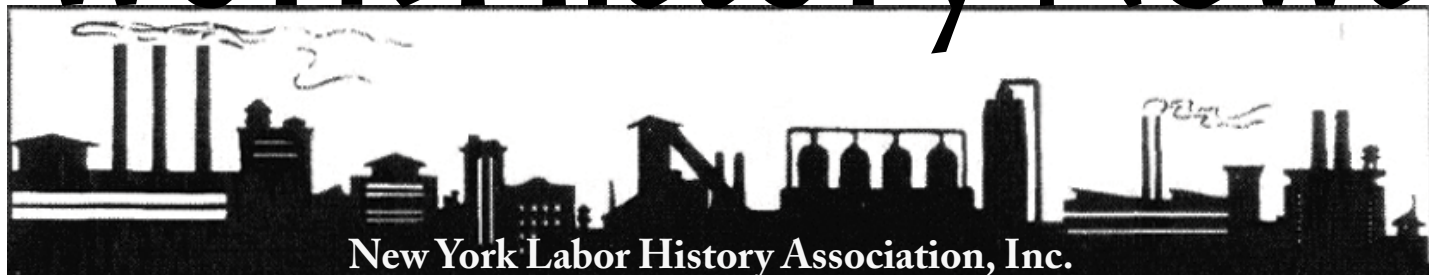


Work History News



New York Labor History Association, Inc.

A Bridge Between Past and Present

Volume 34 No 1 Winter/Spring 2017

Connie Kopelov (1926-2016)

A remembrance by Jon Bloom

“If you can cope with love, you can pronounce Kopelov,” Connie used to say. Love made Connie unexpectedly famous, as the first (along with her partner Phyllis Siegel, of course) to be married in a legal same-sex marriage in New York State.

By then she was retired from her long career as a labor educator, what sociologist Al Nash once called a “marginal occupation.” The few hundred labor educators across the country mostly work for unions or university labor extension programs, organizing and teaching workshops and courses in steward training, labor history, and workers’ rights. Connie began doing labor education in the 1950s, and was well known in the field, working most notably for the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America.

Defending workers

I met Connie in the late 1970s. She was great pals with my late wife, Debra Bernhardt, and adored our kids, Alex and Sonia, who called her “Kokomo Connie,” after Connie’s hometown of Kokomo, Indiana. I got to know her better when we overlapped briefly at the Workers Defense League, where she worked during the hard, long Reagan years. WDL had become interested in

the problem of finding representation for workers denied unemployment insurance benefits, and Connie came up with the idea of a training program for non-lawyer advocates. She got grants, recruited trainees and teachers, and designed a lengthy and thorough curriculum. The project was the foundation of WDL’s current program helping thousands of unemployed workers get benefits.

Wit, knowledge and love

Connie was a founder of the New York Labor History Association and a long-time and beloved board member. She loved labor history. Irish-American union leader Leonora O’Reilly (1870-1927) was her personal heroine; Google her, you’ll see why. My last project with Connie was in 2004, when I coaxed her out of retirement to lead a labor and women’s history tour with me for the AFL-CIO Lawyers Coordinating Committee, whose annual meeting was in New York that year. Frail and leaning on her cane, Connie charmed the large group of visiting labor lawyers with her wit and knowledge as we strolled around Union Square.

Having come of age in a repressed era, Connie took pride in the emergence of the women’s and gay rights movements. She burst with joy



Connie Kopelov, lifelong labor educator, activist, co-founder of the NYLHA, and a dear friend to many NYLHA members

into the WDL office at the “splendid” news that Deborah Glick had been elected as the first openly gay candidate to the state legislature. Nonetheless she recognized the problems facing workers as workers – men and women, of all races and nationalities, younger and older. She was first and foremost a labor person.

Jon Bloom is the executive director of the Workers Defense League.

Telling labor's story

The American Labor Studies Center helps make sure that workers' history is more than a thing of the past

By Paul Cole

Former Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey said, "The history of the American labor movement needs to be taught in every school in this land... America is a living testimonial to what free men and women organized into free democratic trade unions can do to make a better life... we ought to be proud of it." Yet an independent Hart Research poll found that 54 percent of adults said they know "just a little or don't know much" about unions.

Teaching materials

I founded the American Labor Studies Center in 2002 to help change this. The ALSC provides teachers with a wide range of materials and strategies for integrating labor history and important contributions into the K-12 curriculum. Materials on our website

– labor-studies.org – include biographies of key labor leaders, facts about child labor, chronologies of important union history, a filmography, labor songs, photos, policy issues, a bibliography, a glossary of labor terms, primary sources, and simulations on organizing a union and collective bargaining. We also conduct workshops and presentation for teachers.

The ALSC sponsors a Gold Medal and \$1,000 prize for the best entry on labor history for the National History



The American Labor Studies Center is in the Kate Mullany house in Troy, N.Y.

Day Contest (www.nhd.org) and we offer a prize for the best entry in the New York NHD contest. We are continuing to restore the Kate Mullany house, where we are located in Troy, N.Y.

Paul Cole is founder and executive director of the American Labor Studies Center. Learn more at labor-studies.org

Remembering Kate

By Art Fleischer

WHEN I CAME to Troy, N.Y. in 1978 to set up an alternative learning high school class, I was excited to live in an area with significant labor history. I had just earned a master's degree in American labor history and had studied the upstate New York area. I taught for a few years, became a union organizer, a delegate of the Troy Area Labor Council, and then president of the council. At that time, I met Paul Cole, a former social studies teacher and then the secretary-treasurer of the New York State AFL-CIO and a vice president of the American Federation of Teachers. I learned that Troy was the home of the first all-women's labor union, the Troy Collar Laundry Union, which led a successful strike in 1864. Kate Mullany, a young Irish immigrant, founded the union and lived in a house near me. Paul and I decided to tell Kate's story. We worked with area leaders and members of Congress to have the house designated a National Historic Landmark and today it is home to the American Labor Studies Center.

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.

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John Commerford Labor Education Awards: **A night of reverence and activism**



Irwin Yellowitz



Ruth Milkman



Keith Mestrich

By Kimberly Schiller

The New York Labor History Association hosted its thirtieth annual John Commerford Labor Education Awards on November 30, 2016 at the 1199/SEIU Penthouse in midtown Manhattan. The evening is a night of reverence for those who fight for the working class.

NYLHA President Irwin Yellowitz welcomed all guests and honorees heartily and paid respect to those lost this past year: Connie Kopelov, Dan Lieb, and Ida Torres. Yellowitz told us about John Commerford, president of the General Trades Union in New York City and our city's primary labor leader in the 1830s. Commerford sought to unite workers in the skilled trades and he saw education as key to worker organizing and power. Yellowitz pointed out that the struggle Commerford and his comrades faced was much like today. We must "recapture this past and make it relevant to the present," Yellowitz urged us. We must persevere and keep

our history alive to counteract those who wish to silence us. This was the theme of the night, with each speaker rallying around three ideas: resilience, camaraderie, and activism.

The first honoree of the evening – introduced by Leyla Vural, NYLHA board member – was Keith Mestrich, president and chief executive officer of Amalgamated Bank. Sidney Hillman and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America founded the bank in 1923, wanting to give workers access to banking and to put workers' money to work for their own interests. The bank's first project was cooperative housing for workers in the Bronx, and during the Great Depression, not a single family was kicked out due to financial distress.

A veteran of the labor movement, Mestrich is keeping the bank true to its original mission.

In his remarks, Mestrich talked about how crucial it is to remain resilient, especially now. "It is deep in our DNA to be fighters," he said. "It

is not in our nature to cover or hide under the bed or to flee to Canada," but rather we continue to uphold the beliefs that inspired Sidney Hillman. After the 2008 recession, the bank was on the "precipice of failure, down," said Mestrich, "but far from out." The bank's leaders "mustered up resilience to change and adapt." Today, Amalgamated Bank is thriving and it continues to create innovative programs to support hardworking people.

Mestrich brought his speech full circle with the IWW motto, "An injury to one is an injury to all." The bank's original promise still holds true. Mestrich humbly accepted the award, not for himself, but for the bank, and noted that it would be proudly displayed for all to see.

This year NYLHA awarded the Barbara Wertheimer Essay Prize, which is for an undergraduate who has done exemplary work on labor history, to Luke Mielke for his Macalester College

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A night of reverence and activism

Continued from page 3

Honors thesis, “Racial Uplift in a Jim Crow Local: Black Union Organizing in Minneapolis Hotels, 1930-1940.”

Miriam Frank, NYLHA board member, introduced the next honoree, Ruth Milkman, distinguished professor of sociology at the CUNY Graduate Center and research director of the Murphy Institute. Distinguished exactly describes Milkman’s contributions to labor education and the struggle for economic justice for all. Her books include *Farewell to the Factory*, *Organizing Immigrants*, and, most recently, *On Gender, Labor, and Inequality*.

Milkman has been “intensely purposeful” in her work to examine gender and workplace dynamics and she has stood strong in the face of hulking adversity. For instance, while she was at UCLA, directing the statewide Institute

for Labor and Employment, then-Governor Schwarzenegger tried to cut the institute out of the state budget. Milkman took on “The Terminator” and secured the institute’s funding. She did not, as Frank put it, “let the bully have his way. She worked quickly to fight and line up her allies.”

Milkman began her remarks by saying how glad she is to be back in New York, where she started her teaching career (at Queens College) and how much receiving an award from NYLHA meant to her. Then she focused on the significant challenges before us. They will “recapitulate the pre-New Deal issues,” she said, like “inequality between the haves and have nots,” the “flames of xenophobia,” “non-union labor,” and the particular difficulties that “vulnerable groups like African Americans and immigrants” will face. But Milkman was not without hope.

“Labor history is especially relevant to the challenges we face today,” she concluded. Together, we must all “learn, study, and organize the unorganized.”

With that call to action, George Altomare – a founder of the United Federation of Teachers, vice president of NYLHA, and winner of a Commerford in 2009 – led everyone in a song circle to conclude the event. The song circle ended the evening on a high note, full of unity, empowerment, and hope. During “Solidarity Forever,” everyone in attendance joined hands and sang. The rousing chorus gave life to the sentiments that resonated all evening: We will remain resilient, build camaraderie, and continue to fight for the working class.

Kimberly Schiller is a veteran English teacher, serves on the New York Labor History Association executive board, and is the district vice president of her local

In Memorium: Henry Foner



teachers’ union.

HENRY FONER, a founder and director of LaborArts, longtime member of the New York Labor History Association, and a Commerford honoree and former editor of this newsletter, died in January at the age of 97. Henry was president of the Fur, Leather & Machine Workers Union for 27 years before retiring in 1988. He served as president of the Paul Robeson Foundation and on the editorial board of *Jewish Currents* magazine, where he contributed a column of humorous poetry. Henry was a songwriter and poet and, for more than half a century, a popular master of ceremonies. You can listen to many of his songs at laborarts.org/fonerbook. A much beloved colleague, Henry was an activist and a self-styled troublemaker for over eight decades. We will miss him dearly.

Henry on sax, and his brother, Jack, performing in the Catskills.

Our history, our streets

Radical Walking Tours of New York City (3rd ed.), Bruce Kayton, Seven Stories Press, 2016

Reviewed by Keith Danish

NEW YORK IS ONE of the world's best cities to walk in (or "gayn shpatsirn", as my "bubbe" would say), and your strolls will be enhanced if you bring along the latest edition of *Radical Walking Tours of New York City*.

The author, Bruce Kayton, used to lead walking tours himself, but he is now a solo trekker and reports that he is frustrated by the disappearance of many historic structures due to gentrification. When sampling some of the walks he detailed, I focused on original structures that remain extant. Your reviewer combined walking with use of a Citi Bike ("Shtot-Velospiped?"), and mixed and matched sites from the East Village and Lower East Side tours. You could also limit yourself to one or two sites in the vicinity of a place you happen to be going to in Manhattan.

The people's New York

Most of the historical sites are found in the older sections of Manhattan, but it's not only the proletarian battlegrounds of the more distant past that get their due. There are tours covering Harlem and the Upper West/



East Side, anti-Vietnam protests, and even recent history such as Occupy Wall Street.

The book is full of historical tidbits ("red-bits?") and contextual information, e.g., in 1889 it was Hillel Solotaroff of the Jewish anarchist organization "Pioneers of Liberty" who introduced Emma Goldman to Alexander Berkman, at Sach's Café on Suffolk Street, and then Alexander invited Emma to attend a speech by fiery anarchist Johann Most, who would become her mentor. Who knew? (Maybe you.)

My initial tour, guided by Kayton's book, started at one of Emma's NYC residences, on East 13th St. (which bears an historical marker), continued on to Webster Hall on East 11th St., now a rock 'n roll venue but once a home to labor and radical meetings and events, then to Cooper Union, to the

Catholic Worker facility, the Tenement Museum on Orchard Street, the *Jewish Daily Forward* building and other longtime social-welfare institutions around East Broadway and Seward Park, and ended at the beautifully restored Eldridge Street Synagogue. The old *Forward* building has been re-purposed for luxury condos, but the busts of Marx, Engels, Lassalle and Liebknecht still watch over the building entrance (and Marx may be contemplating whether the phrase "to each according to need" fairly describes the situation of the building's current occupants). Down the street, the old Garden Cafeteria, once a place for *Forward* staff and assorted radicals to schmooze over dairy meals, is now a Chinese restaurant.

Before "plotzing", one should take a rest and grab a nosh at a venerable eatery

like Katz's Deli or Yonah Shimmel's Knish Bakery, on Houston Street, or the renovated Kossar's Bialys on Grand Street, or sample the lox at Russ & Daughters Café on Orchard Street, a spin-off of the old "appy" purveyors.

Kayton's guide can be supplemented with the interactive "Labor History Map" that is accessible on our NYLHA website (www.newyorklaborhistory.org) by clicking on "Labor History Resources".

And so, by using the aforementioned guidebook, you can get exercise, fresh air, a knish, and a history lesson – what could be bad?

Keith Danish, a retired attorney who practiced in the field of intellectual property law, is a new board member of the NYLHA. He engages in various types of volunteer work, including lecturing about labor history.

BOOK REVIEWS ONLINE NYLHA is now publishing book reviews online. Visit us at newyorklaborhistory.org to read our first: sociologist Maynard Seider on Aldon D. Morris's *The Scholar Denied: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Birth of Modern Sociology*. If you'd like to write a review, please contact Keith Danish, our book review editor, at keithdanish@yahoo.com with your suggestion.

Union voters and presidential elections

By Irwin Yellowitz

The presidential campaign of 2016 seemed endless, and now the analysis of why Donald Trump won may become never ending as well. We have heard how Hillary Clinton did more poorly than expected with various groups of voters. However, there has been little discussion of a key group she had expected to win – union voters. An examination of what happened with these voters helps explain why we have a President Trump.

The lack of interest in union voters by the media and political pundits may stem from the decline in the number of union members in the United States. However, union voters are a much greater proportion of the electorate, especially in key states, as compared to the percentage of unionists among the work force. Historically, about 60% of the members of union households nationally have voted for the Democratic presidential candidate since 1976, according to exit polls. Union members, as compared to a union household where at least one person is a union member, have voted for the Democratic presidential candidate by about an added 3-5%.

These numbers are critical for Democratic candidates in Rust Belt states because the margins for Democratic



presidential candidates from union households are at the national level or above, and the percentage of such voters as a percentage of total voters is significant. Based on figures for the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections, union households as a percentage of total voters was 34% in Michigan, 27% in Pennsylvania, 22% in Ohio, and 21% in Wisconsin. Any Democratic presidential candidate must hit that 60% vote figure, or above, among union households to win these states. Many had done so in the past since Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin had not voted for a Republican presidential candidate for over twenty years.

How did Hillary Clinton do with union household voters? She underperformed the historic vote for Democratic presidential candidates nationally and more important in the Rust Belt states. Exit polls differ

somewhat, but they show Clinton nationally with between 51 and 54% of the vote in union households. That is at least 5% below any Democratic candidate since 1984. However, Clinton did survive this loss of support to win the popular vote nationally. She could not overcome a similar decline in the key Rust Belt states, and so lost them and thereby the election.

The figures tell the story

In Michigan, union households favored Clinton by a 53 to 37% margin – a decline from the usual 20 point spread in that state, and well below Obama's 33 point margin in 2012. Clinton lost Michigan by a few thousand votes.

In Ohio, union households voted 52% for Trump, a sharp decline from President Obama, who had a 23% margin among these voters in 2012. Clinton's number also was below the usual vote from union

households for Democratic presidential candidates.

In Wisconsin, union workers (not households), who voted for Obama in 2012 at a 66% rate, only supported Clinton by 52%.

I do not have statewide figures for Pennsylvania, but reports from strong union areas, such as Erie and Northampton Counties, show significant declines for Clinton as compared to past Democratic presidential candidates.

Had Hillary Clinton held the historic percentages from union households for Democratic presidential candidates in these four states, she would have had a very good chance of winning at least three of them, and thereby the election.

In this short piece, I will not discuss why Clinton did not keep the traditional Democratic percentages among union voters. There are many factors, and many opinions, but that is a subject for a forum or a longer article. However, it is clear that the union votes matter, and no Democratic presidential candidate can win without the historic margins in this group. The Democratic Party had better keep this in sharp focus if it hopes to prevail in future presidential elections.

Irwin Yellowitz is a labor historian, professor emeritus of history at CUNY's City College, and president of the New York Labor History Association.

“Dig where you stand”

A celebration of labor history and writing at the 2nd annual Debra E. Bernhardt Labor Journalism Prize

By Alexander Bernhardt Bloom

The 2nd Annual Debra E. Bernhardt Labor Journalism Prize event, held on October 15, 2016, opened to the applause of a full house, an enthusiastic audience gathered in the reading room of NYU’s Tamiment Archives in Bobst Library. The award is given in honor of Debra Bernhardt’s dedication to public history and to creating Tamiment as a space for the discussion, debate, and celebration of the history of working people, radicals, and leftists. The award is intended to recognize and further the work of current journalists whose writing, with an eye toward historical context, focuses on working people and their lives.

The evening’s event – coordinated in the capable hands of Debra’s former colleague and long-dedicated labor historian, Rachel Bernstein – offered a rich panel discussion about history and its role in current journalism in addition to the presentation of the award and comments from the honoree. The award is co-sponsored by the New York Labor History Association, LaborArts, the Metro New York Labor Communications Council, the NYC Central Labor Council, AFL-CIO, and the Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives at Tamiment Library.

Jon Bloom spoke about Debra’s life and legacy. Debra’s husband of 17 years before her death in 2001, Jon discussed her path to public history and offered some valuable insight into the mission of Debra’s work as she saw it. In her native Michigan and the Midwest, Debra got her start collecting the oral histories of miners and loggers and later brought her approach to historical work to New York and Tamiment archives. “Dig where you stand,” was the driving idea: that rich and valuable and research-worthy stories were to be found all around, if only dedicated historians would dig them up. It was this



Chloe Kent, journalist and founder of Enchantress Magazine, received the 2016 Bernhardt Labor Journalism Prize for her piece about New York City’s women firefighters, “The Women of New York’s Bravest.” Read it at enchantressmag.com

view of the work of historians that brought her to projects such as *New Yorkers at Work* and *Ordinary People, Extraordinary Lives*, achievements that are part of Debra’s legacy and that speakers alluded to several times during the evening. A second part of Debra’s legacy, Jon emphasized, was her commitment to making Tamiment a space for gathering around history, a venue for activists, intellectuals, students, workers, and agitators to gather to tangle over and make sense of the history in the archives’ collections. It would be the “Switzerland of the New York City left,” Jon recalled, a place for open discussion among those of various minds and stripes.

To that end, the evening’s panel discussion fittingly honored Debra’s legacy. Historian Kimberly Phillips-Fein and journalists Juan Gonzalez and Tom Robbins spoke insightfully on the role of history in journalism. “You can’t do a good job of reporting current events without putting your coverage in historical context,” argued Juan Gonzalez, investigative journalist and co-host of Democracy Now!

The event closed with the presentation of the award to Chloe Kent, journalist and founder of *Enchantress Magazine*, in which appeared her prize-winning 2016 article, “The Women of New York’s Bravest.” Presenting the award was Jane LaTour, a former colleague of Debra’s and uniquely qualified for the part, given her own historical work on women in organized labor. *Enchantress* was founded, explained Kent, with the mission of moving the emphasis in publications for women “from aspirational to inspirational.” Her article, written on the basis of extensive interviews she conducted with current and retired firefighters, tells the story of working women overcoming terrific odds and historical adversity to become New York City firefighters, and does certainly further this cause. It is a strong example of the sort of journalistic writing the Bernhardt prize was created to celebrate.

Alexander Bernhardt Bloom is a teacher and writer whose exposure to the world of organized labor began when he was in diapers.

About the prize The Debra E. Bernhardt Labor Journalism Prize is an award of \$500 for an article that furthers the understanding of the history of working people. The deadline for the next award is July 31, 2017. Go to laborarts.org/Bernhardt for details on entering.

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

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



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