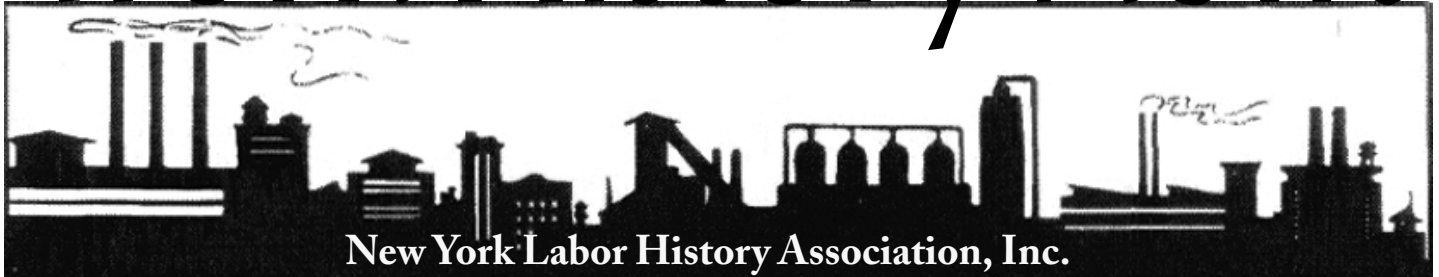


Work History News



A Bridge Between Past and Present

Volume 41 No 1 Winter/Spring 2024

A Commerford attends the Commerford awards

On December 5, 2023, we closed out a year of nationwide labor activism by joining together virtually for the thirty-seventh annual John Commerford Labor Education Awards. NYLHA President Irwin Yellowitz welcomed all attendees and reminded us about the significance of John Commerford, the 19th Century labor leader. Then, a special greeting was offered by Janine Commerford Sellers, a great-great-granddaughter of John Commerford, whose family is most grateful for our efforts to keep her ancestor's name and history from being forgotten, including the placement of a marker on his gravesite in Brooklyn's Green-Wood Cemetery.

Covering the public sector

Reuven Blau presented a Commerford Award to Richard Steier. Mr. Blau is a senior reporter at the online non-profit news site *The City*, where he covers criminal justice issues. He recently co-authored an oral history of the Rikers Island detention facility. Award-winner Steier is a veteran journalist specializing in labor issues with a focus on



Richard Steier
New York City's public sector. He was a reporter, editor and/or columnist for many years at *The Chief*, which covers municipal government, civil service and labor issues in New York. He then became a communications specialist for the UFT. Steier also worked for the *New York Post* and WCBS-TV. He has been a prominent voice, helping the public to understand municipal and labor history, and labor disputes, warts and all.

Chris Brooks presented a Commerford Award to Rebecca Kolins Givan. Mr. Brooks studied under Prof. Givan at the University of Massachusetts and is the chief strategist for UAW President



Rebecca Kolins Givan
Shawn Fain, devising the "Stand Up Strike" strategy which recently led the auto workers to substantial gains vis-à-vis their employers. Award-winner Givan is Associate Professor of Labor Studies and Employment Relations in the School of Management and Labor Relations at Rutgers University.

A scholar and activist

Her labor activism at Rutgers resulted in historic gains for adjunct faculty and graduate workers. She continues to be an activist as well as a scholar, working with union leaders as well as rank and file leaders. The most recent of her many writings is

Strike for the Common Good, which she co-edited.

Also, Board member Brian Greenberg announced the award of our Bellush Prize for an outstanding labor history paper by a graduate student. This year's recipient was Salem Elzway, of the University of Michigan, for "Arms of the State: A History of the Industrial Robot in Postwar America," concerning the political economy of industrial robots from 1940 to 1980, and how state policies concerned with military power and economic productivity intersected with the work of an array of public and private actors to develop and deploy industrial robotics.

Yancy Abril delighted us with songs to open and close the program, *Lift Every Voice and Sing* and *Lean on Me*.

We are grateful for the support of NYU's Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives and of Labor Arts, as well as our Association's planning committee comprised of Rachel Bernstein, Sherry Kane, Debra Bergen, Kyle Friend and Kimberly Schiller.

MILESTONES – 100 Years Ago

The Immigration Act of 1924

The Johnson-Reed Act to restrict immigration was signed into law by President Calvin Coolidge on May 24, 1924, “to preserve the ideal of U.S. homogeneity,” according to the State Department. It passed Congress with veto-proof majorities. The law’s best-known feature was a quota system, building on an “Emergency Quota Act of 1921” and limiting immigration to 2% of any given nation’s residents in the U.S. as counted in the 1890 census, with a total annual cap on immigration of 150,000.



The American Federation of Labor supported the act; it had even supported more severe measures to restrict immigration, believing that they would protect American labor. AFL President Gompers wrote that “[l]abor does not desire to erect a wall around our country and prevent the poor of other nations from entering...there should be and must be some restriction of immigration that will prevent disintegration of American economic standards.” Racist and anti-Radical arguments were also offered in support of the legislation. But the ILGWU was an example of an immigrant-rich union that opposed the 1924 Act.

Substantial liberalization of the immigration laws did not come until 1965; before then, U.S. immigration laws prevented many refugees from Nazism and other oppressive conditions from obtaining sanctuary in this country.



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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.

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Editor	Keith Danish

Grace Abbott: A life among the shock troops

By John Sorensen

During World War I, American newspaper writers coined a provocative expression: “the shock troops.” The term designated those elite soldiers who were being ordered into the War’s most perilous combat offensives – into the very shock of the battle.

One day at about this time, a young woman named Grace Abbott came across that journalistic phrase. The woman was an ardent pacifist and an anti-war protester – all the same, the terminology of warfare never seemed to be far from her lips. She spoke of the “casualties” lost and of the “battlefront service” given by her colleagues in the struggles for human rights.

A voice for women and children

Grace Abbott was immediately struck by the pertinence of the newspaper’s expression as it might be applied to a different kind of conflict – one in which she herself was deeply engaged. Before long, she was forcefully asserting that “The movement to end child labor has – in every country – supplied ‘the shock troops’ in the struggle for decent working conditions for all citizens.” It was no exaggeration that the early twentieth century crusade for children’s rights truly was being carried on in a war zone.

Grace Abbott was the great American champion of children’s rights – bringing healthcare and financial assistance to mothers and infants who, in earlier days, had been abandoned to sickness and death; and, too, she was leading the fight to end child labor.

In 1907, Grace Abbott boldly left behind her well-to-do rural home to live for several years amid the desperately poor immigrants of urban Chicago alongside her mentor, Nobel Prize-winner Jane Addams. There – settled among the newly arrived Greeks and Poles and Russian Jews of the neighborhood – Abbott stood up in court for a young



Grace Abbott

Bohemian victim of rape; she organized help for crippled and defrauded Italian laborers; she brought hope and pragmatic solutions to the problems of thousands of America’s newest citizens.

Grace also worked as a muckraking journalist for the *Chicago Evening Post*. There she told a wide audience of readers about the plight of “the lost immigrant girls” – young women newly arrived in the U.S., speaking little or no English, who were being kidnapped and forced into prostitution and slave labor. And, as the Director of the Immigrants’ Protective League, she became an influential national leader, defending the rights of her immigrant friends before even the President of the United States.

Perhaps the crowning achievement of Grace’s career as an immigration activist came in January 1912, when she was called to Washington to testify before Congress about an oppressive “literacy test” that was being proposed to restrict future immigration. She was ardently opposed to the bill, protesting, “It’s going to establish an unfair standard that will keep out people who, through no fault of their own, have grown up without the opportunity for schooling.” Even after her strong testimony, the harsh bill was adopted by the Congress. But it never became law. It was crushed by a Presidential veto. Why? As President Taft

explained: “It was the statement of a young woman, Grace Abbott, at a hearing I held, that persuaded me to veto that restriction.”

Director Abbott soon thereafter became the first person appointed by the U.S. to a committee of the League of Nations – an event that was hailed at New York’s “Women’s Council,” according to one witness, “as if it were the opening of heaven itself.”

At last, Abbott was named to be one of the top women in the U.S. government: leading, for many years, the bitterly contested national fight against child labor as Chief of the U.S. Children’s Bureau.

She often took, for her trailblazing efforts, the calumny of male politicians. She was decried as “a would-be woman boss carrying out Shylock political deals” and as “a menopausal maniac with a Mussolini complex.” In response to these insults, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt came to her friend’s defense by calling Grace Abbott “one of the great women of our day ... a definite strength which we count on for use in battle.”

A “great humanitarian”

Chief Abbott was the first woman in American history to be nominated to a Presidential cabinet post: Secretary of Labor in the Hoover administration. She was also, therefore, the first woman attacked for aspiring to such a position. She became the center of a volatile national campaign – during which her nomination was supported by the likes of civil rights leader W.E.B. Du Bois and resisted, ironically and successfully, by Hoover himself. Abbott’s personal defeat in her hopes for the cabinet position was, nonetheless, a victory in the progress of women in government.

As Chief of the United States Children’s Bureau, Abbott ran the very first federal grants-in-aid welfare program in U.S. history: the influential Maternity

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Alex Press wins 2023 Bernhardt Labor Journalism Award

By Joe Doyle

Journalist Alex Press won this year's Bernhardt Labor Journalism Award for her July 21, 2023 *Jacobin* article, "Hollywood Is on Strike Against High-Tech Exploitation." Press is a staff writer at *Jacobin* magazine, where she covers the labor movement. Her writing has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Nation*, and *The New Republic*, among other publications.

In her acceptance speech Alex embraced "the exciting moment" we're currently living through – with strikes of screen actors, screenwriters, auto workers, and Las Vegas casino workers – enjoying overwhelming support by the American people. She took note, though, as well, of the tragedy of the current moment – with 36 journalists killed in the past month in Israel-Palestine, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists. [Note: The Bernhardt event took place on November 8, 2023.]

Tamiment Library's Shannon O'Neill hosted the evening at NYU's Bobst Library and greeted the attendees. Kate Whalen, Communications Director of the NYC Central Labor Council, who is one of the 5 judges of the Bernhardt Award, praised Alex Press's labor journalism. Rachel Bernstein, another judge, organized the fine awards ceremony. Rachel encouraged audience members to subscribe to Kate Whalen's digital newsletter for the Central Labor Council, *Every Friday Morning*. Rachel also made a pitch for NYLHA's Dec. 5th Commerford Awards – AND to join NYLHA.

A.I. threatens journalism

A highlight of the awards ceremony was a digital slide show by Debra Bernhardt's daughter, Sonia Peshe Bernhardt Bloom. Sonia showed photos of her mother launching her WNYC radio series, "New Yorkers at Work"; Debra's publication party for *Ordinary*



Alex Press

People, Extraordinary Lives (a paperback version of which NYLHA was selling in the back of the hall); and two incandescent family photos – of Debra at Tamiment – holding Sonia in one – and her brother in the other. At the sound of Sonia's voice, Debra's grandson, 2-year-old Amaro, raced to the microphone to salute his aunt, with his parents Ada and Alex Bernhardt Bloom, in hot pursuit. Alex opined, "Amaro gave us a Debra Bernhardt moment." Everyone present was charmed.

A panel discussion: "Reports from the Front Lines – Labor Faces Artificial Intelligence," sparked compelling discussion. Jane Chung (*Justice Speaks*) moderated, alerting her audience to the imminent dangers of "A.I. ghost bosses" and armies of "data workers training the A.I. model." Susan DeCarava, President of the NewsGuild of New York, noted that A.I. is a persistent threat to the 6,000 members of the NewsGuild. In recent years, throughout the U.S., newsroom staffs have been slashed. Hedge fund owners of newspaper chains, like *The*

Tribune, see A.I. as a panacea. Reporters see A.I. as an instrument to hollow out news journalism even further. "Employers are sneaking A.I. into our platforms. It shows up on the back end of our work. People don't want to see their work gobbled up, repurposed for uses they didn't intend. They don't want their work policed in ways they didn't intend."

A.I. unites writers

During the Q&A, an audience member posed the question: "Are there any positives about Artificial Intelligence?" Panelist Chris Kyle (Writers Guild) noted wryly that A.I. did unite everyone in the Screenwriters Union – famous for wildly divergent opinions – galvanizing their picket lines to try to stop A.I. before it gets out of hand in the studios. He cautions A.I. may be used to produce a rough draft – to be polished up by a "star" writer/reporter. It negates the process of learning. What is the hierarchy determining the "stars" who polish the final draft? Kyle answered his own question – "those close to upper management."

George Altomare remembered

We mourn the passing of George Altomare, who played such a pivotal role in the founding and building of the United Federation of Teachers, and then served our NYLHA for many years. From 1953, when he began to teach social studies in a Queens junior high school, until he founded the UFT Retired Teachers Chapter, "George was there in the beginning and was active up until the very end, so the union is forever in his debt," said UFT Secretary LeRoy Barr. Here are two tributes from longtime friends and colleagues of George Altomare:



GEORGE'S LOVE OF UNIONISM and labor history must not be forgotten. He was essential to the success of the New York Labor History Association, where he served for many years as Vice President. He recognized that the prominence of the United Federation of Teachers in our city and well beyond was integrally aligned with New York labor history. He firmly believed in teaching labor history to our students and even to our teachers, paraprofessionals, and other union members.

I first met George while teaching elementary school in District 21 in Brooklyn when I taught about the Lowell Girls' early labor organization to my fifth graders. I

IT IS RARE TO HAVE the privilege of experiencing living history, and so I treasure my friendship with George Altomare that lasted for several decades. He had been a founder of the United Federation of Teachers in the 1960s, and he played an important role in the history of the UFT throughout his life. He remembered much of what had happened, and he also had the ability to fit the history of the UFT into the larger framework of the labor movement. As a labor historian, I spent many hours of wonderful conversation with George about the UFT and labor history in general.

George also was a major figure in the New York Labor History Association. He was our Vice President for many years, and he strongly supported our activities, including the annual John Commerford Labor Education Awards. George encouraged the UFT to support the event, and thereby to help the NYLHA fund its many other

also did a workshop for elementary teachers about ethnic and labor history, thanks to Abe Levine. Surprisingly, I was an elementary school teacher who tried to interest her students in the history of working people. George was quite a supporter of this!

He interested me in joining the NYLHA and becoming active in it. We depended on George for his contacts and support within the UFT, for his guidance in planning our many events and knowledge of the labor movement, both historical and present.

He will be enormously missed by all of us, teachers, unionists and also animal lovers!

Abbe Nosoff, Secretary, NYLHA

activities. He also was a Commerford awardee, a richly deserved honor for a lifetime of concern for labor education, and one he appreciated and prized.

George was a doer. He loved to talk about labor history and labor issues in general, but throughout his life, he was an activist. He never sat it out, but instead worked as hard as he could for those values he supported, including, of course, unionism – not only for educators, but for all working people.

We all remember his guitar as he led the singing of Solidarity Forever at the end of many union events, including the Representative Assembly of the New York United Teachers. That image will remain with me: George strumming his guitar and leading people in a song that he felt was the essence of unionism. It was my good fortune to know George, and I honor his memory.

Irwin Yellowitz, President, NYLHA

Dedication of Triangle Fire Memorial



The Memorial, when completed

By Keith Danish

On October 11, 2023, a large crowd assembled at the corner of Washington Place and Greene Street in New York's Greenwich Village, outside NYU's "Brown Building." At this site on March 25, 1911, the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire consumed the lives of 146 people, mostly young, female Jewish and Italian immigrant workers, unable to



FDNY demonstrates limited reach of ladders in 1911

escape the smoke and flames from a rapidly expanding fire in shop floors well above the reach of rescue workers, and victims of locked doors, faulty fire escapes and inadequate elevators.

We gathered on October 11 to mark the initial dedication of a Triangle Fire Memorial, a stainless steel "mourning ribbon" running from the 9th floor down the corner of the building and splitting off to the left and right about 12 feet above the ground. The ribbon is inscribed with the names of the victims, first-

hand accounts of the tragedy in English, Yiddish and Italian, and fabric patterns. The horizontal section has been completed and the vertical section should be in place by the 113th anniversary of the fire on March 25, 2024.

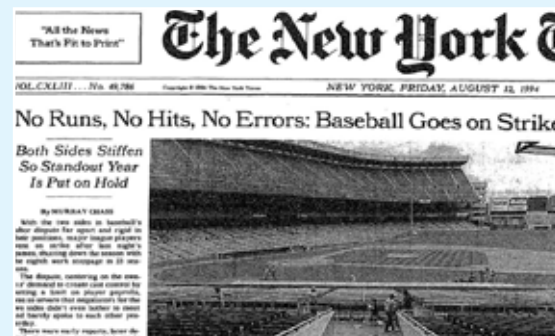
Speakers at the dedication included New York's Governor Kathy Hochul, Acting U.S. Labor Secretary Julie Su, and Lynne Fox, president of Workers United, the entity that absorbed the remnants of the Int'l. Ladies' Garment Workers' Union. The brave young women of the "ILG" had fought for but failed to win union recognition at the Triangle Shirtwaist Company in 1909-10; the fire occurred just a year later.

Years of planning and hard work spearheaded by the *Remember the Triangle Fire Coalition* brought us this indelible landmark, and one can only hope that memories of the 1911 tragedy will never fade, as well as appreciation for the reforms that an aroused and angered public demanded and got. Frances Perkins, who witnessed the fire and two decades thereafter became FDR's Secretary of Labor, would later say: "The New Deal began on March 25th 1911."

MILESTONES – 30 Years Ago

The Great Baseball Strike of 1994-95

THE LONGEST PLAYERS' STRIKE in Major League Baseball history began on August 12, 1994, wiping out the rest of the regular season and the post-season playoffs, including the World Series. The strike went on until late April of 1995, resulting in a shortened season for that year. Millions of dollars in business revenues and player salaries were lost, and the game's image was severely tarnished. The strike ended after then-Federal District Judge Sonia Sotomayor sustained a NLRB ruling that the team owners had engaged in unfair labor practices. The owners' divergent interests failed to undermine the solidarity of the players' union. A new book, *The Year Without a World Series*, by Robert C. Cottrell, describes the strike and the turbulent history of labor relations in our "National Pastime."



2023 Labor Day Parade in NYC: our largest contingent ever!



Grace Abbott

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and Infancy Act. And she was the only trained social worker at the top levels of American government at the onset of the Great Depression. Accordingly, her efforts led the way to the creation of the Federal Emergency Relief effort during the Depression, of the Social Security Act, and of international children's work that later came to fruition in the United Nations' UNICEF program. She utilized the many communication forums of her day: from magazine articles and pamphlets (including some of the best-sellers of the government presses) to public speeches and motion pictures. When radio broadcasting became possible, Abbott seized upon this new venue, too, with a weekly series airing on N.B.C., thus becoming one of the first female broadcasters to a national audience. Her best communiqués were those that deal with children's rights.

The shift in social welfare conditions in the past hundred years has been so pervasive that we sometimes take it quite for granted. But it is useful for us to remember that much effort was required

to effect these changes. We see, too, why Franklin Roosevelt spoke with such deep admiration for this woman whom he addressed as a "great humanitarian" who "rendered service of inestimable value to the children and mothers and fathers of the country."

When Chief Abbott – only sixty years old – died in 1939, Congresswoman Caroline O'Day paid an homage that went straight to the heart of her finest achievements, saying that "Grace Abbott's influence will extend to future generations – not only in our own country, but in many parts of the world. Thousands of mothers and children are alive today who might have died but for the beneficent activities which Grace Abbott initiated or furthered."

In her radio programs and speeches of the 1920s and '30s, Grace Abbott would sometimes address the younger people in her audience. In one Depression-era talk, she said, in part:

"Without apology, then, I ask you to use courageously your intelligence, your strength, and your good will toward children in the progressive removal of the economic

SAVE THE DATE!

For Labor History Month, **May 2024**, a virtual program about the Wagner Act and the National Labor Relations Board created by the Act, as we approach the 90th anniversary of this historic legislation.

Watch for further details about the program.

barriers which have retarded the full development of children in the past. There will, I warn you, be discouragements and disappointments. But the cause of children must triumph ultimately. The important thing is that we should be on our way."

The simple promise: of a life well-lived, an existence well-used – which she herself discovered only through a painful, often lonely lifetime spent among "the shock troops" – is Grace Abbott's great and lasting victory.

John Sorensen authored the books The Grace Abbott Reader (University of Nebraska Press, 2008) and Grace Abbott: an Introduction (UNO, 2010). His most recent Abbott book (A Sister's Memories) was published by the University of Chicago Press in 2015. Mr. Sorensen has presented a wide range of arts and social service programs for the U.S. Dept. of State, the New York Public Library, Chicago Public Radio, New York University, Columbia University, the University of Chicago, the University of Nebraska, Paley Center for Media, Anthology Film Archives, Nebraska Public Radio, the Chicago Humanities Festival, etc.

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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 – and if you're not a member yet, please join us!**



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