

# Why Teach Labor History?

Most retired union members I know worry that their struggles have been forgotten. The sacrifices of their forebearers who fought for the eight hour day and the forty hour week—"the folks who brought you the weekend" as one union bumper sticker reads—certainly are taken for granted. Like the character in Kundera's novel who believes the struggle against power "is the struggle of memory against forgetting," the elder generation worries that the continuity of their traditions is dying (1).

For these union veterans the reasons for teaching labor history are obvious. They want young people to study what they remember—the contributions they made to building a nation and the sacrifices they made to democratize its brutal workplaces and to create for millions of their kind lives with a measure of economic and social security. Most of all, they want young people to learn from labor history that individual workers can achieve some dignity if they assert their collective power.

Those who benefited from the labor movement accept its conflict-ridden past and the lessons of sacrifice it seems to hold. But that bloody history can teach different lessons. Unions are often associated in history texts with violent strikes—usually with defeated strikes (2). Social forces and human passions were often revealed in these dramatic confrontations at times with painful and heroic clarity (3). Union supporters and members who lost their lives in labor struggles (far more than in any other industrial nation) should trouble the students of our history. Why did people who demanded their rights suffer from such violent repression in a free society? Students of labor history may also ask why U.S. employers, as compared to their European and Canadian counterparts, have insisted on such total control of the workplace and of the people in their employ, and why private and state forces intervened so often against workers and their unions (4).

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Trade unionism's violent past is perhaps one deterrent to the teaching of labor history. There are others. The powerful influences of competitive individualism and ideological conservatism discourage many Americans from appreciating union history. But labor's enemies are not entirely responsible for its absence in many history courses. The unions' often exclusionary past has prevented women, immigrants, and minorities from seeing union history as relevant to their lives. And despite labor historians' emphasis on organized

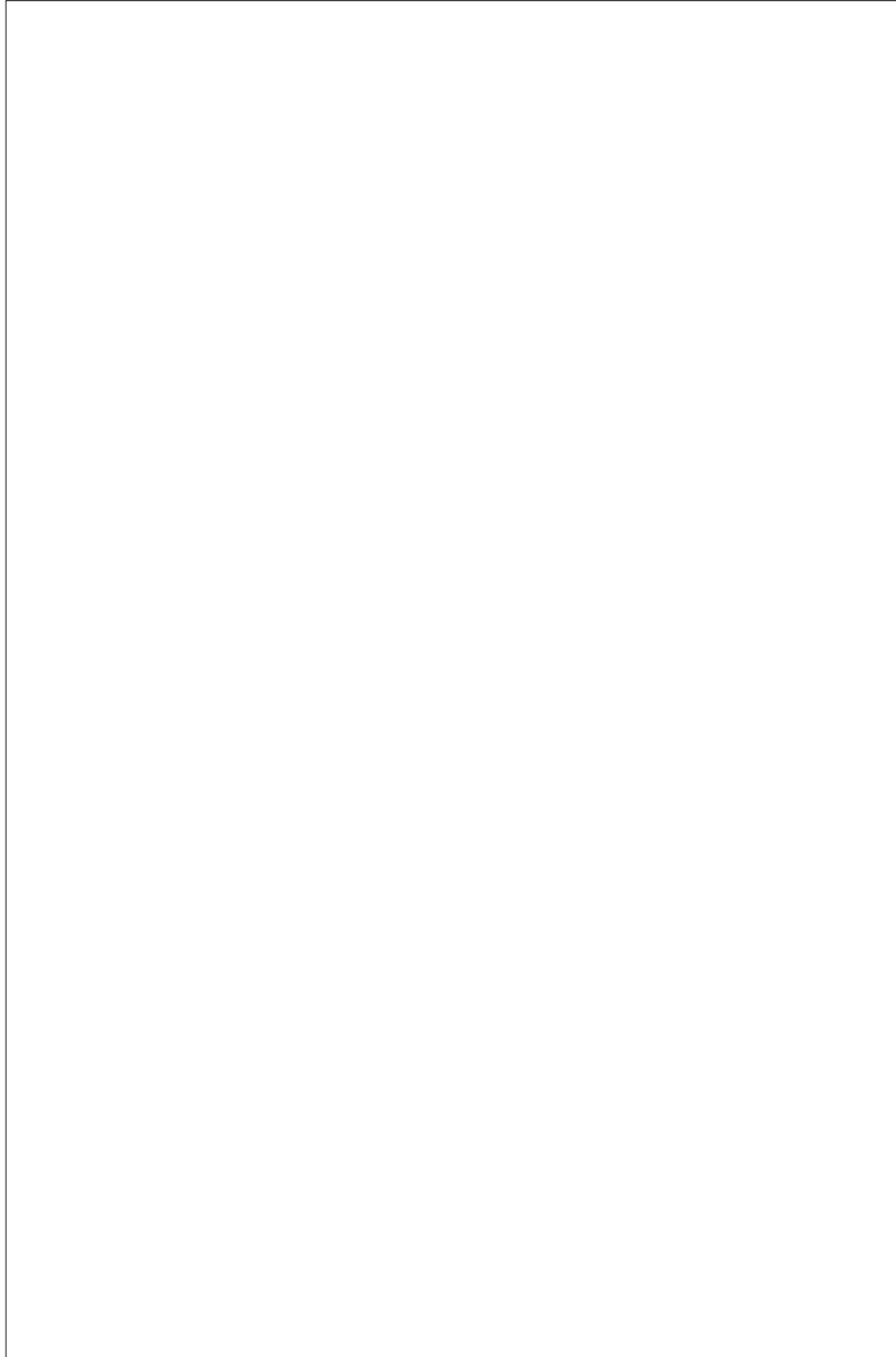
labor's great contributions to social and economic justice, many people still regard unions as an inward looking, protectionist set of institutions easily categorized as "special interest groups" (5).

Yet, as workers face a very uncertain future, more are expressing a need for a voice in the workplace, especially women and African Americans (6). Unions, led by the progressive "New Voices" leadership of the AFL-CIO, are responding by diversifying their leadership, engaging in social justice issues, democratizing their own organizations, and seeking support from young people and community allies. Unions' approval ratings are now climbing in public opinion polls (7).

Perhaps more educators will be encouraged to teach labor history as a revived AFL-CIO places more emphasis on education. The publication of *Labor's Heritage* and its use by school teachers is one high-quality history project already in place. Inspired by the enormously positive effect of Black History Month, the AFL-CIO has persuaded President Clinton to declare May "labor history month" for educational purposes. However, the case for teaching

labor history cannot be made solely by union officials. It must be made primarily by history teachers (8).

Original photograph in the George Meany Memorial Archives; this one is reprinted from *Labor's Heritage* (Spring 1995)



Max Kalish's 1937, "tribute to Newspaper craftsmen," *The Make-Up Man*.

Besides appreciating the role of unions in improving economic and social security, students can learn valuable lessons about citizenship from studying labor history. As a counterweight to overwhelming emphasis on individual rights in our history curricula, labor history illustrates the less appreciated struggle for collective rights (9).

As teachers educate future citizens for democracy, they should consider workers and their organizations as important defenders and progenitors of democratic change in the society. Fortunately, the National History Standards (which neglect labor history in some respects) do emphasize this dimension of labor history in the section on the Great Depression—as the *Who Built America?* text does in an excellent chapter on the New Deal called "Labor Democratizes America," an approach also adopted in Blackside's powerful documentary film

series "The Great Depression" (10).

These works and others suggest to students what black history

and women's history teaches: that movements of ordinary citizens have been necessary to make democracy more inclusive and to make public policy that benefits the needy. At a time when enthusiasm for democracy withers, the study of social movements can instill hope in students jaded by their exposure to media-driven political leaders (11). Furthermore, at a time when the possibilities of democracy are more and more restricted in public discourse and in popular imagination, labor history offers fascinating stories of labor visionaries who dedicated their lives to broadening those possibilities (12).

Underlying the theme of the labor movement as an agent of democracy lies a long history of working people striving to free themselves from wage dependency and from legal inferiority. Like the emancipated slaves whose experience during Reconstruction challenges students to explore the meaning of freedom in America, the fate of "free labor" in other spheres raises fundamental questions about democratic citizenship in a society based on property rights and market freedoms. As David Montgomery, the influential labor historian, writes in his new book *Citizen Worker*, "the most urgent question" facing the labor movements in North America and Europe as the twentieth century dawned was "whether democracy could be rescued by extending its scope into the forbidden gardens of the market itself" (13).

As the dawning of the twenty-first century presents a new world of global markets and powerful financial forces operating far beyond the boundaries of democracy, teachers should have no doubt about the relevance of "the urgent question" that motivated labor history a century ago.

With union membership reduced, government standards for worker rights and safety under assault, with job security in jeopardy everywhere, young people entering the labor market are more vulnerable than ever to abuse in the workplace. And yet they are alarmingly unaware of the decades of struggle previous generations made to extend human and civil rights to the workplace. At work, Americans are instructed that "democracy stops at the factory or office door," as if democracy could be "relegated only to evenings and weekends" (14). Educators will need to offer more opposition to the "schooling" citizens receive in the workplace.

Studying the labor movement is one good way to counter this limited notion of citizenship and this restricted concept of democracy. But the case for teaching labor history does not depend solely on the importance of union struggles for economic and political rights. Inspired by Herbert Gutman, pioneer of the "new labor history," scholars have developed a much broader approach to studying workers and workplace issues (15). Since the 1960s, practitioners of the new labor history have produced superb studies of work experience, studies of value to teachers who wish to make work a central problem in U.S. history (16).

De-industrialization creates the impression that work, as we knew it in the factory age, has ended. And yet, more people are now working than at any time since the Depression in low-wage jobs created by "the great American jobs machine," and more Americans are working longer hours (17). Poor women who work raising children with meager aid from the federal government are now being driven off welfare and onto the Darwinian job market. With the

erosion of job security and the decline of real wages, work will remain highly problematic in the twenty-first century.

If high school, community college, and university curricula are to be more and more oriented to preparing students for the world of work (a trend that should arouse critical attention), labor and social history offer students ways of understanding the problems and difficulties of work, including the conflicts of class, gender, race, and culture that have been especially important at work (18). And, unlike most career-oriented curricula, the new labor and social history provide students with critical perspectives from which to understand work and its discontents (19). □

### Endnotes

1. Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (New York: Penguin Books, 1981), 3.
2. Jean Anyon, "Ideology and American Textbooks," *Harvard Educational Review* 49 (August 1979): 373, shows that high school texts concentrated on three violent strikes that ended in defeat—the 1877 rail strike, the Homestead lockout, and the Pullman boycott, an emphasis which casts doubt on "striking as a valid course of action."
3. Some of the most effective visual resources for teaching labor history center on strikes and lockouts: the powerfully animated account of the 1877 railroad strike, "The Grand Army of Starvation"; "The River Ran Red" about the 1892 Homestead strike; "With Babies and Banners" portraying women in the 1937 sit-down strike in Flint; and "They Stood at the River" about the Memphis sanitation workers' strike when Martin Luther King was murdered.
4. For an interpretation that emphasizes the hostility of employers and government to organized labor, see Patricia Cayo Sexton, *The War on Labor and the Left* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1981).
5. On the historic restriction of unions' mission, see David Brody, "Shaping a Labor Movement," in *In Labor's Cause: Main Themes on the History of the American Worker* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 81-92.
6. On the higher levels of union support among women and African Americans, see AFL-CIO Committee on the Evolution of Work, *The Changing Situation of Workers and their Unions* (Washington, D.C.: AFL-CIO, 1985).
7. Diane E. Lewis, "Labor '96: Unions Look to the Young," *Boston Globe*, 2 September 1996, 1, 20.
8. The AFL-CIO Education Department will provide copies of curricula and lesson plans developed by teachers. The Massachusetts AFL-CIO has published a *Resource Guide to Labor Education* developed by and for social studies teachers.
9. See William E. Forbath, *Law and the Shaping of the American Labor Movement* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991).
10. "National History Standards, Part II. United States History Standards, Grades 5-12," *OAH Magazine of History* 9 (Spring 1995): 21. Joshua Brown, et. al., *Who Built America? Working People and the Nation's Economy, Politics, Culture and Society*,

- vol. 2 (New York: Pantheon, 1992), chapter 8. The labor show in PBS's "Great Depression"—"Mean Things Happening"—depicts the struggle for democracy led by the CIO unions. For an essay based on the program theme, see James Green, "Democracy Comes to 'Little Siberia': Steel Workers Organize in Aliquippa, Pennsylvania, 1933-1937," *Labor's Heritage* (August 1993).
11. For a parallel argument about the value of teaching about the civil rights movement, see Vincent Harding, *Hope and History: Why We Must Share the Story of the Movement* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990).
  12. See Nick Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs, Citizen and Socialist* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982); Jervis Anderson, *A. Philip Randolph: A Biographical Portrait* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1973); Steven Fraser, *Labor Will Rule: Sidney Hillman and the Rise of American Labor* (New York: Free Press, 1991); and Nelson Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit: Walter Reuther and the Fate of American Labor* (New York: Basic Books, 1995).
  13. David Montgomery, *Citizen Worker: The Experience of Workers in the United States with Democracy and the Free Market during the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 162.
  14. Elaine Bernard, "Why Unions Matter," *Open Magazine Pamphlet* 36 (Westfield, N.J.: Open Media, 1996).
  15. See Herbert G. Gutman, *Work, Culture and Society* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1976), 9-15; and his posthumous collection *Power & Culture: Essays on the American Working Class*, ed. Ira Berlin (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987).
  16. On the contributions of the new labor historians, see David Montgomery, "To Study the People: The American Working Class," *Labor History* 21 (Fall 1980): 485-512; and David Brody, "The New Labor History," in Eileen Boris and Nelson Lichtenstein, eds., *Major Problems in the History of American Workers* (Lexington: D.C. Heath, 1991), 2-14, an excellent collection of documents and articles representing recent scholarship.
  17. Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison, *The Great U-Turn: The Corporate Restructuring of America* (New York: Basic Books, 1988); and Juliet Schor, *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).
  18. For new work on race, gender, and ethnic conflicts in the workplace, see the special issue of *Labor History* on race and ethnicity, 35 (Winter 1994); and Ava Baron, ed., *Work Engendered: Toward a New History of American Labor* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).
  19. Ironically, the new School to Work curriculum advanced by the federal government, which is supposed to prepare young people for the world of work, finds little or no place for labor history. For good suggestions on teaching about the history of work, see William Bigleow and Norman Diamond, *The Power in Our Hands: A Curriculum on the History of Work and Workers in the United States* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1988).
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## Stuart Kaufman, 1942-1997

It is with sadness that I report the death of Stuart Kaufman. Professor of History at the University of Maryland, he died on January 19 at the age of 54. A labor historian, teacher, editor, and administrator, he bridged the gap between academic scholarship and public education. And he did so with good humor, a generous spirit, and impressive dedication.

Kaufman accomplished much in his life, but perhaps his most singular achievement was founding and editing *Labor's Heritage*, a quarterly publication of the George Meany Center for Labor Studies. This handsomely illustrated, carefully documented journal brings the work of labor historians to a broad general public. Kaufman also did much to transform the Meany Archives into a first-rate research center. The author of many books and articles, he was the founder and editor of the Samuel Gompers Papers.

I got to know Stuart during his four years of service on the National Park System Advisory Board (1991-1994), where he was a staunch advocate for the labor history theme study project. Stuart Kaufman gave tremendous energy to labor history and contributed much to the field. The labor history community deeply appreciates what he achieved, and he will be missed. —Martin H. Blatt, guest editor. □