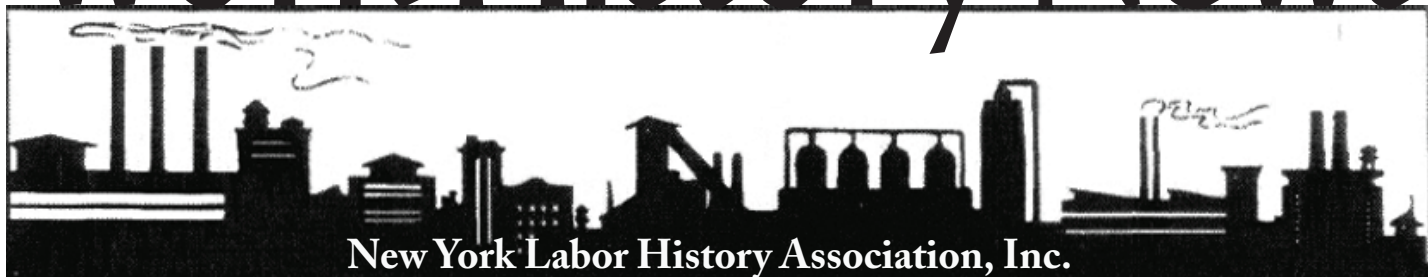


Work History News



New York Labor History Association, Inc.

A Bridge Between Past and Present

Volume 40 No 2 Summer/Fall 2023

Clara Lemlich Awards 2023

By Sherry Kane

On Friday, May 19, 2023, over 150 people packed the auditorium at the Museum of the City of New York to honor six incredible women at the Clara Lemlich Awards for Social Activism. Started in 2011 to honor the dynamic organizer who, in 1909, declared “I have something to say,” and urged her co-workers to go out on strike to improve conditions in the garment industry, the award is given to women who have dedicated their lives to changing the world.

Meeting the winners, in-person

Back in person for the first time since 2019, the event was organized by LaborArts and the Remember the Triangle Fire Coalition and supported by the 21st Century ILGWU Heritage Fund and the Puffin Foundation. The 2023 honorees were Black and Latina cultural correspondent **Angela Fontanez**, quality of life activist **Olive Freud**, civil rights and UFT organizer **Velma Hill**, Chinatown union leader **Alice Ip**, and prison reform advocate **Barbara Martinsons**. In honor of Clara Lemlich’s daughter Rita Margules, who passed away in March, Holocaust educator **Anita Weisbord** received an award posthumously.

After a rousing rendition of *Bread and Roses* and *Solidarity Forever* by the New York City Labor Chorus, Clara Lemlich’s great-grandson, Adam Schaffer suggested that, like Ms.



Photo: Gary Schoichet

Award winners (l to r) Velma Hill, Barbara Martinsons, Olive Freud, Angela Fontanez, and Alice Ip

Weisbord, “we must not be bystanders, we must be ‘upstanders’ and speak out against bigotry in all its forms.”

Introduced by several formerly incarcerated women whose lives she touched, Barbara Martinsons explained, “I imagined that those I taught and mentored might coalesce...into a dynamic and progressive force to establish people-oriented policy and heal the world or, at least, our corner of it. In Hebrew, the phrase is Tikkun Olam – repair the world. As I look out at the audience, success seems possible and maybe inevitable.”

Changing the world

Civil rights and union activist Velma Hill agreed. Attempting to integrate a Chicago area beach in 1960, Ms. Hill was injured by a mob of young white men. She persevered and credited her lifetime of activism to being a team with her husband Norman Hill, who helped organize the 1963 March on Washington.

“We decided at Rainbow Beach that we would try to change the world or at least a corner of the world,” she said.

Honoree Alice Ip was instrumental in mobilizing for the 1982 Chinatown Strike and paid tribute to garment workers, especially immigrant workers, by reciting an original poem in Chinese and English. And Angela Fontanez, who helped foster the media careers of people of color over the years, remembered her shock at learning she was the only female producer of color for a major network in the country when she began her career at WNET Channel 13 in the late 1960s.

Finally, Olive Freud, who is still fighting against unbridled real estate development in her neighborhood after 30 years, reminded the audience that we can all do our share to save public space in New York City.

For more information on the Clara Lemlich awardees over the years, visit www.laborarts.org.

DEBRA E. BERNHARDT LABOR JOURNALISM PRIZE 2023 CALL FOR ENTRIES

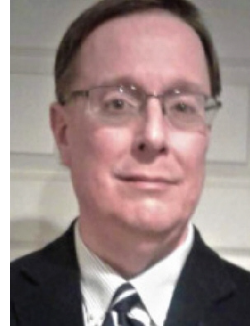


THE BERNHARDT PRIZE is an award of \$1000 given to an article that furthers the understanding of the history of working people. Articles focused on historical events AND articles about current issues (work, housing, organizing, health, education) that include historical context are both welcome. The work should be published in print or online between August 31, 2022 and August 30, 2023. To enter see www.laborarts.org/bernhardt



Grave marker of 19th Century labor leader John Commerford, now being installed at Green-Wood Cemetery, Brooklyn.

In Memoriam



KENNETH KEARNS, who served on the Board of our association, passed away at age 65 on January 23, 2023. His government service included almost 13 years as Analyst/Manager at the NYC Department of

Environmental Protection, as well as other roles in the DEP. More recently, he was a Grievance Representative for the Organization of Staff Analysts. Rest in peace, Ken.

WANT TO LEAVE A LABOR LEGACY?

Consider making a bequest to the

New York Labor History Association

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.

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

When Mexico's working people called on American unions and the left for help

By Dan La Botz

THE MEXICAN REVOLUTION (1910-1940) was a long, complicated affair, but it was in large part an upheaval from below by the country's working people: peasants, miners, railroad workers, and small ranchers. America's labor movement and the Left, from Samuel Gompers, founder of the American Federation of Labor, to railroad-workers' leader Eugene V. Debs of the Socialist Party, initially supported the revolution, first against the dictator Porfirio Díaz then against the usurper General Victoriano Huerta. The American labor left supported the revolutionary movement at first, when it was led between 1900 and 1910 by Ricardo Flores Magón and his anarchist Mexican Liberal Party, and then after 1910 when it was led by the capitalist Francisco Madero. Madero became president in 1911, was overthrown and assassinated by the rightwing Victoriano Huerta in 1913, but the revolutionaries rose up again and soon drove Huerta from power.

The war of the factions

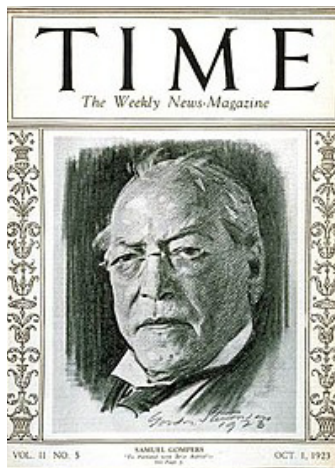
Then in 1914, the revolution split into two factions, one made up of modernizing capitalists led by the state-builders Venustiano Carranza and Álvaro Obregón and the other led by Emiliano Zapata, head of the Liberating Army of the South in Morelos and by Francisco "Pancho" Villa,



Venustiano Carranza

chief of the Division of the North based in Chihuahua. Carranza's group, known as the Constitutionalists, and the Zapata-Villa group, the Conventionists, went to war with each other. When that took place, the American labor movement and the left chose to support Carranza's bourgeois faction over the plebian Conventionists.

Samuel Gompers' decision to side with Carranza's capitalist faction is hardly surprising. Already in the 1870s he had broken with his Marxist associates and rejected Marxism as well as the industrial unionism of the Knights of Labor. He turned his craft union, the Cigar Makers, into the first American business union, arguing that it would simply fight for "more" within the capitalist system. He built the AFL on that model of craft unions that accepted the capitalist system. His support for the governments of Carranza, Obregón and Plutarco Elías Calles that followed and for the official state-controlled unions was thoroughly consistent with his politics. Moreover, as he grew closer to President



Samuel Gompers

Woodrow Wilson, he adopted a program of AFL labor imperialism through the Pan American Federation of Labor that he created.

A cautious course

But Debs? Why did Debs tacitly support the Madero and Carranza governments over both the anarchists and the plebian revolutionaries like Zapata and Villa? When the anarchists called upon peasants to seize the land and workers to seize their factories, Debs asked "...what would the masses in their present ignorant and unorganized state do with them after having obtained them? It would simply add calamity to their calamities, granting that this impossible feat was capable of achievement."¹

Rather than calling upon the workers to take over the land and the factories, Debs wrote that, "The right course for the Mexican revolutionists to pursue in this crisis, in my opinion, is to lay the foundation for economic and political organization of the

dispossessed and enslaved masses, throughout the Republic."² Without explicitly stating support for Madero, Debs hoped for the creation of a bourgeois democracy which would make possible the organization of workers in labor unions and the creation of a socialist party. That – not an anarchist-led social revolution – was the task of the day.

Later, after the assassination of Carranza in 1920, the AFL and the Socialists generally supported the new state led by Obregón and Calles, even as it suppressed the independent unions of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), the anarchists, and the Communists. During the 1930s when the left nationalist Lázaro Cárdenas became president, the Congress of Industrial Organizations established ties to the Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM), the state-supported labor federation. Those early decisions by the AFL, the Socialists, and the CIO laid the basis for the close ties between the AFL-CIO and the CTM labor bureaucracies that deepened during the Cold War and the anti-Communist purges of the left in both countries.

Mexican working people called on the American labor left for help, but the close ties between Democratic President Woodrow Wilson and Gompers and the social democratic politics of the

(continued on page 6)

Jane LaTour made the world a bet

By Joe Doyle

Jane LaTour made the world a better place by writing articles for the Public Employee Press about underappreciated city employees in DC 37. (Happily, Jane was recognized by her peers on the Metro NY Labor Communications Council – twice winning their Mary Heaton Vorse Award given for outstanding achievement in labor journalism).

Jane made the world a better place by struggling against gender discrimination by employers and by trade unions themselves. Jane's 2008 book *Sisters in the Brotherhoods: Working Women Organizing for Equality in New York City* is a user's manual for tackling workplace discrimination. Jane knew from bitter experience what it was like for male union leaders to minimize the concerns of their female rank-and-file. And Jane wasn't naïve. She once organized a virtually all-women electronics shop – only to have those same women vote a man into office as their business agent.

Worker, organizer, advocate

Jane's gift for organizing drew on seven years' factory experience. Andy Piascik describes her factory years in a must-read article for *Counterpunch*, *Jane LaTour: 50+ Years in the Labor Movement (And Still Going)*. <https://www.counterpunch.org/2018/06/15/jane-latour-50-years-in-the-labor-movement-and-still-going/> Jane led a nighttime wildcat walkout in a Philadelphia factory because her fellow workers were freezing, because management refused to fix the broken windows. By the next evening shift, every broken window was fixed. Jane thrilled at the memory of their "drive-out" – "seeing all of the car lights ahead of me as we left the factory."

Jane passionately believed in trade unionism. Among her greatest achievements is a stunningly beautiful map of 350 sites important in NYS labor history, *The History of Labor in New York State*. It was printed for our association



in 1998, <http://newyorklaborhistory.org/Map.htm>. Jane chaired the committee that produced the handsomely illustrated map, requiring years of research, patient encouragement of her fellow team members, and, at one point, rescuing the enterprise from dissolution – at the insistence of a doomsayer on the committee appalled by the history of racism in the union movement as a whole.

Jane burnished the principle of union democracy. She gave heart to isolated, discouraged union dissidents – hearing them out, writing about them, editing their newsletter, *Hard Hat News*. Jane championed individuals who dared to criticize their union leadership. She knew what they were talking about – she'd had her own run-ins with union bosses too far removed from the day-to-day insults and injuries on the shop floor.

Jane had a mystical devotion to conferences. Among Jane's proudest accomplishments were conferences she organized for Cornell's Industrial and Labor Relations school in NYC. Jane organized a memorable conference for the NY Labor History Association on the theme of labor history in NY State, to celebrate the publication of NYLHA's labor history map. In 2019 Jane organized NYLHA's spring conference: "Taking the Lead: Labor and Global Warming – Our History, Activism, and Challenges."



Memorial brick for Jane, recently installed in the "Silk Walk" at the Botto House / American Labor Museum.

Two weeks before she died, Jane dictated the playlist for the party she wanted held in her memory: "First! *My Generation* (her eyes glittered thinking of the song). Second: *A Change Is Gonna Come*. [Sam Cooke]. Third: *Philadelphia* [Springsteen]." She confided, "my mother died when I was four. My whole life, I've been determined not to get cancer. I stopped eating meat when I was 20. I stopped using deodorant [when news stories labelled five carcinogenic ingredients]. How could this happen to me?"

Losing her mother cemented Jane's fierce love for her three sisters. I think it gave her the iron will to fight to democratize the union movement and carve out an enduring place for women in every trade. It's consoling that Jane had a husband as loving and devoted as Russ Smith. It's consoling that Jane was visited

ter place

by her son and youngest grandson in the weeks before she died. And we have a book of consolation to look forward to – provisionally titled *Rebels With a Cause: An Oral History of the Fight for Democracy in New York City Unions*. Andy Piascik will make the final edits to finish the book for Jane. Jane did a bang-up job, traveling the United States publicizing *Sisters in the Brotherhoods*. Sisters and brothers, Jane counted on all of us to do all we can – to publicize *Rebels With a Cause* when it comes out.



MIRIAM FRANK

WE ARE ALL grieving for our loss of Jane. She was a brilliant character and a profound friend. She gave her best as best she could.



IRWIN YELLOWITZ

NYLHA President

WE WORKED TOGETHER for over two decades. She was a major leader in the NYLHA. Whether it was program planning, adding new people to our Executive Board, working assiduously to increase our membership, among others, there was Jane at the center of all we did. Jane had that important, but rare, ability to not only propose a project, often something outside the box, but then carry it through and make it a success. It was such a pleasure to work with her because she could combine conviction and cordiality. You knew what she stood for, but she respected what you stood for. In the end that produced good results.

She also was an author with a well-regarded book, and a second in the final stage of revision for publication by the University of Illinois Press. I am pleased that a colleague will be able to conclude the work on this volume so that it will be further testament to Jane's creativity.

I mourn her loss.

KYLE FRIEND

JANE LATOUR was a brilliant writer, a fearless unionist, and one of the best people I've ever met. I met Jane after finishing her book, *Sisters in the Brotherhoods*, while conducting research on the struggles faced by tradeswomen. I e-mailed her to see if she'd meet over coffee to talk about how industry conditions had evolved since she published it a decade ago.

She agreed – quickly – and set a time to meet at a nearby coffee shop the following day. As we pushed in our chairs to say our goodbyes after our hours-long conversation, I reached out to shake her hand and thank her for the help. It was, she said, “for the cause.” She hugged me instead. Over the next five years, despite our fifty-year age difference, we became good friends.

Her optimism and hope for the future of labor was infectious; her wisdom, drawn from decades of tirelessly fighting injustice, was profound. It was a privilege to know Jane and to call her my friend – a sentiment I am sure is shared by many. May her legacy and memory live on.

MIKE KONCEWICZ

JANE LATOUR was always a shining light within the Tamiment community. She was dedicated to documenting the history of working women and played a key role in building our archive. I'm lucky she was my friend, and I looked forward to the books she sent us for my daughter's birthday.

KEITH DANISH, Editor of *Work History News*

NO ONE COULD replace Jane as editor of this newsletter, but her support and kindness inspired me to do my best to carry on with the work. I will never forget her.

We intended to publish this poem when Jane carried out her plan to move back to her beloved New England. It was not to be. Now, and with the approval of her dear husband Russ, we offer Jane's goodbye to New York.

Goodbye, New York

(Song from the right side of the Hudson)

You were the lyrics I sang driving up the West Side Highway
My first morning in New York City
Residence secured with a rent-controlled apartment on the Upper, Upper West Side
Listening to Duke Ellington on my radio – telling me to “Take the A-train” – Yes!

You were the bodega where I bought a big bag of cheese popcorn after walking

The length of the island the afternoon of the August blackout

Stacks of *The Times* we almost never read
Except for the headlines

You were the tiny brass mailbox key
The joy of “us” and the sorrow of “me”
Moving day, your many loads
And my Christmas gift *War Torn* for company

You were the balcony in Grand Central
Police positioned above us
Smacking their hands together – encased in leather
As echoes of our chants bounced off the walls – our opposition to the distant war

The post-Bluestocking's-book talk blintzes at Katz's Deli
Across from Evan's home where she stood me up the first time I went to interview her – the pride of Local 3 females
UT – “To go where no woman has gone before.”

You were the prizefight we watched in a bar
My brother and I
Visiting – and calling the Police to find a local sports bar
The lightning-strike first kiss on Payson Avenue
A second repeated on the path in Inwood Hill Park near the baseball fields
The occasional truth that the fortune cookie tells
“The harder you work, the luckier you get.”

Sinatra still singing at Radio City
When Mom and Dad took me to see Pal Joey
Mom's worried whispers to Dad about its “suitability”
A call from the Port Authority to Princeton relatives
Runaway fleeing from suburbia to safety

The baseball team we cheered from the rooftop on Beekman
The Mets victorious – as the air filled with tickertape
The fireworks we watched from the jam-packed street north of 14th
Darkness pierced by bursting colors raining overhead

My skyline,
My byline – so long in coming
My buzzer and door
Now you're the dream
We lived – “before.”

– Jane LaTour
Sunday, August 28, 2022

When Mexico's working people called on American unions

(continued from page 3)

Socialist Party marginalized the U.S. solidarity movement of the far left – the anarchists, IWW, and later the CP. Solidarity between U.S. and

Mexican workers remains to be built.

Dan La Botz is a co-editor of *New Politics* (newpol.org) and the author of several books on the Mexican labor

movement. Brill will publish his forthcoming book *Riding with the Revolution: The American and the International Left in the Mexican Revolution, 1900-1925*.

(Endnotes)

1. Eugene V. Debs, “The Crisis in Mexico,” *International Socialist Review*, Vol. XII, No. 1, 23.
2. Ibid.

June Smith receives Philoine Fried Award

By Joe Doyle

The second presentation of the Philoine Fried Award took place via Zoom on May 18, 2023. This award is named after our association's former president and (until she was 99) treasurer. The award goes to an unsung trade unionist who has made an extraordinary contribution of their time and talent to improve the lives of working people. (Philoine Fried Award winners aren't union officials. They don't get paid for the extra work – they volunteer – and they don't usually get praise or recognition for the “Jimmy Higgins” work they contribute.)

Kimberly Schiller gave an enthusiastic, heartfelt introduction to June Smith, a retired teacher turned volunteer extraordinaire: “My union president handed me a paper, told me I needed to run a phone bank for the upcoming election and to choose a date. So, I chose a date. June and her husband Ron brought the phones and laptops, set up shop at my local president's home, gathered the troops, and made calls. June has been inspiring all from the get-go, and her warm and welcoming disposition has inspired countless others.”

“In her first year of teaching (Physical Education in Smithtown, Long Island) her local was without a contract and she took part in the picketing before and after school without any trepidation. By her second year of teaching, she was ... asked to be a delegate at the Representative Assembly. June has been to every RA since.”

Many inspired her

The Fried Award winner June Smith spoke animatedly of Albert Shanker, George Altomare, and other New York City UFT leaders who inspired her own NYS United Teachers local on Long Island. June said she never was afraid to join a picket line or take on roles in her local teacher's union because her union officers were so helpful and encouraging. She loves the NYSUT Representative



June Smith



Philoine Fried

Assembly – meeting different locals, debating resolutions, and taking action – same for the Committee of 100 – coming together to meet legislators. She is inspired to see younger unionists exercising a strong voice in their union.

Leyla Vural had prepared an oral history of Philoine Fried in 2016. She played excerpts: “I am Philoine Fried, daughter of Sidney Hillman and Bessie Abramowitz” – who used to say, “I was Bessie Abramowitz before he was Sidney Hillman,” which is true.

“From the very beginning, we knew what my parents were doing, because we

were a part of their life, not just left aside ... If my mother couldn't come home sometimes on a weekend, I remember we were taken to Pennsylvania, where she was organizing, and we would walk on the picket line with her.”

Sidney Hillman and Bessie Abramowitz were key organizers of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America. After the Fried Award was presented, we watched the 1964 documentary about the ACWA, *The Inheritance*. We saw rare newsreel footage of Bessie walking out on strike in 1910 from her Hart, Schaffner & Marx factory in Chicago. The film included a dramatic reenactment of Sidney and Bessie forming the ACWA in a breakaway union convention in Nashville in 1914 – and hungry picket lines as courts rained down injunctions on ACWA strikes in the 1920s.

The role of “The Amalgamated”

A passage from Vural's oral history captured Philoine's impulse towards volunteering: “I was a member of Workmen's Circle and I ... somehow ... got connected with the Jewish Labor Committee ... so I walked in there one day and said, “Do you need any help?” So, I stayed there for about 30 years. I was in charge of the papers, the filing, the archives, all of that.”

Another highlight of the award ceremony was SUNY Cortland history professor Karen Pastorello's commentary on *The Inheritance*. She said the Amalgamated not only stabilized a chaotic garment industry by winning improved wages, reasonable hours, and a grievance procedure, it also pioneered in reaching out to workers in areas beyond the shop. Thus, the Amalgamated developed housing for workers at reasonable cost, established a bank to serve the needs of working people, offered educational opportunities, and helped its members enormously through unemployment benefits at a time when government unemployment insurance programs did not exist.

MILESTONES —60 Years Ago

EQUAL PAY ACT OF 1963



CONGRESS PASSED THE Equal Pay Act in May of 1963, and President Kennedy signed it into law the next month. As a result, the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 was amended so that covered employers shall not discriminate between employees “on the basis of sex” in the payment of wages for jobs performed under similar working conditions, the performance of which requires [substantially] equal skill, effort, and responsibility, with certain exceptions such as for seniority or merit systems. In 1972, the Act was amended to apply it to “white-collar” employment. The Equal Pay Act is administered and enforced by the EEOC as well as through lawsuits by aggrieved employees.

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