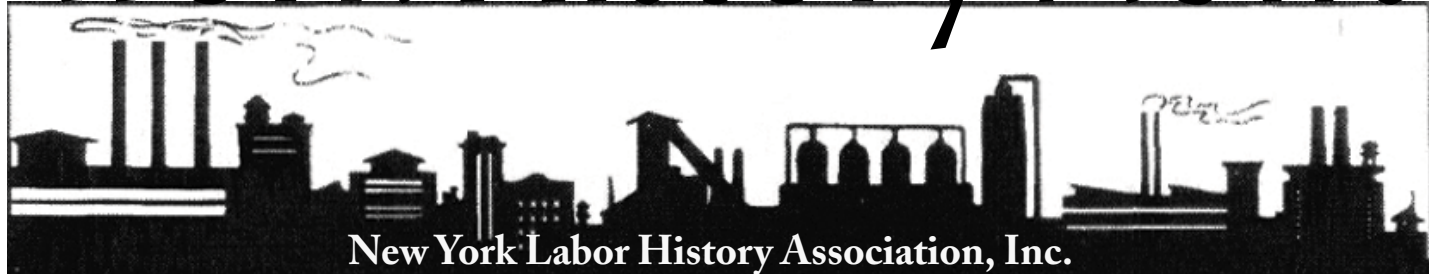


Work History News



A Bridge Between Past and Present

Volume 35 No 1 Winter/Spring 2018

John Commerford's lesson for today *31st annual awards offer hope, even now*

By Leyla Vural

Activism is, at least in part, rooted in optimism. Struggling for change requires believing that change is possible.

But even optimists need a boost sometimes.

The 31st Annual John Commerford Labor Education Awards on November 28 were just that: a reminder that the activist community is alive and well in New York and pushing for a brighter day, every day. Honorees Bhairavi Desai, co-founder and executive director of the New York Taxi Workers Alliance (NYTWA), and investigative journalist Tom Robbins each inspired the audience with stories of their work and the satisfaction that comes from calling out injustice and demanding better. For Desai, that's about organizing taxi and black-car, including Uber and Lyft, drivers. For Robbins, that's about uncovering hidden stories and exposing them.

Old friends in new places

This year 32BJ SEIU offered the Commerford



Photo credit: The Chief-Leader/Pat Annov

2018 Commerford honoree, Bhairavi Desai, co-founder and executive director of the New York Taxi Workers Alliance reception a new home in its Chelsea headquarters. Many people in the standing-room only crowd commented on the power of holding the Commerford in a space filled with labor art, most notably the workers' rights mural, which Brooklyn teenagers painted, that dominates one of the walls.

In his warm welcome, 32BJ President Héctor Figueroa talked about the importance of labor history and the value he places on organizations, like the



Journalists for justice: Juan González (left) introduced 2018 Commerford honoree Tom Robbins

New York Labor History Association, that work to keep workers' history alive and to make it relevant to today's challenges.

Look in the right place

Figueroa also introduced Bhairavi Desai, describing her as one of the great, progressive labor leaders of our time and a personal friend. He noted that she is an excellent person to strategize and work with—and that she's fearless

and at the ready when circumstances call for quick action. In January 2017, for instance, when the Trump administration announced its first Muslim ban, New York Taxi Workers Alliance members acted fast, going on strike at JFK in protest.

Accepting the Commerford award on behalf of all the members of the New York Taxi Workers Alliance, Desai talked about

Continued on page 3



Upcoming events

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

**Tuesday, April 10, 2018
6-8 p.m.**

Baseball and Labor Relations: Current Issues/Future Directions

BASEBALL MAY be America's pastime, but it isn't just fun and games. Just days after the 2018 season opening day, come learn about the past, present, and future of labor relations in the game. A panel discussion and audience Q&A will follow presentations from Lincoln Mitchell, author of *Will Big League Baseball Survive?*; Roberta Newman, co-author of *Black Baseball, Black Business: Race Enterprise and the Fate of the Segregated Dollar*;

Dave Prouty, counsel to the MLB Players' Association; and Keith Danish, NYLHA board member.

NYU Tamiment Library

70 Washington Square South
New York, NY 10012

RSVP to tamiment.events@nyu.edu or call 212-998-2630.

Coming soon Labor and the Vote

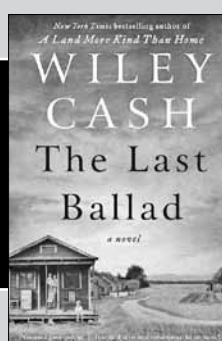
IF YOU'RE still scratching your head at how Donald Trump won over working-class voters and trying to make sense of how union members voted, this event will

be for you. We are inviting scholars and activists to come together to discuss past voting patterns among union members, why those patterns lasted over many elections, and why they changed in 2016. Panelists will consider whether 2016 marked a decisive change or traditional patterns are likely to return. And they will explore the role that unions can now play in affecting the way workers, union and non-union, vote.

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



Good news to push aside the winter blues



LOOKING FOR A BOOK to read or movie to see? We can help. Our stash of reviews continues to expand online. We've even got a list of "The Best Labor Union Movies of All Time." Visit us at newyorklaborhistory.org and click on "Book Reviews."

If you'd like to write a review, please contact Keith Danish, our book review editor, at keithdanish@yahoo.com with your suggestion.

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
Secretary	Abbe Nosoff; Regina Olff
Treasurer	Peter Filardo
Editor	Leyla Vural

John Commerford's lesson for today



32BJ President Héctor Figueroa hosted the Commerford Awards and introduced honoree Bhairavi Desai

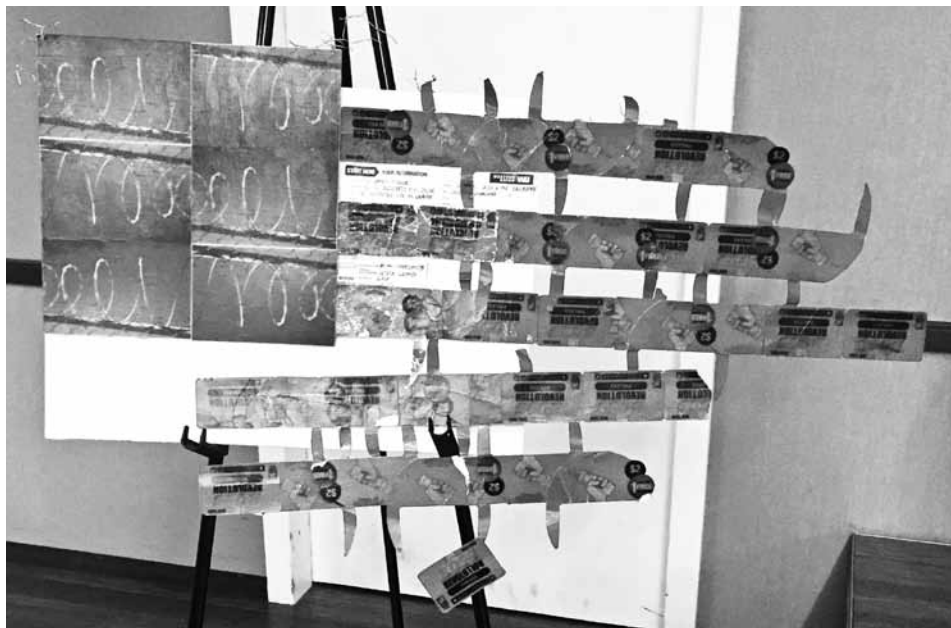
Continued from page 1

her 20 years organizing taxi workers and the increasingly dire challenges drivers face, from the “part-timing” of the industry to the denigration of immigrants and people of color, who make up much of the workforce. (In a heartbreaking illustration of just how tough conditions are, livery driver, Doug Schifter, committed suicide in front of City Hall in early February.) Desai stressed, though, that the NYTWA is about more than its own members, as, she noted, all organizing must be. The struggle for good jobs, respect, and the rights that should be fundamental to all people can't just be a struggle with, and on behalf of, some workers. “It's about the working class,” Desai said, “not just union members.”

Tough times don't deter Desai; they fuel her resolve. In fact, Desai challenged the gloomy mood that so many feel these days. “If you don't see all the organizing, activism, and building that's happening, you're looking in the wrong place.”

The Commerford effect

In an unexpected segue between honorees, Tom Robbins told the



The evening included awards to two graduate students – Marc Kagan and Luke Elliot-Negri – for their labor history research; Shantel Campell singing “Change is Gonna Come”; Chesray Dolpha reading Langston Hughes’s “I look at the world”; and Clara Leonor Cruz showing her art, (shown above) “Pan Americano,” about America’s broken promise to immigrants – and happy birthday wishes for NYLHA board member, Philoine Fried (see page 6).

audience that before he became a journalist, he drove a taxi for seven years, a job he lost for union organizing. He has been exposing labor issues and telling workers' stories ever since.

Juan González, who received the Commerford in 2010, introduced Robbins and regaled the audience with stories of Robbins's principled approach to reporting. Robbins and González share a part in labor history, as they were two of the self-named “Tabloid Ten,” *Daily News* reporters who were arrested for staging a sit-in during the 1991 strike at the paper. González described the humor and grace that Robbins brought to helping lead that strike.

Robbins – known for his work at the *Village Voice*, the *Daily News*, *The New York Observer*, *The New York Times* and elsewhere, and since 2011, the investigative journalist in residence at the CUNY Graduate School of Journalism – described the work of “talking to people, writing about them, and telling their stories” with palpable joy.

It was what Robbins had to say about the legacy of John Commerford – a labor leader in the 1830s, successful in his time only to have the movement he built quickly crushed – that left the crowd thinking. You might read Commerford's story as one of defeat. But none of us can have any idea what the long-term effects of our work will be, Robbins argued. Commerford couldn't know that workers in New York City would have to try and try again before they could build a movement strong enough to withstand the forces against them. But build it they did. He couldn't know that the seeds he had sown would feed a movement for generations to come. Robbins named this the “Commerford Effect.”

It's the stick-to-itiveness that the fight for workers' rights and social justice always demands, even, perhaps especially, in times when optimism is hard to hold onto. It's the Commerford Effect.

Leyla Vural is an oral historian and member of the NYLHA board.

3rd Annual Debra Bernhardt Labor Journalism Award

Putting the Paterson silk strike back in the record

By Irwin Yellowitz

On October 12, the NYLHA sponsored the third annual Debra Bernhardt Labor Journalism Award and Forum. The event was held at the Tamiment Library/Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives of NYU. Cosponsors were Tamiment/Wagner, the NYC Central Labor Council, the Metro New York Labor Communications Council and Labor Arts.

The program was chaired by Rachel Bernstein, and comprised a panel discussion and the award of the prize for labor journalism to Garret Keizer for his article, “Labor’s Schoolhouse: Lessons from the Paterson Silk Strike of 1913”, which appeared in the July 2017 issue of *Harper’s Magazine*.

Debra Bernhardt was one of the founders of the NYLHA in 1976. She also was the first director of the Wagner Labor Archives. Her premature death from cancer was a great loss for the labor community in this city. Her husband, Jon Bloom, spoke about Debra’s background in the mining area of Michigan, which already was depressed during her childhood. Debra was committed to the labor movement from early on, and she built the Wagner Archives as a major repository for the records of organized labor in New York City.

The panel members were Ginger Otis, of the *New York Daily News*, Michelle Chen of *The Nation*, and Ed Ott, the former executive director of the NYC Central Labor Council and now a faculty member in the Murphy Institute of CUNY. Ginger Otis stressed the role of the press in bringing important labor issues to the public. In particular, she discussed her articles on the struggle of women to enter the NYC Fire



Rachel Bernstein and Garret Keizer

Department. Michelle Chen focused on the role of minorities in building a vibrant labor movement historically, and the need to organize today by reaching out to minorities if the labor movement is to reverse its decades long decline. Ed Ott also argued that unions today must organize underrepresented populations, including minorities and women. He then commented directly on labor journalism, and forcefully called for the labor movement to move beyond house organs and support independent labor publications to influence the general public and union members.

Several members of the audience commented on the need for the labor movement to reverse its decline. The panelists responded that the labor movement must stress aggressive organizing, a vigorous journalistic presence, and give attention to the demands of the future as well as the lessons of the past.

Re-igniting collective memory

The final part of the program was the award to Garret Keizer. His article discussed the Paterson Silk Strike of 1913,

which involved a number of immigrant groups and was led by the IWW. The strikers held rallies at the Botto House, the home of Maria and Pietro Botto, in the adjoining town of Haledon. Today, this house is the home of the American Labor Museum, and Keizer discussed its activities.

Keizer spoke forcefully about his work. He stressed the support he received from an editor who believed that *Harper’s* should publish an article on labor history. Keizer hoped that his work will educate the public and union members about the benefits that they enjoy as a result of the struggles of the labor movement. His remarks were timely and heartfelt, and the audience responded enthusiastically.

Keizer wrote that “Perhaps the saddest outcome of the strike was its virtual erasure from collective memory.” Labor history in general has faced this fate, and the basic purpose of the NYLHA and the Debra Bernhardt Award is to make labor history more visible. Keizer’s article in a general interest magazine with a national audience certainly helps meet that objective.

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

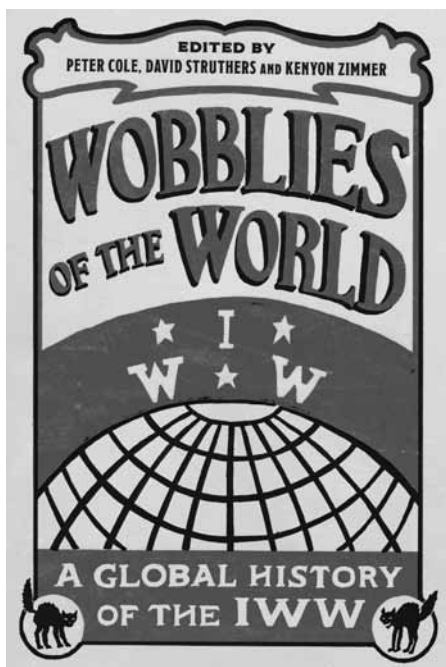


Debra Bernhardt: activist, archivist, and oral historian

Book Talk Review

When one union tried to make “Workers of the world unite” a reality

Wobblies of the World: A Global History of the IWW, edited by Peter Cole, David Struthers, and Kenyon Zimmer, Pluto Press (www.plutobooks.com), 2017



By Joshua Barnett

A union activist who worked at Bellevue Hospital once told me there were 26 separate locals and unions at the hospital. Twenty-six, at one hospital. “One Big Union” – the slogan of the Industrial Workers of the World, known as the IWW or the Wobblies – was meant as an answer to those kinds of divisions between workers. That slogan struck a deep chord with many workers in the US after the IWW’s founding in 1905. It’s not as well known that the slogan struck a chord with workers in many other countries as well. The “international” part of the union’s title wasn’t gratuitous. The Wobblies had a base in Chile, India, Mexico, South Africa, Sweden, Australia, New Zealand, England, Denmark, Germany, and Ireland, among others.

The international organizing of the IWW is the subject of a powerful new



Michelle Chen and Peter Cole at the October 21 book talk

book, *Wobblies of the World*, presented at Cornell on October 21, 2017 to a very interactive group of about 50, moderated by Michelle Chen and featuring Peter Cole, one of the editors of the book, professor of history at Western Illinois University. The book, an anthology of 19 articles on aspects of the Wobblies’ global organizing, is the first to deal with the IWW’s international efforts.

Chen and Cole led off with a summary of the issues dealt with by the IWW in global organizing. In a day without video, audio, or any form of social media, ideas were spread internationally by mail or as organizers traveled, or were exiled, across borders. Tracking this kind of history is complicated; many languages are involved (Italian, Yiddish, Hindi, Finnish, Afrikaans) and many documents involved are not yet digitized.

But this aspect of the IWW’s history is overdue, and vital. As the presentation and several people stressed during the Q&A, the issues of how to unite foreign-born and native-born labor are just as pressing now as then, especially with xenophobic and neo-fascist nativist movements on the rise around the world. The IWW’s experience in places like India and South

Africa showed that multi-lingual and cultural organizing is possible, if difficult. (There was a striking lack of romanticizing in the presentation about the difficulties of organizing across languages and borders, or just organizing, period.) One point made by several speakers is that then, as now, capital organized globally but workers organize (if at all) locally and nationally. The Wobblies were one of the few unions (as opposed to socialist or communist internationals) to try and challenge that.

It would be great to be able to present all the points made and the fascinating pieces of history (the IWW paper in New Zealand was printed for a time in English and Maori). But the event, and the book, are living history. As the presenters noted, the Wobblies were a small, poor organization, but one that made an impact beyond its numbers. *Wobblies of the World* isn’t just filling in an overlooked blank in labor history, although it certainly accomplishes that, as the presentation showed, it’s a chance to see how the ideas of one big union, literally global, have been tried, and what can be learned to try again.

Joshua Barnett is a union architect, DC 37/Local 375 shop steward at the NYC Housing Authority, and believer in one big union.

Happy birthday, Philoine



PHILOINE FRIED has been making history, and witness to it, for a long time. The first child of Sidney and Bessie Abramowitz Hillman, founders of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, Philoine has spent her entire life in and around the heart of the American labor movement. In November, her sons, Michael and Geoffry, threw a party for their mom's 100th birthday. Many members of the New York Labor History Association were there, too, and grateful for the chance to celebrate one of our founders and a leader in our organization ever since. Among her many contributions, Philoine also volunteered for decades for the Jewish Labor Committee and the Jewish Museum.



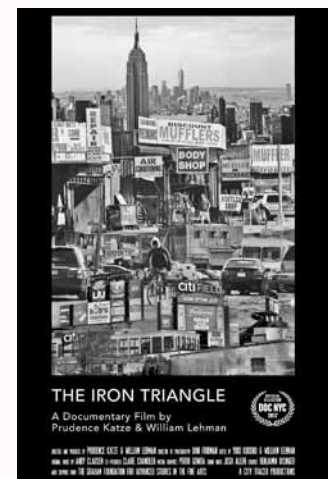
The Iron Triangle

A film by Prudence Katze & William Lehman

FOR DECADES, Willets Point in Queens has been an interconnected community of hundreds of small auto repair shops, known for inexpensive, quality service. The owners, many immigrants, have persevered despite a lack of city support. But their luck may have run out.

This documentary, co-directed by NYLHA board member Will Lehman, tells the story. With the Iron Triangle declared a blight and marked for lucrative redevelopment, the working class of Willets Point is facing off against gentrification and urban renewal for the future of people's livelihoods and their neighborhood.

The Iron Triangle was an official selection of the 2017 DOC NYC. Visit www.theirontriangle.com for more about the people of Willets Point and their struggle—and to get notices about when the film will be screened.



Progress Made, More to Do

35 years of making space for women in non-traditional trades

By Sadye Stern

In honor of the thirty-fifth anniversary of the first woman's hiring as a New York City firefighter, NYLHA co-sponsored a panel discussion on September 22 on activist strategies to – as moderator and labor historian Jane LaTour put it – “make space” for women in trades not traditionally open to women. In a sense, the entire evening was a commentary on the legacy of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act and a tribute to the activists who have fought, and continue to fight, to see the promises of the law brought to life.

Former FDNY Captain Brenda Berkman, who in 1977 brought the lawsuit that opened the door for women to join New York City's fire department, explained that while Title VII officially ended legal discrimination, a biased entry exam kept the fire department white and male until the court decision in *Berkman v. Koch*, in 1982, found that the physical exam violated Title VII and thus forced the FDNY to put a new exam in place. That year Berkman and 44 other women were sworn into the FDNY's ranks.

Stagehand Eileen MacDonald discussed the importance of women seeing one another on the job and in leadership positions. She described her struggle to have a voice in a male-dominated workplace. To be heard, she said, “you had to be confident but not overbearing...and this became an art form.” After joining Local One, IATSE, MacDonald organized for female leadership, founding a women's committee and getting elected to the executive board.

Judaline Cassidy, plumber and founder of Tools and Tiaras, highlighted the lack of encouragement girls and women receive in pursuing traditionally male-dominated jobs. She stressed the importance of cultivating women's enthusiasm for non-traditional trades and confidence in their



Erin Sullivan (left) and Cynthia Long – journeywomen electricians, Local 3, IBEW members, and activists for women in the skilled trades

ability to perform these jobs.

Erin Sullivan, electrician and member of Local 3 IBEW, discussed the need for solidarity among women in the non-traditional trades. Upon entering Local 3, Sullivan saw female electricians sidelined to “domestic” tasks – fetching coffee or sorting material – and realized she needed to “get the tools in [her] hands” to show male co-workers her capabilities. Sullivan suggested that women could share this and other tactics with each other, but only if they “stop walking past one another on the job.”

Sarinya Srisakul, firefighter and president of United Women Firefighters (UWF), spoke of the inequalities that still persist in the FDNY, noting that loneliness is a reality for women in traditionally male trades. In 2014, UWF

Members of the first class of FDNY women firefighters. From left: Brenda Berkman, Capt. Ret.; Ella McNair, Lt. Ret.; Lynn Porter Bernadotte, Firefighter Ret.; Katrina Cannon, Firefighter Ret.; and Rochelle Jones, Batt. Chief Ret.

founded a training program to prepare women for the FDNY's entry exam. That year the number of women in the FDNY hit an all-time high of 63 (out of 11,000 total). Srisakul emphasized the importance of women building alliances with people of color, LGBT individuals, and male co-workers who also seek change.

These tradeswomen's stories show that while change is possible, it depends on activists, like the night's speakers, who struggle not only to gain acceptance and recognition of their ability, but also to build structures to support the success of future generations of women. Activists working to make space for historically marginalized groups must work as hard today as ever to protect their gains and push for further progress. That includes remembering, celebrating and sharing their history of activism and reminding the public that the playing field was, and is, not equal and that change has taken incredibly hard work and come against all odds. Events like this one help advance this important work.

Sadye Stern is an organizer for the hotel workers' union in New York City.

NEW YORK LABOR HISTORY ASSOCIATION
Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives
70 Washington Square South, 10th Floor
New York, NY 10012

Inside

- ▶ Meet Commerford honorees, Bhairavi Desai and Tom Robbins
- ▶ Women in non-traditional trades
- ▶ A global history of the IWW
- ▶ The Paterson silk strike remembered
- ▶ Upcoming events
- ▶ And more

Work History News



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

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



Like us on Facebook / New York Labor History Association