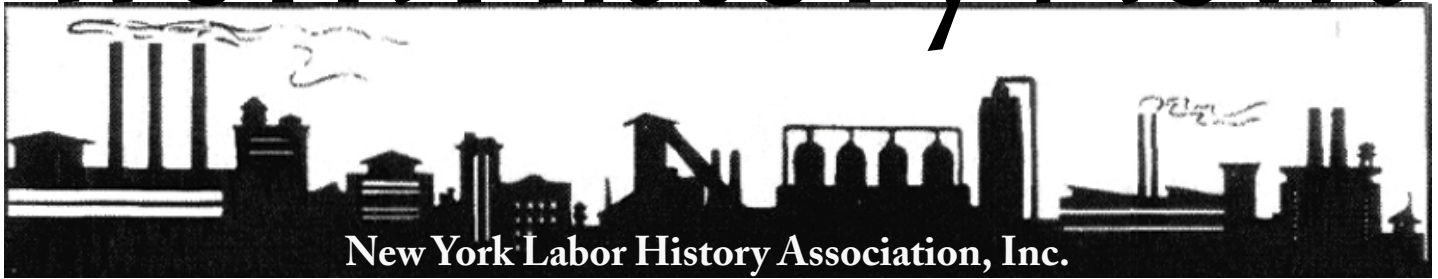


# Work History News



A Bridge Between Past and Present

Volume 40 No 1 Winter/Spring 2023

ENDING THE YEAR ON A HIGH NOTE

## The 2022 John Commerford Awards

**A**s always, the NY Labor History Association wrapped up the year by presenting its John Commerford Labor Education Award to two nonpareils in the field of labor education. The event was held via “Zoom”.

Following welcoming remarks by our association’s president, Irwin Yellowitz, and Michael Koncewicz of NYU’s Tamiment Library, we were delighted to hear from Princeton University Professor of History Sean Wilentz, an admirer of John Commerford tracing back to his appearance in the professor’s first book, “Chants democratic” (1984). Wilentz lauded Commerford as a labor intellectual, an editor, an abolitionist, and an anti-nativist.

### A marker for Commerford

We also learned that Brooklyn’s Green-Wood Cemetery will be erecting a marker on John Commerford’s gravesite, which is presently unmarked.



Dorothy Sue Cobble

The first Commerford Award for 2022 was presented by CUNY Sociology Professor Ruth Milkman (a previous Commerford winner) to Dorothy Sue Cobble, Professor Emerita of History and Labor Studies at Rutgers University. Cobble is an American historian, and a specialist in the study of work, social movements, and social policy. She is the author of prize-winning books including *Dishing It Out: Waitresses and Their Unions in the Twentieth Century* (1991), *The*



Melvyn Dubofsky

*Other Women’s Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America* (2005), and *The Sex of Class: Women Transforming American Labor* (2007). Her most recent book, *For the Many: American Feminists and the Global Fight for Democratic Equality*, reveals the grit, courage, and wisdom of the women who led the fight for economic justice and social democracy in the United States and abroad. Cobble also founded the Center for Women and Work, at Rutgers. Cobble grew up in a blue-collar

family in Atlanta in the 1950s, and the jobs she held while completing her education profoundly shaped her thinking about work and labor reform. But she told us that no one has all the answers; we each have one piece of the puzzle and must bring them together to develop a collective wisdom.

### Award to Professor Dubofsky

The second Commerford Award for 2022 was presented by CUNY History Professor Joshua Freeman (another Commerford winner) to Melvyn Dubofsky, Professor Emeritus of History at SUNY Binghamton, who has been an activist scholar and pioneering labor historian since the 1960s, helping to advance the field of “new labor history,” which focuses on the experiences of workers and social movements rather than institutions. He has written extensively about the role of politics and state action in the changing fortunes of the

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# Marking the Paterson Silk Strike

ON JUNE 26, 2022, a ceremonial re-dedication of the renovated "Lou Costello Park" introduced Patersonians to



a newly-erected historical marker with information about the great Silk Strike of 1913. Striking workers had met in halls located near the marker site until the police closed the halls and workers reassembled at the "Botto House" in nearby Haledon, where today one can stand on the same balcony from which IWW strike leaders addressed the crowds.

## MILESTONES — 100 Years Ago

### Minimum-Wage Law Struck Down

**1923 WAS THE YEAR** in which a federal minimum-wage law for women and children, enacted in the District of Columbia, was held by the U.S. Supreme Court to be an unconstitutional infringement of "liberty of contract," which, at that time, was deemed to be guaranteed by the Due Process Clause of the Fifth Amendment to the Constitution. (*Adkins v. Children's Hospital*) Since the Court majority believed that employers and employees "have an equal right to obtain from each other the best terms they can as the result of private bargaining," it would not allow government interference in the bargaining process. (This kind of equality had been described sardonically by Anatole France when he told us that "the law, in its majestic equality, forbids rich and poor alike to sleep under bridges, to beg in the streets, and to steal their bread.")

The dissenting opinion by Chief Justice Taft was more connected to reality: "...employees, in the class receiving least pay, are not upon a full level of equality of choice with their employer, and, in their necessitous circumstances, are prone to accept pretty much anything that is offered. They are peculiarly subject to the overreaching of the harsh and greedy employer." Taft understood that "liberty of contract" meant little to the average worker. However, with regard to "protective" legislation for women, an alternative view of who was being protected is discussed in the recent paper *The Women Themselves: Working Women's Opposition to Protective Labor Legislation in New York, 1913-1921*, by Rachel B. Tiven, our Bernard Bellush award-winner for 2022.

*Adkins* was overruled by the New Deal Supreme Court in 1937.

## Recent sports labor developments

Major League Baseball (MLB) Players' Association joins AFL-CIO...

MLB Players' Association to represent minor league players...

MLB owners to pay \$185 million to end class-action lawsuit by minor leaguers for alleged minimum-wage and overtime violations...

All MLB players have guaranteed-money contracts, but few in NFL do...

College "student-athletes" are now making money from "NIL" licensing deals (name, image, likeness).



## 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. For more information, visit us at [newyorklaborhistory.org](http://newyorklaborhistory.org).

President	Irwin Yellowitz
Vice-President	George Altomare
Secretary	Abbe Nosoff; Regina Olff
Treasurer	Peter Filardo
Editor	Keith Danish

## WALKING TOUR

# The 1982 Chinatown garment workers' strike

By Joe Doyle

**N**YLHA member and CUNY Professor Daniel Katz led a lively tour on May 21, 2022 of key sites in the 1982 Chinatown Garment Workers' Strike. Highlights included recollections by three veterans of the 1982 strike, whose battle cry was: "We are one." ILGWU organizer May Chen was particularly eloquent. She recalled that after many weeks of preparation – and an inspired rally in Chinatown's Columbus Park – the strike was won in a single day, July 15, 1982. Workers streamed out of factories densely packed into buildings on Mott, Mulberry, Elizabeth, Grand, and a dozen other Chinatown streets. Contractors never dreamed that ALL of their workers would walk out, but that's exactly what 20,000 garment workers did. Contractors got the message and signed the ILGWU contract they previously thought only the old-line manufacturers would agree to.

### Immigrant solidarity

Katz, the founder of People's Heritage Tours ([phtoursnyc.com](http://phtoursnyc.com)), enlisted strike participants, union organizers, and community historians to walk along on the tour, adding personal perspectives to the overview he presented of Chinatown 40 years ago when it still boasted a thriving garment industry. While garment factories had been fleeing Manhattan for decades, Chinatown factories made sportswear – which started booming in the 1970s – and sportswear fashions changed so rapidly, manufacturers wanted a quick-response local work force. Chinatown factory owners depended on their immigrant laborers – newly arrived in the wake of 1960s U.S. immigration reforms – but underestimated the iron in the backbone of the many Chinese-speakers in their shops.



Photos: Conky Lee

Tour leader Katz found visually arresting stops (in the shade on a 93F day!), beside a statue of Confucius, community murals, old law tenements, Columbus Park, and the Beaux Arts police prefecture (now featuring a Chinatown seniors' center) for his strike veterans and multi-generational community speakers to speak to us. Huiying Chan, a young grad student in creative writing at Rutgers-Newark, communicated the passion and hurt over anti-Asian violence that engendered a new mural at Mott and Mosco Streets (facing Wing On Wo & Co., the oldest family-owned business in Chinatown, which commissioned the mural by Jess X. Snow). Katz's walking tour ended with a riveting account by a Chinatown

activist of the long struggle to establish a day care center for working parents in Chinatown.

Kudos to Rachel Bernstein and LaborArts.org for commissioning this tour about the Chinatown Strike and for hosting a May 2 virtual book party for Wai Wah Chan's *Chinatown Heroes*, a high-energy retrospective of the strike. Go to LaborArts.org for a superb virtual exhibit on the strike. Other commemorative activities included a June 25 celebration in Chinatown's Columbus Park, site of the aforementioned workers' rally that paved the way for the dramatic, transformative strike, and an exhibit (running until May 2023) at Columbia University's Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Race.

# Taft-Hartley at 75

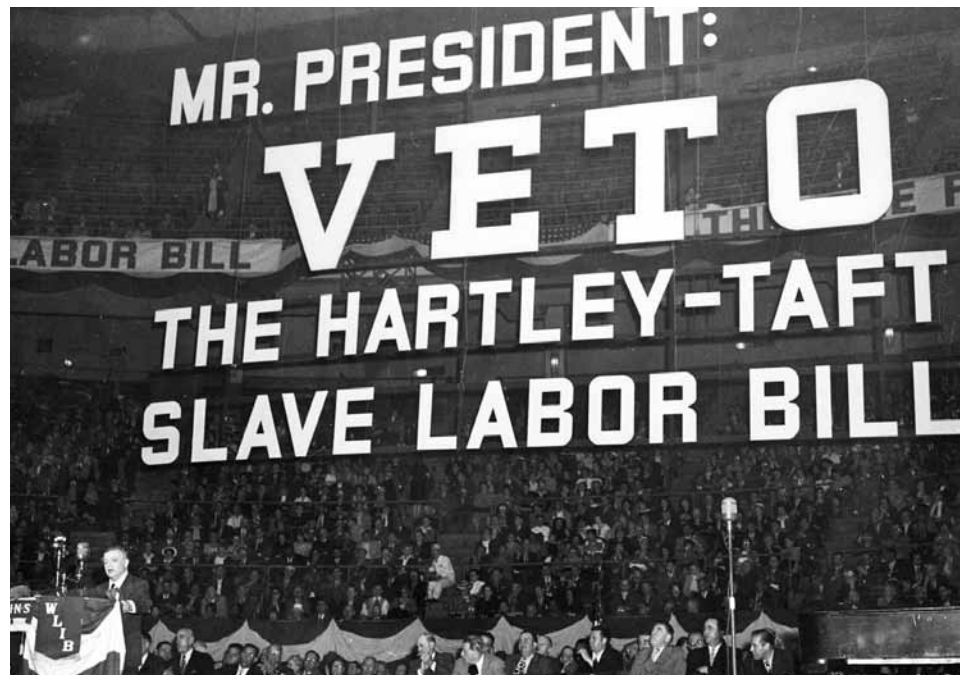
By Steve Golin

**T**he Labor Management Relations Act of 1947, better known as the Taft-Hartley Act, which was enacted on June 23, 1947 over the veto of President Truman, marked the end of a period of tremendous labor militancy. Taft-Hartley was a backlash against the real gains that working people had made. But at the same time, Taft-Hartley shows what was so radical about the labor movement. In Taft-Hartley, business and political leaders attacked the labor movement where it was most vital and egalitarian. They allowed “right-to-work” laws, granted corporations free speech, and gave presidents more authority. They pressured unions to purge radicals. They outlawed secondary boycotts. To see what scared business leaders and political leaders, read the Act backward, from the Act to the movement it was meant to curb.

During the Depression, the labor movement was dangerous. In contrast with today, when we talk about the labor movement, there really was a *movement*. One victory led to another. Radical strikes in 1934 led to pro-labor legislation – the Wagner Act of 1935 – which led to more strikes in 1937. Working people created new tactics, like the sit-down strike, which spread explosively. They were fighting for a better life for themselves and for a better world. Their instincts were egalitarian.

## Taming the labor movement

Workers had won collective bargaining rights in unprecedented numbers during the Depression and WWII. The Taft-Hartley Act authorized “right-to-work” state laws, slowing and reversing the growth of unions. It allowed corporations to hold compulsory anti-union meetings before union elections, which also made it harder to unionize. It gave more authority to the U.S. president to break strikes. The labor movement, from roughly 1934 to 1946, had pushed up the standard of living



ILGWU Pres. David Dubinsky speaks at rally against Taft-Hartley bill.

of most Americans, decreasing inequality. By deliberately empowering corporations and weakening workers, Taft-Hartley reversed these egalitarian trends.

The Taft-Hartley Act went after radicals, especially Communists. It required every union officer to swear that he or she did not support the overthrow of the US government and was not a Communist. During the Depression, militant strikes were often led by radicals. In 1934 alone, Trotskyists led a victorious battle in Minneapolis, Communists led a general strike in San Francisco, and socialists led the unemployed in support of workers’ demands in Toledo. All these leaders were radicals, who differed in ideology but agreed on unleashing the power from below. Under the pressure of Taft-Hartley, the CIO, which had emerged dynamically during the Depression, purged radicals from leadership. Taft-Hartley succeeded in taming the labor movement.

Perhaps the most revealing – and least famous – provision of Taft-Hartley was the ban on secondary

boycotts. Unionized workers, during the Depression, were not just trying to get a better deal for themselves. Often, they would actively support the strikes of other workers, in other industries, by boycotting or picketing a company that did business with the corporation that was being struck. They added their power to the power of the strikers, which made it much harder for corporations to win. By making secondary boycotts illegal, Taft-Hartley insisted workers mind their own business.

Taft-Hartley was designed to limit, weaken, contain, and tame the militant labor movement that emerged from below during the Depression. We gain a new appreciation of workers’ power from Taft-Hartley by reading the Act backward, seeing what it was designed to limit, weaken, contain, and tame.

*Steve Golin is Emeritus Professor of History at Bloomfield College. His books include “The Fragile Bridge: Paterson Silk Strike, 1913” and, most recently, “Women Who Invented the Sixties: Ella Baker, Jane Jacobs, Rachel Carson, and Betty Friedan”.*

## 2022 BERNHARDT PRIZE GOES TO

# How the Taxi Workers Won

The 2022 Debra E. Bernhardt Labor Journalism Prize was awarded to Molly Crabapple for her article, “How the Taxi Workers Won.” The winning article had been co-published by *The Nation* and *The Economic Hardship Reporting Project*.

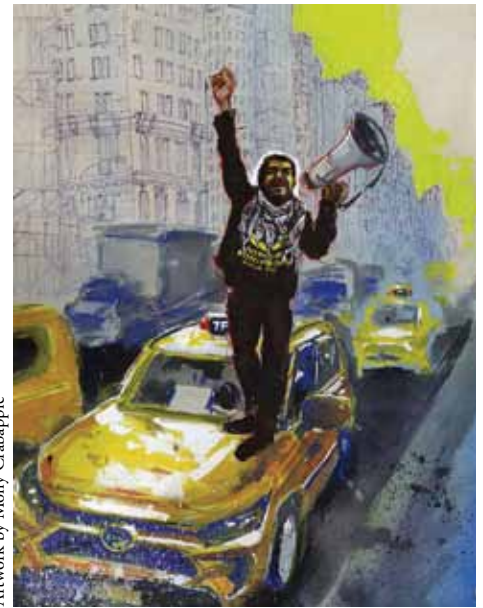
With COVID receding somewhat, it was possible to have a “live” event at NYU’s Tamiment Library in addition to online access. Along with Tamiment, other co-sponsors were Labor Arts, Metro NY Labor Communications Council, and the NYC Central Labor Council, AFL-CIO.

### A life-or-death struggle

Ms. Crabapple, an artist and writer based in New York, reported on the activism of the New York Taxi Worker Alliance, led by Bhairavi Desai, to mitigate the crushing debts these immigrant drivers had incurred to buy medallions before the crash of their market values. The author was an intimate observer of the organizing

activities of the drivers, including protests and hunger strikes, while despair drove some to suicide. In the end, though, substantial debt relief was obtained from the city. As Desai said, “[f]ailure was not an option.”

The evening’s event concluded with a lively panel discussion moderated by veteran investigative journalist Tom Robbins, featuring Claire Chang, a worker-organizer at REI, Mat Cusick, a former Amazon union organizer, and Joselyn Chuquillanqui, a Starbucks worker-organizer fired for her union work. These companies may have a positive public image but to the young workers on the inside, concerned about health and safety, the anti-union tactics were overwhelming and all too familiar to an audience versed in labor history. The panelists discussed their organizing methods, including use of social media, and critiqued the coverage of labor by the



Artwork by Molly Crabapple

general media. While it amplified their voices, it was deficient as to context and complexity of issues, but, as noted by Ms. Crabapple, the media does not do complexity so well.



## WANT TO LEAVE A LABOR LEGACY?

Consider making  
a bequest to the  
New York Labor History Association



## MILESTONES — 100 YEARS AGO

### Florence Rood becomes AFT President

#### IN 1923, FLORENCE ROOD

became the first woman president of a national union that included both men and women members, i.e., the American Federation of Teachers. Rood served in that position for two years. Her teaching career began in rural schools in Iowa and North Dakota, after which she moved to St. Paul, Minnesota, taught school and helped organize the Grade Teachers’ Organization. Rood also was active in the Working People’s Non-Partisan League and the Minnesota Farmer Labor Party.



The American Federation of Teachers, founded in 1916, now has 1.7 million members and its president since 2008 has been Randi Weingarten.

# In Memoriam

## BARBARA EHRENREICH

(1941-2022)

In her writings, she was “an explorer of prosperity’s dark side” and the vulnerabilities of the working and middle classes, said the *NY Times* in its obituary for Ehrenreich. Probably best known for “Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America,” in which she recounted her own undercover work in minimum-wage jobs and described her co-workers as follows: “...the camaraderie of people who are, in almost all cases, far too smart and funny and caring for the work they do and the wages they’re paid. The hope, of course, is that someday these people will come to know what they’re worth, and take appropriate action.”



## STAUGHTON LYND (1929-2022)

Historian, activist, and labor lawyer, he waged a lifelong struggle for peace, justice, and civil rights, culminating in years spent as a labor organizer and attorney. “He walked a path that was his own”, said historian Gar Alperovitz about Lynd, “...he was a very moral political figure rather than a tactical one.” Lynd was a conscientious objector to the Korean War and his antiwar activities during Vietnam cost him his passport and his teaching position at Yale. His books included “Solidarity Unionism,” “Rank and File”, and “Labor Law for the Rank and File.”



## JULIA REICHERT (1946-2022)

Filmmaker and educator, her documentaries included “Growing Up Female” and the labor films “Union Maids,” “American Factory,” “The Last Truck: Closing of a GM Plant” and “9 to 5: The Story of a Movement.” Ohio Senator Sherrod Brown called Reichert a friend, and said, “She was such a champion for working-class Americans who are still in search of the American dream; I will miss her unique storytelling and her ability to connect with all kinds of people on such a human level and tell their stories in respectful and empathetic ways.”



### THE TRIANGLE FIRE MEMORIAL

is currently being built on the site of the original fire in New York City. It will be one of the only memorials to workers, women, and immigrants in the country.

Find out how you can donate to help make this beautiful tribute to workers a reality at:  
[www.rememberthetrianglefire.org](http://www.rememberthetrianglefire.org)

Join us and be part of history!

# The 2022 John Commerford Awards

(continued from page 1)  
American labor movement, and he stresses the role culture and the development of capitalism play in the American labor movement. Among his most notable books are *When Workers Organize: New York City in the Progressive Era* (1967), *We Shall Be All: A History of the Industrial Workers of the World* (1969), *John L. Lewis: A Biography* (1977, co-written with Warren Van Tine); *The State and Labor in Modern America* (1994); and *Hard Work: The Making of a Labor Historian* (2001). Dubofsky

drew for us a colorful picture of the pre-gentrification Brooklyn where he grew up long ago and explained how he became a labor historian by accident. That “accidental” career, and his many years of teaching, writing and mentoring, resulted in many honors and awards. We also salute Mel for his service on the Board of the NY Labor History Association.

## Tributes and recognition

The annual Bellush (graduate) and Wertheimer (undergraduate) Awards for labor history papers

by students were awarded, respectively, to Rachel B. Tiven of the CUNY Graduate Center, for *The Women Themselves: Working Women's Opposition to Protective Labor Legislation in New York, 1913-1921*, and to Peter Baltes of Notre Dame University, for *An Occupied City: The U.S. Army's Defeat of the 1919 Steel Strike in Gary, Indiana and the Colonial Origins of the Domestic Surveillance State*.

Jon Bloom paid tribute to the late Larry Cary, a co-founder of our Association and a Commerford awardee, who died in 2021. Cary was

an organizer who became a lawyer for workers and unions. Information about his life appeared in *Work History News* last year.

The evening was also graced with opening and closing songs by Treya Lam, “Keep the Flowers Growing” and “Lean on Me”.

Thanks to NYU's Tamiment Library for its “Zoom” hosting services, and especially to the Patrons and others who made generous donations to support the Commerford event and the ongoing activities of the NY Labor History Association.

## NYLHA ON PARADE



Keith Danish, Kimberly Schiller and her daughter Annalee Campiglia, and Joe Doyle carried the Association's banner up Fifth Avenue in the NYC Labor Day Parade on September 10, 2022.

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*... 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](http://newyorklaborhistory.org) — and if you're not a member yet, please join us!**



Like us on Facebook / New York Labor History Association