Work History News

New York Labor History Association, Inc.

A BRIDGE BETWEEN PAST AND PRESENT

VOLUME 44 NO 1 WINTER/SPRING 2026

2026: Our 50th Anniversary

Commerford Awards for 2025: Live and lively

By Keith Danish

For the first time since 2019, we were able to announce: "Live from New York, it's the Commerford Awards," because, on December 3, 2025, the 39th Annual John Commerford Labor Education Awards Reception was hosted by the Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives at the NYU Bobst Library. We had a full house in attendance, supplemented by a substantial online audience.

Making and preserving history

Susan Davis, the Managing Partner at Cohen Weiss & Simon LLP, who has represented labor unions for over 40 years, presented our first Commerford Award to **Jennifer Abruzzo**, who worked at the National Labor Relations Board for almost 30 years, starting as a field attorney in the Miami office, later becoming Deputy General Counsel and Acting General Counsel. When Joseph Biden became U.S. President, he appointed Abruzzo to be General Counsel of the NLRB, a role in which she enforced labor law vigorously and advanced workers' rights during Biden's presidency, including streamlining of unionization efforts. Many consider her to have been Biden's most progressive appointment. Therefore, it was no surprise when in 2025 the Trump 2.0 regime forced her out of the NLRB. Accepting her award, Abruzzo remarked that her goals at the NLRB were

Mary Anne Trasciatti and Jennifer Abruzzo

to "educate, protect and enforce" and to level the playing field for workers vis-à-vis employers. Reminding us that Biden-era precedents of the Board remain in effect, she urged us to use our collective power as workers, consumers and voters to maintain and expand workers' rights.

Jennifer Abruzzo is now Of Counsel to the labor-friendly law firm Bush Gottlieb, and she is a Senior Advisor to the President of the Communication Workers of America.

Kim Kelly, author and writer, who wrote "Fight Like Hell: The Untold History of American Labor," and received our association's Bernhardt Labor Journalism Prize in 2024, presented our second Commerford Award to **Mary Anne Trasciatti**, a Professor of Rhetoric and Director of the Labor Studies program at Hofstra University. She is an activist, educator, scholar and editor, and President of the Remember the Triangle Fire Coalition. Trasciatti and her colleagues were responsible for the funding, design and erection of a stainless steel "mourning ribbon" on the outside of the Greenwich Village building where the tragic Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire occurred in 1911.

Trasciatti has authored or edited several books; the most recent one is *Elizabeth Gurley Flynn: The Rebel Girl, Democracy, and Revolution*. Accepting her award, she talked about the importance of linking labor history with present-day struggles and the value of collaborative work, because much remains to be done.

The Bellush Prize for graduate-level writing in labor history was awarded to Natalia Dubno Shevin, a Ph.D. candidate at New York University, for her paper, "'Liquidated Damages Helped the Union Survive' – ILGWU Becomes Funded by Deindustrialization." The Wertheimer Prize for undergraduate-level writing in labor history was awarded to Simone Herko Felton, of Yale University, for her paper, "Housewives in the Collective Home: A Domestic History of Union Cooperative Housing in New York City."

The struggle goes on

The program also featured a backgrounder by Keith Danish on "Who is John Commerford," and two stirring

(continued on page 7)

Debs Award to Senator Sanders

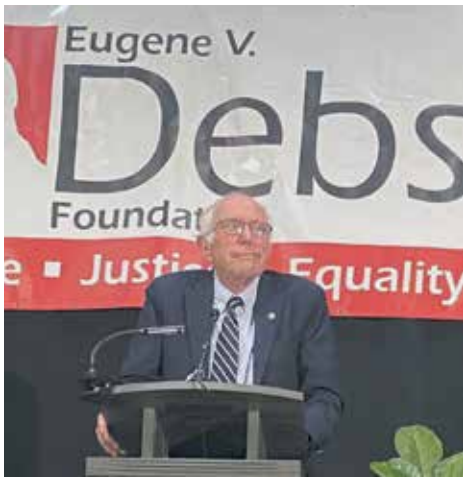
"I CAN SEE THE DAWN of a better day for humanity. The people are awakening. In due course they will and must come to their own."

During his victory night speech on Election Day 2025, New York Mayor-Elect Zohran Mamdani quoted part of Eugene Debs's 1918 speech to the court that was to sentence him for violating the Sedition Act by opposing U.S. involvement in "The Great War."

Living history

Senator Bernie Sanders also keeps the memory of Debs alive, and his life's work was recently recognized by the Debs Foundation in Terre Haute, Indiana (Debs's home town), which bestowed on the Senator its Eugene V. Debs Award for 2025. The award was first presented in 1965 and recipients have included Dorothy Day, Michael Harrington, Ralph Nader, A. Philip Randolph and Walter Reuther.

Sanders accepted the award in front of a large audience that included our Board members Gail Malmgreen and Arieh Lebowitz, who also serve on the Board of the Debs Foundation. According to the Senator, "Debs frightened the ruling class when he was alive and he still frightens the ruling class," because of his class consciousness and his unwavering focus on inequality, and Sanders declared: "Don't look at Gene Debs as some kind



of historical figure. Look at him as somebody who is motivating us today." We can do both!

MILESTONES

100 YEARS AGO

Railway Labor Act of 1926

NINE YEARS BEFORE CONGRESS ENACTED THE NATIONAL LABOR RELATIONS ACT it passed the Railway Labor Act of 1926, to regulate labor relations for railroad employees. (Airline employees would be covered in 1936.) The industry had a history of violent and disruptive strikes, and the Act's first stated purpose was "to avoid any interruption to commerce or to the operation of any carrier engaged therein," while also providing for prompt and orderly settlement of disputes over pay, work rules or working conditions, initially through Boards of Mediation. The Railway Labor Act is more "interventionist" than the National Labor Relations Act; the federal courts can enjoin a rail or airline union from striking over major disputes if the union has not exhausted the Act's negotiation and mediation procedures.

In 2022, President Biden and the U.S. Congress forced a settlement on railroad unions, pursuant to authority granted under the Railway Labor Act, to avoid a nationwide strike. Over 500 labor historians signed an open letter to the President and his Secretary of Labor, objecting to the imposed settlement.

Save the Date

The Clara Lemlich Awards for Social Activism

Monday, May 4, 2026

In-person at the New York Society for Ethical Culture, and live-streamed.
Celebrate the lives of incredible women whose activism made real and lasting change in the world
Visit: www.laborarts.org

Work History News
New York Labor History Association, Inc.

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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Randolph, Rustin, and the Black – Labor alliance

By Walter Naegle

The two-year period from 1965 to 1966 saw a significant strengthening of the Black-Labor alliance, which had been key to the success of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. A. Philip Randolph, the Director of the march, initially called for a "March on Washington for Jobs". Randolph, the founder of the first successful Black trade union (the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters) and a member of the AFL-CIO Executive Council, had always championed organized labor as key to Black economic uplift, understanding that freedom on paper meant little if Black workers could not secure fair wages, safe working conditions, and decent healthcare and housing.

These ideas were shared by Randolph's protege, Bayard Rustin, the march's chief organizer, as well as by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., its principal speaker. At the 1961 AFL-CIO convention, Dr. King had made his position clear: "Our needs are identical with labor's needs... That is why Negroes support labor's demands and fight laws that curb labor. The two most dynamic and cohesive liberal forces in the country are the labor movement and the Negro freedom movement."

George Meany, A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin – Photo Credit: Sam Reiss, 1970

Working with labor

Although the AFL-CIO did not officially endorse the march, individual unions, locals, and members were free to support it and attend. Thousands of rank-and-file workers boarded buses, trains, and automobiles to stand united in what has often been called one of the great days in our nation's history. AFL-CIO Vice President Walter Reuther gave both moral and financial support to the demonstration. His remarks at the Lincoln Memorial echoed the demands for full employment, job training, a Fair Employment Practices Commission, and other measures to make equal opportunity for African Americans and all workers a reality.

Two months before the march, President John F. Kennedy had proposed new civil rights legislation that largely addressed racial segregation in public education and accommodations. Nightly newscasts in the months before the march brought the brutal reality of southern racism into America's living rooms, and the demand for freedom and equality for African Americans became the rallying cry during the summer of 1963. The call for jobs and economic justice fell largely to the wayside.

Following Kennedy's assassination, his proposed civil rights legislation led to the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act, both pushed through Congress by President Lyndon B. Johnson. While these codified some of the march's demands for freedom, they did not include proposals for economic policies that would address the issue of poverty and unemployment that disproportionately affected Black Americans.

Randolph, Rustin, and King worked to hold together the coalition of civil rights and labor that had made the March on Washington a success. In speeches, articles, and at demonstrations, they repeatedly stressed the importance of addressing economic issues, while also continuing to push for enforcement of legislation that had delivered freedom under law, if not in reality. In *From Protest to Politics: The Future of the Civil Rights Movement* [1], often cited as Rustin's most important and influential essay, he argued that "We need to propose alternatives to technological unemployment, urban decay, and the rest. We need to be calling for public works and training, for national economic planning, for federal aid to education, for attractive public housing – all this on a sufficiently large scale to make a difference." Here, Rustin was not arguing for abandoning nonviolent

(continued on page 6)

It is never too early...

By Marcia Newfield

If Cinderella gets around to permeating children's consciousness at a very young age, along with Hansel and Gretel, and the Wicked Witch, why not labor unions, worker power, organizing strategies, or diversity and inclusion?

The American Library Association condemns censorship and works to defend each person's right to read under the First Amendment and to ensure free access to information. Every year, ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF) compiles a list of the Top 10 Most Challenged Books to inform the public about censorship in libraries and schools.

The lists are based on information from confidential reports filed by library professionals and community members, as well as news stories published throughout the United States. Because many book challenges are not reported to the ALA or covered by the press, the data compiled by ALA represent only a snapshot of censorship attempts in libraries.

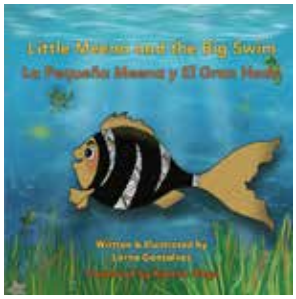
The 2024 data reported to ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF) show that most book censorship or restriction attempts are now originating from organized movements. Pressure groups and government entities that include elected officials, board members and administrators initiated 72% of demands to censor or restrict books in school and public libraries. Parents only accounted for 16% of demands to censor or restrict books, while 5% of challenges were brought by individual library users.

The 120 titles most frequently targeted during 2024 are all identified on partisan book rating sites which provide tools for activists to demand the censorship of library books.

The most common justifications provided by complainants were false claims of illegal obscenity for minors; inclusion of LGBTQIA+ characters or themes; and covering topics of race, racism, equity, and social justice. The 2025 list will come out in April 2026.

Although most bookshops do not have a labor section for picture books, they are available through websites. Some reliable sources for books relevant to labor are *Hardballpress.org*, *bookshop.org* and *socialjusticebooks.org*. There are hundreds of intriguing titles. The books cited below were chosen for their ideas and presentation, not for their banned status. They all provide "teachable moments" for the engaged adult.

Little Meena and the Big Swim/La Pequena Meena y El Gran Nado, by Lorna Gonsalves.

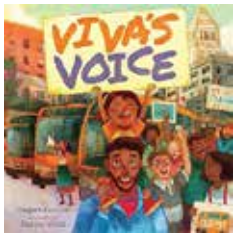


A simple tale of how the small fish band together to secure food that the big fish are hoarding even though there is enough for all. The charming illustrations by Lorna Gonsalves, the bilingual translation, and the provocative discussion questions provide an opening for great conversations.

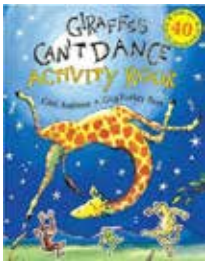
What is Labor Day?, by Lina McFin.

A heartwarming celebration of hard work, kindness, and family togetherness – perfect for Labor Day and beyond. Follow young Maya as she explores the meaning of Labor Day in this beautifully illustrated children's book. Through everyday adventures – helping her parents with chores, greeting community helpers, enjoying a parade, and sharing a family picnic—Maya learns how everyone's work matters.

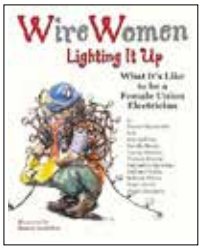
Viva's Voice, by Raquel Donoso/ illustrated by Carlos Velez Aguilera tells the story of Viva, a spirited Latina girl who learns to use her voice for justice. Inspired by the author's childhood experiences, the book explores themes of labor unions, strikes, and workers' rights through Viva's interactions with her quiet Papi, who gains confidence from her support. The narrative emphasizes the importance of standing up for change and the power of one's voice in advocating for social justice.



Giraffes Can't Dance, by Giles Andreae/illustrated by Guy Parker-Rees. Gerald the giraffe longs to dance, but his legs are too skinny and his neck is too long. His knees buckle whenever he tries to twirl. At the Jungle Dance, the warthogs waltz, the chimps cha-cha, and the lions tango. "Giraffes can't dance," they all jeer when it's Gerald's turn. But there is one little creature who believes in Gerald. "Everything makes music," the cricket explains, "if you really want it to." So, Gerald starts swaying to his own sweet tune. With light-footed rhymes and high-stepping illustrations, this tale is gentle inspiration for every child who encounters obstacles.



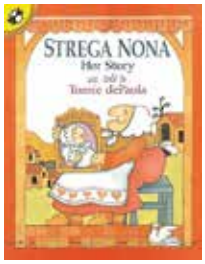
Wire Women: Lighting It Up: What It's Like to be a Female Union Electrician, by Sharon Szymanski and her class. Aimed at an older group, this is the fairy tale come true… women can work as electricians, they keep the subways running and the stadium



To educate children about labor, diversity, inclusion, and more

lights ablaze. They learn the language and the skills in this five-year union-sponsored training program. The book gives kids an insight into jobs they probably haven't thought about.

Strega Nona, Her Story, by Tomie dePaola. When local witch and healer Strega Nona hires Big Anthony as her assistant, she warns him never to touch her magic pasta pot. Of course, he can't resist



and ends up with a hilariously urgent overflowing pasta mess. Some groups complain that this story portrays magic and witchcraft in a positive light, but it also provides lessons about following rules, listening, and taking responsibility for actions.

Sulwe, by Lupita Nyong'o. Young Sulwe worries about how her midnight-black skin is darker than others around

her. A magical journey changes her thinking. The author's note describes her own personal journey to accept the beauty of her dark skin.

A final note: the Anti-Bias Children's Book Calendar for 2026 is available at rebekahgienapp.com.

Marcia Newfield is a member of the NYLHA Board. She is a retired BMCC Adjunct Lecturer in English and former VP for Part time workers at the PSC (Professional Staff Congress), the union for CUNY's 33,000 faculty and staff. Several of her books for children have been published.

MILESTONES

80 YEARS AGO

1946 Rochester General Strike

IN 1945, MUNICIPAL EMPLOYEES OF ROCHESTER, NEW YORK were attempting to unionize and to form a local of the Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (FSCME, which is now known as AFSCME). This conduct was deemed to be a threat to public health, safety and welfare, so on May 15, 1946, the jobs of 489 public workers were terminated by city government. The next day, protest meetings, picketing and marches commenced, other city workers walked off the job, and the trash began to pile up. On May 23, 208 picketers were arrested. In the next few days, the strike extended to the town's clothing industry, public transportation, movie projectionists, and other trades; labor leaders claimed that 50,000 people either participated in the "general strike" or could not get themselves to work. The strike was settled on May 29 with reinstatement of the discharged workers and recognition of the city's workers' right to organize.

Rochester's "general strike" was one out of almost 5,000 work stoppages in 1946, and widespread strikes like Rochester had experienced also took place in Hartford and Stamford, Connecticut, Oakland, California, Lancaster, Pennsylvania, Camden, New Jersey, and Houston, Texas. The strike wave of 1945-46 most likely contributed to a backlash against labor and to passage of the anti-union Taft-Hartley Act, which was enacted in 1947 over President Truman's veto.

At the time of the Rochester strike, FSCME had around 73,000 members. Currently, AFSCME has over 1.6 million active and retired members.

Randolph, Rustin, and the Black – Labor alliance

(continued from page 3)
protest, which had been so effective in the South. Rather, he was acknowledging that the resulting legislative achievements had opened a new front in the war on inequality: political activism and engagement. Those tools could be wielded to improve conditions through developing a new generation of Black political leadership.

At the climax of the Selma to Montgomery protest march in 1965, Dr. King delivered one of his most powerful speeches. That day, Randolph and Rustin were joined on the viewing platform by Don Slaiman, the recently appointed head of the AFL-CIO's department of civil rights. All of these men recognized that economic progress for Black people, particularly in Northern cities, would require strengthening the bond between Black workers and organized labor. To that end, Slaiman helped to secure AFL-CIO funding for the founding of the A. Philip Randolph Institute (APRI) with Randolph as its President, and Rustin as its Executive Director. Initially designed as a platform for advancing Randolph's vision of an expanding and inclusive labor movement, APRI, under the direction of Norman Hill and Clayola Brown, has established chapters in major urban areas around the country.

A "Freedom Budget"

Randolph and Rustin, along with Dr. King, supported Johnson's Great Society programs, especially the "War on Poverty," but did not believe these efforts were sufficient to address the long-term effects of structural racism and the technological innovations transforming the workforce. Rustin often noted that civil rights legislation was passed simply "by the stroke of a pen," while emphasizing that billions of taxpayer dollars would be needed to educate and train the poor, both Black and White, to compete in a workforce that increasingly relied less on physical labor and more on technological skills.

In October of 1966, APRI published *A "Freedom Budget" for All Americans – Budgeting our Resources, 1966-1975 to Achieve "Freedom from Want."* Its chief author, Leon Keyserling, was an economist who had been the primary drafter of both the Social Security Act and the National Labor Relations Act. The Freedom Budget was endorsed by more than 100 leaders representing the broad coalition of labor, civil rights, religious leaders, community groups, and prominent individuals who had supported the 1963 March. Widely distributed and discussed in the public forum, including testimony by Rustin before Congress, the Freedom Budget was not enacted and faded from public view until the 2013 publication of *A Freedom Budget for All Americans,* by Paul Le Blanc and Michael D. Yates.[2] Recalling the history of the *Freedom Budget,* and documenting the economic trajectory in the decades since its publication, the authors called for a new effort to address the ills of poverty through government action. In their final words, Le Blanc and Yates posited, "...unless the power of the 1 percent is broken and the power of the 99 percent is asserted, the people of the United States – and nearly every other country – are soon going to inhabit a world in which most of us will experience declining economic and political security, rising workplace exploitation, and a rapidly deteriorating environment."

More recently, Idrees Kahloon wrote, "There was political wisdom in the design of the Freedom Budget that A. Philip Randolph, Bayard Rustin, and Martin Luther King, Jr., proposed a half century ago: its benefits were meant to reach all Americans. Today, that wisdom is no longer optional. It is the only path left."[3] Kahloon's plea for an approach that will address poverty across racial lines echoes ideas that were at the core of Randolph's work through his decades as a labor and civil rights leader. Rustin, whose activism was inspired by his religious faith, evolved into a political strategist who came to realize that the world envisioned by his Quaker faith could only be achieved through political action and social democratic means. Dr. King, whose activism was also faith-based, gradually came to the same conclusion. All of these leaders recognized that the growth and strength of organized labor were key to realizing their vision of a more equal and just society.

Unity and cooperation

Today, sixty years later, we are challenged by an administration that seeks to destroy the frayed coalition that mounted the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. It is attempting to reverse the progress made since that historic day, not only by eliminating government agencies and programs, but also by erasing historical references that reveal our inability to consistently live up to the ideals espoused in our founding documents. Union membership has declined significantly, and many workers struggle to survive on minimum-wage jobs that offer few, if any, benefits.

Journalist Harold Meyerson recently wrote that "The class-based universalistic politics of the socialists of the 1960s and '70s hold important lessons for the socialists of 2025."[4] One such democratic socialist is New York City's Mayor, Zohran Mamdani, whose ideas and proposals reveal that he has studied the lessons of Randolph, Rustin, and King. On January 1, 2026, Mamdani took the reins of the city that A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin called home. Both of these giants lived in Penn South, a cooperative housing complex constructed by the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU). Its opening ceremonies in May of 1962 included a bipartisan platform of labor and political leaders who agreed on the benefits of cooperating to construct decent, safe, and affordable housing for middle-class workers. Penn South is one such model, one that should be replicated not only in New York but across the country.

A bipartisan, multiracial approach to addressing the economic demands posed by the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom – affordable housing,

(continued on page 7)

2025 Commerford Awards

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a cappella songs by Gregory Doughty, who was introduced by Alina Bloomgarden, the founder of "Music on the Outside," a program that provides incarcerated youth and adults a path to healing and achievement through music education and mentoring.

As always, we are ever so grateful for the long and thorough preparatory work by the Commerford Awards planning committee (Rachel Bernstein, Sherry Kane, Joe Doyle and Kyle Friend) supported by Shannon O'Neill, her Tamiment Library team, and its high-quality tech services. Special thanks to young Annalee Jane (see accompanying photo) who helped sign up new members for the association.

We enjoyed the "return to normality" that an in-person Commerford event offered to us, but, as our award winners reminded us, there is no normality or stability with respect to workers' rights, not with a President blocking a quorum at the NLRB and the very existence of the Board being challenged in the courts. The struggle goes on.

Annalee Jane

Randolph, Rustin...

(continued from page 6)

health care, education, decent wages – is desperately needed if we are to stem the growth of income inequality. We, the workers of this country, cannot afford to let ourselves be divided by fear of "the other", or by race, gender, and religious differences, if we are to move forward toward a more just society.

Walter Naegle was Bayard Rustin's partner from 1977-87 and is the Executor of the Rustin Estate. In 2013 he accepted Rustin's posthumous Presidential Medal of Freedom from President Barack Obama. A graduate of Fordham University, he is a co-author of the young person's biography, "Troublemaker for Justice – The Story of Bayard Rustin, the man behind The March on Washington."

* * * *

[1] *Commentary*. February 1965.

[2] Yates, Michael D. and Le Blanc, Paul. *A Freedom Budget for All Americans*. 2013. New York: Monthly Review Press.

[3] Kahloon, Idrees. "Mind the Gap." *The New Yorker*. August 4, 2025, p. 63.

[4] Meyerson, Harold. "How Mamdani's Predecessors Built Democratic Socialism." *The American Prospect*. October 2, 2025.

MILESTONES

175 YEARS AGO

Origin of the Pinkertons

THE NORTH-WESTERN POLICE AGENCY, CO-FOUNDED IN 1850 by Allan Pinkerton, would become the Pinkerton National Detective Agency in 1855. Known for its "We Never Sleep" motto and Unblinking Eye logo, Pinkerton was a leading detective and industrial spying organization which (along with Baldwin-Felts) became a leader in the dirty business of intimidating workers and suppressing labor organizing.

A notorious use of Pinkerton agents precipitated the 1892 "Battle of Homestead," when 300 of them were brought in on a barge to help break the steelworkers' strike at the Carnegie Steel plant in Homestead, PA. The workers resisted and a bloody battle followed, with many deaths and injuries on both sides.

A 2003 book titled "From Blackjacks to Briefcases" explored the history and increasing sophistication of the strikebreaking/unionbusting industry in this country. Another appropriate title for the book would have been "From Pinkertons to Pinstripes." Prominent labor and employment law firms on the "union avoidance" side include Littler Mendelson, Morgan Lewis, and Ogletree Deakins, aided by consulting firms such as IRI Consultants and the Labor Relations Institute. One scholar has observed that:

> "[t]he USA is alone among rich democracies in allowing the development of an enormous industry of law firms dedicated to defeating union organising campaigns and keeping their clients – including many large multinational corporations – union free."

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Labor Day and the NYLHA — In 2025, the banner of our association was carried by marchers in the New York City Labor Day Parade and in a parade organized by and stepping off from the American Labor Museum/Botto House in Haledon, New Jersey. In New York we were joined by members of EWOC, the Emergency Workplace Organizing Committee.

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