

Work History News



A BRIDGE BETWEEN PAST AND PRESENT

VOLUME 44 NO 2 SUMMER/FALL 2026

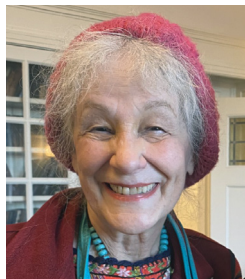
2026: Our 50th Anniversary

Clara Lemlich Awards for 2026:

"Something to say" to all of us



Dana Minaya



Scotty Embree



Shirley Kaplan



Eva Richter



Dawn Harris-Martine

The Sixteenth Annual Clara Lemlich Awards program was held on May 4, 2026, at the New York Society for Ethical Culture:

*"Honoring those who
jump into work head first
without dallying in the shadows
who do what has to be done
again and again"*

—Marge Piercy

Here is the honor roll for 2026:

Dana Minaya, a community activist whose life works included Peace Corps teaching in Ghana, development work in several nations, helping to develop an architectural engineering STEM program, and volunteering for health, climate and educational causes. In her community, she initiated volunteer gardening and innovative programming for seniors.

Scotty Embree, a worker coalition organizer; in retirement following her

career as a consulting analyst and manager in technology, she became an active member and Trustee of the New York Society for Ethical Culture, organized a large march for environmental change, originated a Jazz Café, and has been active in many community groups.

Shirley Kaplan, a painter, director, playwright, and more! She co-founded the Paper Bag Players and founded Painters' Theatre and the Sarah Lawrence College Theatre Outreach Program. She creates workshops based on personal stories and visual interaction for NYC museums,

Eva Richter, a migrant rights leader who has advocated for the rights of displaced and marginalized people ever since arriving in the U.S. as a "stateless person" after a turbulent youth in Germany and China in the 1930's and 1940's. She co-founded the NGO Committee on Migration at the United Nations.

Dawn Harris-Martine, a Harlem literacy guru known as "Grandma Dawn," was a teacher and small business owner in Harlem. She always encouraged children's growth and taught them the skills needed to blossom in their lives, by means of bookmobiles and then a toy shop and activity space which has been a welcoming site in the Harlem community.

Inspiring young and old

The evening was enlivened by the songs of Chesray Dolpha, accompanied by Leandria Lott, and the voices of the Sing Harlem Choir.

It was evident from the words of the young people who introduced the honorees that each has been an inspiration and role model, and not just to the young.

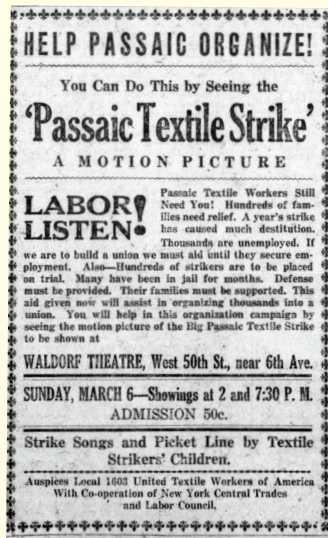
The event was presented by Labor Arts, supported by the Remember the Triangle Fire Coalition and the New York Society for Ethical Culture.

MILESTONES

100 YEARS AGO

1926 Passaic Textile Strike

THE PASSAIC TEXTILE STRIKE of 1926 shut down the Botany and Forstmann woolen mills, and others, in Passaic and nearby New Jersey towns for a year. An AF of L textile union, the United Textile Workers,



had been uninterested in organizing the Passaic textile workers, especially those in low-skill jobs. When one mill cut workers' pay by 10%, and the AF of L still would not help them, the workers turned to a group of Communists including Albert Weisbord, a City College and Harvard Law grad, who organized a "United Front Committee" to lead the strike. The Communists proved that they could get favorable publicity for the strike (in part from NYC artists and intellectuals, as had been done during the great Silk Strike of 1913), maintain solidarity, organize food

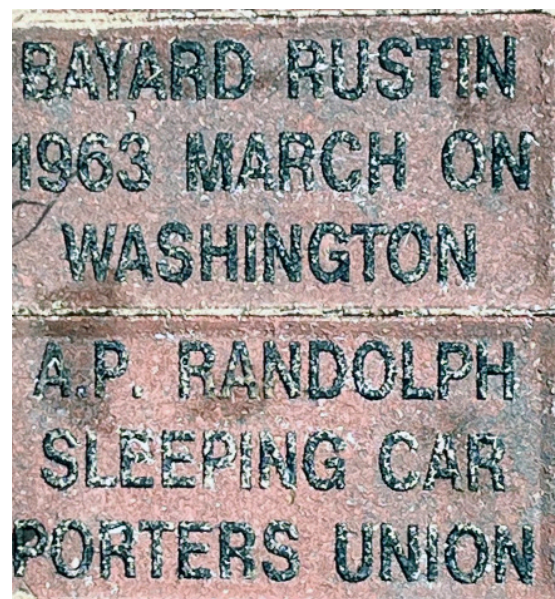
and other relief for strikers, get them legal defense against the many arrests carried out by police, produce and sell a propaganda pamphlet called "Hell in New Jersey", and make a silent film called "The Passaic Textile Strike". Government repression of strikers and their allies was severe, with the right of free speech almost nullified. The AF of L was hostile, calling the strike leaders "Communitic". Eventually, the "Red" leaders had to back off, and workers joined the Federation's United Textile Workers, which negotiated a settlement of modest gains for the workers that, regrettably, proved to be illusory.

These young Communists displayed organizational talents of a type which would help build the CIO a decade later. But the downside of a strike led by Communists was that mill owners, government officials, police and the AF of L could paint the event as a subversive activity and disregard or downplay the authentic grievances of the workers. Sympathy for the strike emanating from Moscow could be portrayed as evidence of a foreign conspiracy to attack American capitalism. Also, the strike was affected by the shifts in labor strategy by American Communists (influenced by Moscow), from "boring from within" to "dual [revolutionary] unionism."

The Passaic strike history was reflected in several 1934 actions, by San Francisco longshoremen, Minneapolis truckers and Toledo auto parts makers, who were led by radical organizers attempting to forge working-class solidarity as well as improve pay and working conditions. These organizers would then be involved in the great CIO drives of the 30's.

New "Silk Walk" Memorial Bricks

IN A CEREMONY HELD on June 7, 2026 at the American Labor Museum / Botto House, Haledon, New Jersey, memorial bricks were unveiled for the civil rights leader and longtime president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, A. Philip Randolph, and the civil rights leader and organizing genius behind the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, Bayard Rustin. The bricks were sponsored, respectively, by Keith Danish and by the Executor of Rustin's Estate, Walter Naegle.



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	Robert Parmet
Secretary	Abbe Nosoff
Treasurer	Peter Filardo
Editor	Keith Danish

The Jane LaTour Book Party

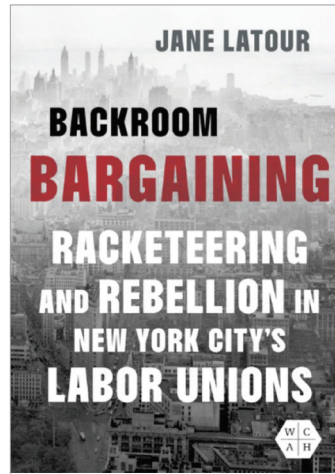
The “Friends of Jane” got together on June 4, 2026, at Houghton Hall in New York City’s Church of the Transfiguration, to celebrate the recent, posthumous publication of LaTour’s book on corruption in labor unions, *Backroom Bargaining: Racketeering and Rebellion in New York City’s Labor Unions*.

The program was moderated by Brenda Berkman, one of the first female firefighters in the New York Fire Department and founder of the United Women Firefighters. She introduced the keynote speaker, Joshua B. Freeman, a leading labor historian and Emeritus Professor of History at Queens College and the CUNY Graduate Center. Freeman first noted the enormous amount of research that LaTour had done on a subject that has



Prof. Joshua B. Freeman

not been widely covered, and that she focused on accounts of members of the rank-and-file who decided to speak up against union corruption (often aided by attorney Burton Hall, who specialized in upholding the rights of union members)



instead of simply “looking the other way” and thereby not risking their jobs, health, or worse! The insular nature of labor organizations and their “coercive” habits sometimes contributed to corruption. Freeman concluded his remarks by raising the issue of whether corruption led to the decline of organized labor but noted that since so many factors were at work the answer is not so clear.

Several speakers, including Jane’s son Richard and the Amazon organizer Antonio Rosario, then read extracts from *Backroom Bargaining*. Special thanks were given to activist/writer Andy Piascik, who took on the task of completing LaTour’s work-in-progress after her passing, so it could be published by the University of Illinois Press. Andy had worked with Jane at the Association for Union Democracy.

Two reviews of this significant work have been added to the collection of book reviews at newyorklaborhistory.org. And we offer our thanks to Joe Doyle and his planning committee for putting together an event that spotlighted the importance of the final reportorial work of our beloved colleague, Jane LaTour.

Save the Date

BERNHARDT LABOR JOURNALISM PRIZE

The Debra E. Bernhardt Labor Journalism Prize for 2026 will be awarded at a labor journalism forum to be held at NYU’s Tamiment Library on October 8, 2026. The event will also be live-streamed. For further information or to nominate a story or article, go to:

<https://www.laborarts.org/bernhardt-prize/>

“Tree of Life” Memorial dedicated in New Jersey

A “Tree of Life” Workers’ Memorial Monument was dedicated on April 28, 2026, in Haledon, New Jersey, a few blocks from the American Labor Museum/Botto House. The monument commemorates and honors workers who have lost their lives in American workplaces. It was unveiled on the 28th day of April because that is “Workers’ Memorial Day,” when American unions draw attention to the occupational health and safety of workers. According to OSHA, there were over 5,000 U.S. worker deaths on the job in 2024, and this does not include long-term mortality caused by exposure to harmful substances or conditions at work.



American Labor Museum

A Golden Anniversary

By Keith Danish and Steven Davis

On May 27, 2026, the New York Labor History Association celebrated its 50th anniversary at the Cornell ILR School in Manhattan. Moderator Keith Danish welcomed around 65 in-person guests and another 50 who attended by Zoom. Keith described the types of “intensive participation” that one can partake in through membership in the NYLHA. He also noted that Irwin Yellowitz, who chaired the planning committee for this event, is approaching his silver anniversary as President of the Association.

Following a half-hour of refreshments and socializing, **Robert Wechsler** and **Rachel Bernstein** presented opening remarks on the history and accomplishments of our Association.

Wechsler, a past president of the Association, has been with us through most of our history. He holds a Ph.D. in History from Columbia, taught history for 14 years at Bronx Community College, and worked on staff for 30 years with the Transport Workers Union of America, among his many accomplishments. Bernstein directs LaborArts, which she co-founded in 2000, and is a public historian who researches, writes about and teaches American working-class history, with a particular focus on New York City. She taught in the graduate program in public history at NYU, is a longtime board member of our Association and has tirelessly co-produced many of its programs.

Reviewing our history

Wechsler noted that our Association was created at Cornell, in Ithaca. He thanked our officers and members for their many contributions and said that we are a “small organization with a big punch.” (Bernstein calls us “small but scrappy.”) Wechsler spoke about New York’s rich history of honoring working people, citing our motto “A Bridge



(l to r) Ruth Milkman, Steven Greenhouse, Robert Wechsler, Rachel Bernstein, Keith Danish; bottom right Prof. Melvyn Dubofsky

between Past and Present,” which reflects the importance of preserving that history. Our labor history news service played a part in such preservation. He recalled how public employee unions bailed out a near-bankrupt New York City, after the Taylor Law allowed such workers to organize. He stressed the importance of preserving union records, a need which led to the formation of our Association and which we carry on with invaluable support from the Kheel Center and the Tamiment Library. Wechsler will follow up our anniversary event with an article in *Work History News* about the history of the NYLHA.

Bernstein works with the Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives to preserve records including those of Debra Bernhardt, annual union records and current labor events. She believes that labor history can empower today’s workers and support organizing. She recalled how instrumental labor lawyer Larry Cary was in getting New York State to establish May as Labor History Month. Cary (now deceased) was a former President and board member of our Association. Each year, we publicize the events of Labor History Month

through a calendar spearheaded by Joe Doyle. Bernstein also recalled the many conferences, film programs and other events we have sponsored, our ongoing Commerford Awards for labor education, Lemlich Awards for women activists, Bernhardt Awards for labor journalism and the Bellush and Wertheimer Awards for student writing about labor or workers’ issues.

Our panelists for the labor history segment of the program were **Melvyn Dubofsky** (remotely), and **Steven Greenhouse** and **Ruth Milkman** (in-person).

Dubofsky, a Distinguished Professor Emeritus of History and Sociology at SUNY Binghamton, published extensively on labor history and has been a key figure in the field since the 1960’s.

Steven Greenhouse was a reporter for the *New York Times* for 31 years,

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for our Association

(continued from page 4)

spending his last 19 years as the labor and workplace reporter for that publication. He reported worldwide on business, economics and labor. Since retiring from the *Times*, he has been a freelance reporter whose work has appeared in many media outlets, and he writes a column for the *Guardian*.

Ruth Milkman, the Distinguished Professor of Sociology and History at CUNY Graduate Center and at the CUNY School of Labor and Urban Studies, has written extensively on work and organized labor. She previously directed the Institute for Research on Labor and Employment at UCLA. She co-produces “The State of the Unions,” an annual profile of organized labor in New York City and State and in the USA.

Dubofsky stated that when he began his career, labor history did not exist as an academic field. Labor history organizations developed in the 1970’s, but by then labor’s status had diminished. There was a theoretical model of big labor, big government and big business, each exercising countervailing power. Supposedly, with the passing of the “Robber Barons” era, companies believed that they had responsibilities to their employees and community, not just to maximize profits. Companies wanting to be free of unions would offer wages and benefits comparable to those that workers could obtain through organizing. This was what academia taught us; it was a “different world,” according to Dubofsky.

In 1976, labor was “prominent” in New York City; it was a real “workers’ city,” according to Professor Joshua Freeman. The needle trades like the ILGWU, Amalgamated Clothing Workers and the Millinery Workers had “real power,” both political and economic. The Amalgamated had its own bank with special benefits for workers. It and the ILGWU built housing for their members. Mayors and public officials respected and dealt with area unions. In the 1920’s,



young Socialists had developed summer camps in the Pocono Mountains which evolved into the Tamiment Resort and the ILG’s Unity House. The Tamiment Library was supported by the resort.

A diminished labor movement

But as the discipline of labor history developed the labor movement declined. The NYLHA was formed in the year that Jimmy Carter was elected President. In the Carter administration, figures such as Alfred Kahn were not pro-labor and were pro-deregulation. They saw union gains coming at the expense of other workers. The labor movement was “well into decline” and the Carter era was a “dress rehearsal” for President Reagan, who destroyed the Air Traffic Controllers Union and signaled the private sector to maintain a hard line against unions.

Steven Greenhouse spoke about New York’s great labor history, from the early attempts to organize, and protesting the enforced labor of slaves in Greenwich Village in the mid-1800’s. The first Labor Day Parade was held in 1882 in Union Square and Clara Lemlich spoke eloquently at a 1909 rally, calling for a general strike of garment workers that led to the “Uprising of the 20,000.” The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire of 1911 killed 146 people, mostly immigrant female garment workers. Steven noted that Frances Perkins, who witnessed that

fire, later became the first female Secretary of Labor. He also recalled the New York labor activism of Samuel Gompers and A. Philip Randolph, while acknowledging that we can only briefly cover labor history in the context of a short program.

Greenhouse noted that more recently the labor movement and labor law have been weak, with too many labor leaders not committed to organizing. However, in recent years there has been an upsurge in organizing with younger workers becoming active in such companies as Amazon, Starbucks, REI, and Trader Joe’s, as unions have become “cool” again. However, those companies are fiercely anti-union, and their strategy is “death by a thousand delays,” so organizing drives often have not resulted in contracts. Although President Biden favored unions the PRO Act (Protecting the Right to Organize Act) did not become law, and the Senate filibuster will continue to block pro-labor bills. Challenges to the National Labor Relations Act alleging unconstitutionality (after all these years of its operation) are now before the courts.

Greenhouse stated that in the future the union movement will be on the “defensive,” at least as long as Trump or his followers are in power.

Ruth Milkman spoke about the “dismal numbers” of current unionized

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Reflections on our 50th Anniversary

In my many years of leadership in the New York Labor History Association, I recall events that stay with me. With pleasure, I remember the 100th birthday celebration for Philoine Fried, who was a major force in our Association for decades, including many years of service as Treasurer; the evening Peter Yarrow and Harry Belafonte joined us for a John Commerford Labor Education Awards event; and the day Governor Mario Cuomo declared May to be Labor History Month at the urging of our Association.



Irwin Yellowitz

These are highlights, and I enjoy the memories, but even more I value the hard work

of our leaders over the years in creating the Commerford Award, the Deborah Bernhardt Labor Journalism Prize, the Wertheimer and Bellush awards for excellent essays in labor history by undergraduate and graduate students, the Labor News Service that for years regularly provided labor history articles for use by labor publications, the Labor History Calendar that continues to inform us of all the events and exhibits that take place during Labor History Month, and our website that includes our

ongoing series of book reviews, our newsletter, and labor history resources.

It has all been done by volunteers who believe our Association is truly a bridge between past and present. It has been my great pleasure to work with everyone, and I thank them for their efforts and their accomplishments.

*Irwin Yellowitz, President,
New York Labor History
Association*

A Golden Anniversary for our Association

(continued from page 5)
workers in a time when we have the most anti-union U.S. President in memory. Only 5.9% of private sector employees are union members, and 10% overall. She noted that fewer strikes are occurring, new organizing is declining and employers are spending \$1.7 billion a year on defeating unionization drives. She stated that opposition to unionization is as strong now as in the early 20th century.

However, Milkman stated that unionization is possible. There is a “new generation of romantics” – Millennials and Zoomers, young organizers at Amazon, Starbucks and Trader Joe’s. She said that the key is “worker to worker” organizing. She noted that EWOC, the Emergency Workplace Organizing Committee, is engaging younger workers to organize themselves, forming their own unions or affiliating

with an established union if they decide to do so. She noted that academic workers, physicians and other health care workers, journalists and other skilled workers are forming unions and cannot be replaced as easily as those in traditional assembly-line jobs. Debra Bergen, a board member of our Association, also expressed the hope that worker-to-worker organizing, aided by social media, can be a model for labor’s future.

In the Q & A period the panelists and audience discussed how workers can raise union consciousness and then proceed from consciousness to action. One tool is to “inoculate” them against the attacks that management will aim against them. It was noted that union leaders may not be as militant as they once were, but Dubofsky reminded us how different our world is from the time of CIO activism in the

1930’s, when workers were part of a tightly knit social structure. Labor laws are woefully out of date but can’t be changed until the Senate’s filibuster wall can be breached.

A final question from Irwin Yellowitz: Will we have to endure another Great Depression and/or World War for the labor movement to regain the power it had at its peak? The future is uncertain, as always, but Greenhouse hopes that we can avoid disaster and that “AI” can bring great benefits to society if those benefits can be shared equitably and not hoarded. But the risk that “AI” will destroy jobs and concentrate wealth even further was recognized. Greenhouse gave the Pope credit for pushing back against the “AI” powers-that-be.

The event concluded with a final call for solidarity and for action, which includes joining our Association as

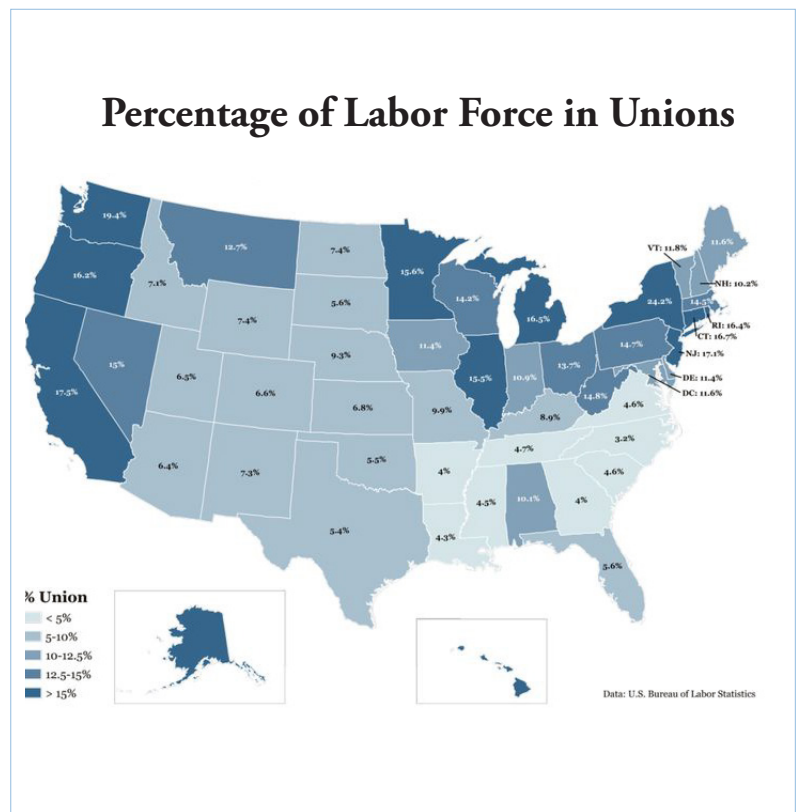
we face what are likely to be revolutionary changes in the labor market and in the nature of work itself. We welcome new voices, new perspectives and fresh energy to support our mission and our programs so we can continue to be a bridge between past and present. We began at Cornell; we celebrate this golden anniversary at Cornell; let’s hope that some of those in attendance tonight will be present to celebrate our Centennial in an era of dignity and prosperity for labor!

Keith Danish and Steven Davis are Board Members of the New York Labor History Association who served on the 50th anniversary planning committee along with Irwin Yellowitz (committee chair), Marcia Newfield and Robert Wechsler. Thanks to all who made this event possible and successful!

LABOR IN AMERICA

Ten Largest Labor Unions	Approx. Membership
National Educational Association	2,839,808
Service Employees International Union	1,901,161
American Federation of Teachers	1,700,000
American Fed. of State, County and Muni. Employees	1,459,511
International Brotherhood of Teamsters	1,400,000
United Food and Commercial Workers	1,300,000
United Steelworkers	860,264
International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers	820,000
Laborers' International Union of North America	669,772
Int'l Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers	653,781

[Sources: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Legal Clarity, etc.]



MILESTONES

90 YEARS AGO

The Sit-Down Strike at GM's Flint, Michigan Plant

AS THE YEAR 1936 ENDED, workers at General Motors' Fisher Body Plant No. 1 in Flint, Michigan initiated a "sit-down strike" inside the factory. They occupied the plant for 44 days and won recognition of the United Auto Workers as their bargaining representative and a commitment by GM to bargain collectively over wages and working conditions. It was not the first time that workers had occupied a factory rather than picketing outside of it (one such instance involved the IWW at a General Electric plant in Schenectady, New York, in 1906), but the Flint strike marked a turning point for a major U.S. industry and what would become a powerful progressive union.

The auto workers occupied several GM plants in addition to "Fisher No. 1". Their cause was bolstered by the labor-friendly Governor of Michigan Frank Murphy, (later to be a U.S. Attorney General under FDR, and a U.S. Supreme Court Justice), who sent the National Guard into Flint, not to bust up the strike but to prevent violence and advance a peaceful settlement. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 583 sit-down strikes took place from 1936 to 1939. In 1939, the U.S. Supreme Court held, in effect, that sit-down strikes were illegal, finding that the NLRB had no authority to order an employer to reinstate workers fired after a sit-down strike, even if the employer's illegal actions triggered that strike. (*NLRB v. Fansteel*)



NEW YORK LABOR HISTORY ASSOCIATION

Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives
70 Washington Square South, 2nd Floor
New York, NY 10012



Access our website with this QR Code.

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