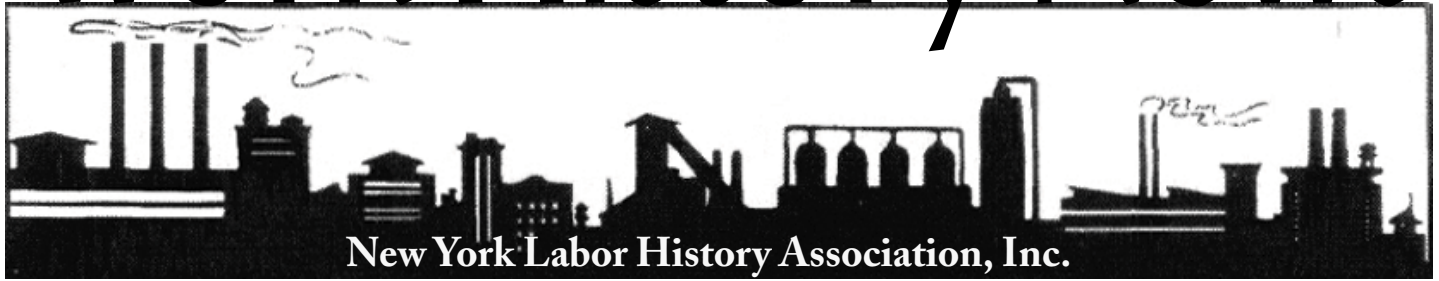


Work History News



A BRIDGE BETWEEN PAST AND PRESENT

VOLUME 43 NO 1 WINTER/SPRING 2025

2024 Commerford Awards

In 2024, the John Commerford Labor Education Awards reception honored one woman who reports on the labor movement and one woman who is making labor history.

Introduced by actor/writer and SAG-AFTRA New York board member Sarah Seeds, the first honoree was **Rebecca Damon**, the Chief Labor Policy Officer and NY Local Executive Director for SAG-AFTRA. Damon was a key architect of the 2012 SAG-AFTRA merger; she discussed the union's long strike in 2023, which was supported by the Writers Guild of America and sought to preserve workers' viability in an industry undergoing radical changes due to "streaming," artificial intelligence, and digital technologies. Her union won safeguards for actors but the use of advanced technology by the content producers will continue to be a subject for vigorous collective bargaining.

Labor making news

Introduced by Steven Greenhouse, who covered the labor beat for *The New York Times* for 31 years and has written many books about labor, the second honoree was **Lauren Kaori Gurley**. She is the labor reporter for *The Washington Post*, and previously wrote for several publications. Gurley reflected on the number of exploited workers she has written about, from children in meatpacking plants to railroad workers with no paid sick leave. She was among the first to write about the organizing drive at the Amazon warehouse



Rebecca Damon

on Staten Island and has helped keep the public aware of other labor activism, from auto plants to ports to Hollywood. It was encouraging to hear that Gurley is being contacted by many students who want to become labor journalists.

The program was bracketed by Lana Crowster's sweet renditions of "A Change is Gonna Come" and "Lean on Me," and included the presentation of our student writing awards: the Bernard Bellush Prize for labor history writing by a graduate student was awarded to Aaron Leon Freedman of Columbia University, for *The Progressive Origins of the Union-Busting Consultant: The Rise and Fall of Nathan Shefferman*; the Barbara Wertheimer Prize for undergraduate writing went to Natalia Facio of The University of Nevada, Reno, for *Unions and Exclusions: Civil Rights Within the Las Vegas Labor Movement*.



Lauren Kaori Gurley

Who was John Commerford? We were told about his role as an important labor leader in 19th Century America, and learned how our association located an unmarked grave for him in Brooklyn's Green-Wood Cemetery and got the cemetery to erect a marker reading: "John Commerford 1800-1878 Pioneering Labor Leader."

The event was held virtually on December 5, 2024, and was organized by the New York Labor History Association, Labor Arts, and NYU's Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Archives. This is a link to a recording of the event: https://newyorklaborhistory.org/web/?page_id=514.

We are grateful for the donations from individuals, unions, and other organizations, as they enable our Association to offer its programs to the public throughout the year without charge.

2024 Bernhardt Award to Kim Kelly

The Debra E. Bernhardt Labor Journalism Forum and Awards Ceremony, now in its tenth year, is sponsored by the N.Y. Labor History Association. The annual award spotlights journalism that furthers the understanding of the history of working people. The prize-winning article for 2024 is *Lawsuit: Alabama is Denying Prisoners Parole to Lease Their Labor to Meatpackers, McDonalds*, published in the April 2024 issue of *In These Times*: <https://inthesetimes.com/article/alabama-slavery-prison-labor-incarcerated-company-exploit-capitalism-lawsuit>

Prisoners cannot organize

Michael Koncewicz, the Associate Director of NYU's Institute for Public Knowledge, introduced the Bernhardt Award winner, **Kim Kelly**, the author of *Fight Like Hell: The Untold History of American Labor* (2022). Her writings about workers have appeared in many publications, and in her 2024 *Lawsuit* article she gives voice to prisoners who, because they do not have a right to organize, have used the courts to challenge a "forced labor scheme in Alabama's state prisons" that exploits the



Kim Kelly

incarcerated workers. It is a system that even denies parole to prisoners so the state can continue to profit from their labor.

Following the award presentation, Natalia Shevin, a doctoral candidate at NYU, talked about Debra Bernhardt's legacy as head of the Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives and as a "historian for the unsung." A lively panel discussion

then ensued about "Election 2024 – What's at Stake for Labor," featuring Ms. Kelly along with Lucia Gomez, Political Director of the NYC Central Labor Council – AFL-CIO, Alethia Jones, Distinguished Lecturer in Labor Studies and Director of Civic Engagement and Leadership Development at CUNY's School of Labor and Urban Studies, and Eric Blanc, a labor studies professor at Rutgers University and an activist in EWOC, the Emergency Workplace Organizing Committee.

The panelists urged all to act and not just talk, to get out into the field and persuade voters, to take bold and progressive stances, and not just rely on labor or political "leaders." Kelly spoke of the importance of labor history and labor education, so that today's workers will know what their predecessors were able to accomplish notwithstanding many challenges.

The event was co-sponsored by Labor Arts, the NYC Central Labor Council (AFL-CIO), and the Tamiment Library/ Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives. It took place on October 17, 2024, in-person at NYU's Bobst Library and virtually via Zoom. Here is a link to a recording of the event: <https://vimeo.com/1023034483>.

WANT TO LEAVE A LABOR LEGACY?

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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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IN MEMORIAM – Jane McAlevey

“We don’t know if my time in hospice will be short as in a week or longer, maybe a few months. But I do know that from here out I will be focused on spending time with loved ones, while cheering on every worker in every fight against what has become a rapacious, vicious new gilded age elite, whose predatory nature is nothing less than despicable, not to mention criminal.”

These were some of the last words of Jane McAlevey, who died last summer at age 59 after a long battle against cancer.

But her indomitable spirit and drive, throughout her life, were utilized to build worker power and combat economic inequality.

She was a worker- and community-based organizer, strategist, trainer and consultant, wrote for *The Nation* as its “Strikes” correspondent, and authored several books including *A Collective Bargain*, *Raising Expectations* (and *Raising Hell*), and *No Shortcuts*.



janemcalevey.com

MILESTONES

200 YEARS AGO

The 1824 Pawtucket Textile Workers “Turn-Out”



IT IS SAID to have been the first factory strike in the United States, and it was led by young women who worked at the Slater Mill and other textile factories in Pawtucket, Rhode Island. In May of 1824, 102 workers walked away from their looms.

The strike (then called a “turn-out”) was precipitated by a 25% wage cut and an extension of the workday by one hour. The young women workers, who had replaced children in the mills when power looms were installed, were not as docile as anticipated by the mill owners. A week of chaos followed, including marches, threats and even arson, and the turn-out ended with a compromise settlement, the terms of which are unknown to history.

National Park Service

The Sacco and Vanzetti of the Bronx

By Marian Swerdlow

“They shall not die!”

This was the cry heard around the world from when Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, Italian immigrants, workers, and anarcho-syndicalists, were sentenced to death in July 1921, until their electrocution on August 23, 1927. Their story is probably familiar to readers of this newsletter.

As the campaign to save them was at its height, on Memorial Day morning 1927, in the Bronx, over a dozen fascists, decked out in black shirts and full military regalia, were heading downtown to march with the Fascist League of North America in the holiday parade. As they were about to climb the steps to the Third Avenue El at East 183rd Street, they were ambushed, and two were murdered. In the melee, the killer or killers escaped.

Darrow for the defense

Police had no evidence. But, under pressure from fascist sympathizers within both the Bronx police department and justice system, six weeks later they arrested over a dozen anti-fascists, including Calogero Greco and Donato Carrillo. Like Sacco and Vanzetti, the last two were Italian immigrants, workers, and anarchists. They were anti-fascists, not leaders, but involved in often-violent clashes with Mussolini supporters. Initially held as material witnesses, on July 26, they were indicted. Carlo Tresca, the famed Italian-American anarchist, speculated that unknown men would be easier to convict, and that it would also intimidate others like them. But their fate diverged from that of the Massachusetts martyrs: they were acquitted by a jury on December 23, 1927.

What explains the different outcomes? Was the Bronx simply a less bigoted or politically conservative place than eastern Massachusetts in the 1920s?

Not according to Tresca, who wrote in October 1927: ...[*The Bronx*] is a part of New York where the Fascists have



NYTimes, Dec. 24, 1927

concentrated their forces and with impunity traffic in fascitized [sic] judges and district attorneys of Italian origin ... The Bronx may become the Dedham [place of the Sacco and Vanzetti trial] of New York State ...

However, working class leaders and organizations had learned lessons from the legal murders of Nicola and Bartolomeo.

Four years after the Sacco-Vanzetti verdict, the Communist Party had formed the International Labor Defense (ILD), a nonpartisan organization that would defend any worker activist against what it denounced as the “frame-up system.”

Tresca heard immediately of the indictments. He took steps to enlist perhaps the country’s foremost defense

attorney, Clarence Darrow, who was also an original member of the ILD National Committee, to represent the pair. Darrow lived up to his reputation: after a prosecution witness, Alexander Rocco, claimed to have seen Carrillo stab one victim and Greco fleeing, Darrow questioned the first police officer to arrive on the scene. The officer explained everyone denied they’d witnessed the murder, so he only took names of people who said they’d arrived after the crime. One of the names in his notebook was Alexander Rocco. Next, Darrow read Rocco’s deposition to the Bronx District Attorney on the night of the murder, describing the perpetrators. They differed significantly from the appearances of the two accused men.

In contrast, Sacco and Vanzetti had at best, mediocre, and at worst, incompetent counsel.

Defense work for Greco and Carrillo began soon after their indictment. Although Tresca’s efforts in August to form a broad defense committee proved fruitless, he organized a defense meeting in Manhattan on October 12, 1927. Then, with the help of Norman Thomas, he formed the “Greco-Carrillo Defense League,” which included sympathetic Italian anti-Fascists and prominent American liberals and leftists such as Upton Sinclair. For its part, the ILD held public meetings from the Bronx to the Midwest, printed articles in its newsletter, and published a pamphlet.

In the Sacco-Vanzetti case, according to one of the leaders of its defense campaign, “the masses ... were largely ignorant of what was going on ... for others, it was just another crime case ...” before their conviction.

Justice in the Bronx

The ILD publicized the Greco-Carrillo case not as unfair treatment of two innocents, but as an example of the use of the “frame up system” against worker activists, i.e., a political persecution.

(continued on page 5)

Triangle Fire Memorial completed

With the installation of the stainless steel "ribbon" running vertically to the ninth

floor (from which workers leaped to their deaths), the memorial to the horrific 1911 fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist

Factory has now been completed. See rememberthetrianglefire.org for further details.



The Sacco and Vanzetti of the Bronx

(continued from page 4)

The Sacco-Vanzetti Defense Committee, on the other hand, had avoided discussing the issue in class terms, instead calling for “impartial fairness” from the obviously biased judge and jury.

Despite Tresca’s pessimism, the Bronx venue did help his two countrymen. One of the defense team members wrote in his autobiography, “The first break in our favor was the announcement of the judge, Albert Cohn, a Jew... When ...it appeared that four of the [jurors]

were Jews, we considered the case won.” They were basing their prediction on the widespread liberalism, and even sympathy for radical politics, among Bronx Jewry at that time. Their belief seemed substantiated when Greco’s mother, after testifying, asked to embrace her son, and, according to *The New York Times*, the judge “bowed his head and covered his face with his handkerchief.”

The Sacco and Vanzetti of the Bronx were saved by the lessons learned from what Sacco and Vanzetti themselves did

not have at their trial: a strong campaign already demanding their freedom, and an effective legal defense. In addition, they were tried in the Bronx of the 1920s, a place with a distinctive political culture.

Marian Swerdlow was born and raised in the Bronx. She is the author of *Underground Woman: My Four Years as a New York City Subway Conductor* (Temple Univ. Press: 1998). Her work has appeared in *Review of Radical Political Economics*, *Gender and Society*, and *Against the Current*, among other publications.

Labor Day 2024



NYLHA's contingent at the 2024 New York Labor Day Parade, with friends from the Jewish Labor Committee

MILESTONES

100 YEARS AGO Death of Gompers



SAMUEL GOMPERS DIED on December 13, 1924. The British-born cigar maker came to America with his family in 1863, rose through the ranks of the Cigar Makers' International Union, then helped found the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions (FOTLU) in 1881. In 1886, it reorganized into the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and Gompers became its president. He would remain president, except for one year, until his death at age 74, when trade union membership was around 3.5 million.

While sympathetic to Socialism in his youth, according to labor historian Melvyn Dubofsky "[b]y 1896 Gompers and the AFL were moving to make their peace with Capitalism and the American system... Although the AFL had once preached the inevitability of class conflict and the need to abolish wage slavery, slowly and almost imperceptibly it began to proclaim the virtues of class harmony and the possibilities of a more benevolent Capitalism." What does the working man want? Gompers responded, "More."

MILESTONES

125 YEARS AGO

Hebrew Actors' Union Founded

By Keith Danish

IN 1899, THE Hebrew Actors' Union [HAU] was officially chartered by the American Federation of Labor, under the umbrella of the Associated Actors and Artistes of America. The HAU is the oldest actors' union in the U.S.A., older than Actors' Equity and, of course, the unions of workers in the 20th Century media of film, radio and TV.

The pre-history of the Hebrew Actors' Union goes back to original Yiddish theater performances in Jassy, Romania, in 1876, associated with Abraham Goldfaden, and the first American performances in 1882 at Turn Hall on the Bowery, by the immigrant performers in the Golubok family. The first organizing activities came in 1887, but it took the involvement of the United Hebrew Trades and Joseph Barondess, and a strike in 1899 at the People's Theater, for the union to get its charter.

Abraham Cahan, editor of the *Forward* and an implacable supporter of Jewish trade unions, had opposed unionization of actors because acting was a "work of the soul," and one could not organize "a union of souls." But actors, like tailors and cutters, have to eat and were subject to exploitation by theater "bosses," so the HAU carried on and became a "closed shop" protective of its existing members, requiring a \$75 application fee and strict auditions by aspiring members.

In 1922, the longtime business manager of the HAU, Reuben Guskin, declared to an interlocutor (journalist Max Danish) that "[s]trikes on the Jewish stage would be unusually costly luxuries for our managers and would practically mean the giving up [i.e., shutting down] of productions." But if, as reported by



HAU Building

The New York Times in 1909, the Yiddish theaters were "absolutely in the power of the unions," it was because of the union's effective use of the strike as a negotiating tool.

The high point of membership in the HAU was in the 1920's when it approached 400, but then the union contracted for reasons such as: the 1924 immigration quotas that curtailed the immigrant audience, the assimilation of the immigrants' children and their movement to mainstream entertainment like the Broadway theater and the "talkies", and the opening up to Jewish performers of Hollywood, radio and TV (where a Meshilem Meier Weisenfreund could become "Paul Muni", Emanuel Goldenberg could become "Edward G. Robinson", and Joseph Levitch could become "Jerry Lewis"). So, in 2005, the



HAU / YIVO

Hebrew Actors' Union was declared defunct by its parent, the Associated Actors and Artistes of America.

As it faded away, the Hebrew Actors' Union transferred its archives of musical scores and scripts to YIVO, but still owns its headquarters building on East 7th Street, west of Second Avenue, where the theaters once were concentrated in a "Yiddish Rialto." (McSorley's Old Ale House still serves the public down the block from the HAU building.) A non-profit "Hebrew Actors Foundation" is raising funds with the ambitious goal of preserving the legacy of the Yiddish theater by renovating the building, creating performance spaces and a café, and offering educational programs. Persons wishing to donate to the project can visit the foundation's website, hebrewactorsfoundation.org, and far a tem fun hayntikn eydishn teater (and for a taste of current Yiddish theater) there is the venerable National Yiddish Theater Folksbiene, based in New York's Museum of Jewish Heritage.

NEW YORK LABOR HISTORY ASSOCIATION

Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives
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New York, NY 10012

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

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



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