the cause of social unionism, and looked beyond teachers' working conditions to eradicate such evils as racism and poverty and create a more just society. As the TU "blurred the line between its work on behalf of teachers and promoted Communist policies," it drew sharp criticism, which in 1941 led to the revocation of the American Federation of Teachers charter it had held since 1916. Remaining committed to social unionism, it joined the Congress of Industrial Organizations, from which it would be ousted in 1950.

## Irresistible target

Ignoring criticism, the TU self-destructively followed the Communist Party line. As Taylor notes, the union even supported the Soviets when they signed a nonaggression pact with Nazi Germany and moved away from the concept of a "popular front" against fascism. However, when the

United States soon afterward went to war with Hitler, who had by then invaded Russia, the TU supported the fight against Nazism. Through the 1930s and into the post-war years it also attacked anti-Semitism and defended the rights of African Americans.

The coming of the Cold War spelled disaster for the Teachers Union. With the world divided into two hostile camps, led by the United States and the Soviet Union, a strong fear arose of internal subversion to overthrow the government. Though the TU had been investigated several times since 1919 for un-American activities, in 1948, with 5,600 members, it presented an irresistible target for people seeking to combat global Communism. "In the resulting purges," Taylor writes, "close to four hundred TU members were fired, forced to resign, or compelled to retire." Following the lead of Superintendent of Schools William Jansen, who sought to uproot Communist teachers from the New York City public schools, congressional hearings assaulted the union, determined to demonstrate that it was a Communist front. Minnie Guttridge was unable to bear this climate. A veteran elementary school teacher who was suffering from cancer, she was interrogated by an Assistant Superintendent of Schools during a school day on her attendance at Communist Party meetings in 1940 and 1941. That

**May Labor  
History Conference.**

**May 8, 6-8 pm  
at the UFT  
52 Broadway**

evening she took her own life. In May 1956 the Board of Education named 273 teachers who it claimed "had been 'suspended, dismissed, resigned or retired' as a result of its investigation into subversion."

Though Taylor is indignant when he describes the affront to civil liberties at this time, he carefully weighs the issues he discusses. For example, there is the question of anti-Semitism. Considering the fact that most of the removed teachers on the 1956 list were Jewish, a hasty conclusion might attribute that situation to anti-Semitism. While not denying that some of the figures leading the purge held such sentiments, Taylor nevertheless examines the question thoroughly, finally deciding that it was a weapon used by both sides.

## Fascinating found history

Within this generally distressing account of leftists under siege there are some surprises. One is a fascinating account of the Teachers Union's campaign to promote black history. Despite the union's decline under the anti-Communist assault in the 1950s, it persisted in championing racial equality, contending that, along with democracy, it was basic to education. This view motivated campaigns to eliminate racist textbooks from the public schools and increase the teaching of black history and the number of black teachers in the schools. Another surprise is a chapter on the role of women in the Teachers Union. By discussing Bella Dodd, Rose Russell and other female activists Taylor adds a women's history dimension to his study.

Taylor ends his book with the creation of the United Federation of Teachers in 1960. An outgrowth of the rival New York Teachers Guild, the UFT was a militant organization without the Communist baggage of the Teachers Union. In November 1960 New York City's teachers went on strike for the first time, led by the UFT, which a year later became their collective bargaining agent. In 1964 the Teachers Union disbanded itself. Associated with the Communist Party, it could not survive the Cold War. In Clarence Taylor it has a worthy chronicler.

*Robert D. Parmet is a Professor of History and Philosophy at York College.*

# White Collar Workers and the Communist Party

DANIEL J. OPLER. *For All White-Collar Workers: The Possibilities of Radicalism in New York City's Department Store Unions, 1934-1953*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press. 2007. Pp. ix, 270. \$49.95, CD \$9.95.

The historians' debate over the role played by communists in the American labor movement during the 1930s and 1940s has been viciously contested. Few arguments of this kind are so heavily freighted with ideological bile. Communists are customarily portrayed either as selfless idealists victimized by anti-Red hysteria or cynical opportunists whose devotion to the working class tacked in lockstep to shifts in the Soviet party line. The question of the degree of political and intellectual autonomy enjoyed by union leaders with communist affiliations in the nascent Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) has exercised a generation of labor historians. Daniel J. Opler's balanced and perceptive study of the struggle to organize New York City's department store workers suggests that this question may at last be beside the point.

## Bargaining for the shop girls

Only communists, operating under the auspices of the Trade Union Unity League, considered New York's predominantly-female cohort of department store employees ripe organizational soil, and in a series of dramatic strikes against discount retailers Klein's and Ohrbach's in 1934 and 1935, they gained a foothold for their local unions. Affiliation with the CIO soon followed, and by 1938 the 40,000-strong United Retail and Wholesale Employees Association (URWEA) had negotiated contracts with "uptown" retail

giants Macy's, Gimbel's, and Bloomingdale's. An ideological rift soon developed between the leaders of the locals, many of whom had communist ties (although relatively few of their rank-and-file did), and the liberal anticommunist national union hierarchy. Between the Hitler-Stalin Pact of 1939 and the 1941 Nazi invasion of the USSR, the locals' officers unsuccessfully pressed "peace" resolutions at URWEA conventions, and once the United States entered the war on the side of the Soviets, adhered to labor's "no-strike" policy so zealously that they even opposed URWEA job actions sanctioned by the War Labor Board.

Little doubt exists that the leaders of New York City's department store locals were in thrall to Moscow. Opler shows, however, that this did not significantly affect the daily activities of the UWREA. National president Samuel Wolchok and the communists worked to keep their political differences from disrupting the union's core mission of organizing and bargaining for retail workers. As a result, the national union was the CIO's seventh largest by 1942, and had won a 40-hour week for its members, a signal achievement in an industry notorious for its arbitrary work schedules. It was not until 1947 and the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act that the issue of communism threatened the existence of the union. The Act's requirement that labor officials swear they were not Communist Party members led to the forced disaffiliation of the New York locals from the national union and the CIO in 1948. The now-independent locals were easy pickings for department store owners intent on regaining the upper hand on the shop floors.

Even a rightward political shift—many of the locals embraced anticommunism and were readmitted to the CIO in the early 1950s—could not save them. Their defeat in the disastrous Hearn's strike of 1953, in Opler's words, "ended... any possibility of a powerful retail worker's union in America" (p. 176).

Opler resists the temptation to attribute the decline of the New York department store locals solely to the excesses of postwar anticommunism or, conversely, to the ideological rigidity of their leaders. He instead cites a number of factors having little or nothing to do with communism. After the war, department stores began to move to suburban areas, where they could hire parttime workers less likely to join unions.

## Bosses regain control

The shift to "selfservice" stores also reduced the demand for employees. Both of these developments enabled store managers to reestablish control of their workplaces. In addition, the working-class consciousness that had been prevalent among white-collar store personnel during the 1930s had dissipated by the postwar years; Opler shows how moves to middle-class housing enclaves such as New York's Stuyvesant Town and Parkchester blunted expressions of labor solidarity. The impermanence of a transformative retail worker unionism, then, had less to do with the behavior of communists as communists than with the growth of a hostile labor environment in the years following World War II. Opler's work helps move us beyond the issues, now all too well ventilated, of whether an "independent" radicalism was possible in the United States during the New Deal years, and whether communists in the American labor movement were martyrs or dupes. He shows that the fate of the department store unions hinged on what occurred in stores, homes, and the streets, not on the Hitler-Stalin Pact or the Moscow show trials. By keeping his ear to the ground, Opler has steered the debate over twentieth-century American labor radicalism in a welcome direction.

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