



History of Labor and Work in the U.S.: 1880-1945 (on-line)

37:575: 202 Section 90 – Spring 2026

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COURSE DESCRIPTION:

This course explores the history of the labor movement in the U.S. from 1880 to 1945. Course themes include the sources and forms of conflict between workers and employers; changes in technology, production, and workplace organization in an evolving capitalist economy; the impact of racism and sexism on the labor movement; the different types of unions and worker organizations which were formed in this period; and the on-going debate over the goals and purposes of unions.

Although unions are not the exclusive focus of the course, we will closely study how labor unions were affected by changes in our economy, political system, and culture, as well as how working people and their unions impacted and shaped these systems. Through this process of mutual interaction, *who* labor unions represented, *what* they sought to accomplish in the short- and long-term, and *how* they attempted to reach their goals evolved. At the same time, the basic purpose of the labor movement - to defend and advance the interests of working people vis-à-vis powerful employers and a government which often supported employers – remained unchanged.

In this course, we will look at how the labor movement's ability to improve their members' living standards and working conditions widely fluctuated from 1880 to 1945. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries unions were relatively weak most of the time, almost marginal in their influence. However, in response to the crisis conditions of the Great Depression of the 1930s, workers organized powerful unions and became a central element of a new, progressive coalition which reshaped our economy and political system.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

Rutgers University, the School of Management and Labor Relations (SMLR), and the Labor Studies and Employment Relations Department have established the following learning objectives for this course:

From the Rutgers University Core Curriculum: HST, SCL, WCr and WCd

- Explain the development of some aspect of society or culture over time. (HST, Goal k).
- Understand different theories about human culture, social identity, economic entities, political systems and other forms of social organization. (SCL, Goal m).
- Communicate complex ideas effectively, in standard written English, to a general audience, and respond effectively to editorial feedback from peers, instructors, and/or supervisors through successive drafts and revision. (WCr, Goal s).
- Communicate effectively in modes appropriate to a discipline or area of inquiry; Evaluate and critically assess sources and the use of conventions of attribution and citation correctly; and analyze and synthesize information and ideas from multiple sources to generate new insights. (WCd, Goal t).

From the Labor Studies and Employment Relations Department:

- Demonstrate an understanding of the perspectives, theories and concepts in the field of labor and employment relations. (Goal 1).
- Make an argument using contemporary or historical evidence. (Goal 4).

From the School of Management and Labor Relations:

- Communicate effectively at a level and in modes appropriate to an entry level professional. (Goal I).
- Demonstrate an understanding of relevant theories and apply them given the background context of a particular work situation. (Goal 4)

Instructor's Learning Objectives: In addition to the learning objectives listed above, the following learning objectives are based on the specific topics and issues covered in the course:

- Understand the critical role of the labor movement in our society.
- Recognize why and how workers have formed different types of labor organizations.
- Demonstrate an understanding of how workers and their organizations (including unions) have been shaped by the larger society of which they are a part but have also contributed to changing the larger society.

Since this is an **on-line course** which includes peer review/editing and forum discussions involving a group of students, several learning objectives concern the process of interaction between students.

- Demonstrate an ability to communicate clearly, authentically, and maintain a content-oriented focus in response to other students' work.
- Maintain a positive and respectful attitude when interacting with other students, especially those who have different views and opinions.

STATEMENT ON DISABILITIES: Rutgers University welcomes students with disabilities into all the University's educational programs. To receive consideration for reasonable accommodations, a student with a disability must contact the appropriate disability services office at the campus where you are officially enrolled, participate in an intake interview, and provide documentation: <https://ods.rutgers.edu/students/documentation-guidelines>. If the documentation supports your request for reasonable accommodations, your campus's disability services office will provide you with a Letter of Accommodations. Please share this letter with your instructors and discuss the accommodations with them as early in your courses as possible. To begin this process, please complete the Registration form on the ODS web site at: <https://ods.rutgers.edu/students/registration-form>.

- Student resources – this link directs students to the appropriate resources if they are in need of help in the areas of (a) mental health, (b) academic coaching, and (c) financial assistance: <https://smlr.rutgers.edu/about-smlr/fall-2022-information-smlr-students>

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY:

In the policy on academic integrity, the University defines plagiarism as the representation of the words or ideas of another as one's own in any academic work (this includes the use of AI generated work that is submitted as your own). To avoid plagiarism, every direct quotation must be identified by quotation marks, or by appropriate indentation, and must be cited properly according to the accepted format for the particular discipline. Acknowledgment is also required when material from any source is paraphrased or summarized in whole or in part in one's own words. To acknowledge a paraphrase properly, one might state: to paraphrase Plato's comment... and conclude with a footnote or appropriate citation to identify the exact reference. A footnote acknowledging only a directly quoted statement does not suffice to notify the reader of any preceding or succeeding paraphrased material. Information that is common knowledge, such as names of leaders of prominent nations, basic scientific laws, etc, need not be cited; however, the sources of all facts or information obtained in reading or research that are not common knowledge among students in the course must be acknowledged. In addition to materials specifically cited in the text, other materials that contribute to one's general understanding of the subject may be acknowledged in the bibliography. Sometimes, plagiarism can be a subtle issue. Students should be encouraged to discuss any questions about what constitutes plagiarism with the faculty member teaching the course.

Basically, your work needs to be yours. But, while the policy focuses on misusing printed sources by failing to paraphrase or use quotation, any time your work is not your own you're plagiarizing. And that makes it much more complicated, because sometimes what you think is your work isn't fully your work, and that can lead to problems with plagiarism.

SCHOLARSHIPS: To ensure that all students are aware of SMLR's scholarship offerings, we encourage you to explore the possibilities:

<https://smlr.rutgers.edu/academic-programs/scholarships>

COURSE READINGS:

1. *Who Built America?: Working People and the Nation's History, Volume II: Since 1877*, 3rd ed., Bedford / St. Martin's Press, 2008. (Referred to as **WBA?** in the following pages of the syllabus.) This is the **textbook** for the course. All assigned readings from the textbook are available on **Canvas**.

2. **Other Required Readings:** In addition to the textbook, the other required readings are also available online with the course. Most of the online readings are **primary sources and will be noted** in the syllabus— i.e. they are from the time period discussed in the text. Other readings are secondary sources; they are interpretations and evaluations of the events or developments.

The primary sources are from the following books:

- *American Labor: A Documentary Collection (AL)*, edited by M. Dubofsky and J. McCartin, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.
- *Major Problems in the History of American Workers (MPHAW)*, edited by E. Boris and N. Lichtenstein, 2nd ed., Wadsworth/Cengage Learning, 2003.
- *Voices of a People's History of the United States (VPHUS)*, edited by H. Zinn and A. Arnove, Seven Stories Press, 2004.
- *Voices of Freedom: Documentary History, volume 2 (VOF)*, edited by Eric Foner, 4th ed., W.W. Norton & Co., 2014.
- *The Voice of the People (VOP)*, edited by J. Rees and J. Pollack, Harlan Davidson, Inc., 2004.

COURSE OUTLINE Week 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE COURSE

Week 1:

Tuesday, January 20 - Sunday January 25

Become familiar with the web site for this on-line course. Then, read the syllabus and a very brief summary of U.S. labor history until 1877. You will also find a video introduction about my background and teaching philosophy.

Readings:

- Course Syllabus
- Slott and Voos, "A Very Brief History of U.S. Labor until 1877," pp. 1-4.
→Assignments due by Jan. 25:

- 1) Introduce yourself to other students by writing an on-line introduction
- 2) Provide "AccountRelatedInformation" for the Canvas website
- 3) Respond to the "Four Questions on Labor Unions"

Week 2: THE RAILROAD STRIKES OF THE 1870s: THE FIRST ACT IN AN ERA OF SOCIAL CONFLICT

Monday, January 26 - Sunday February 1

Readings:

- Gutman, "Trouble on the Railroads in 1873-1874: Prelude to the 1877 Crisis?" in *The Labor History Reader*, pp. 132-152 (1985).

- Brecher, “The Great Upheaval,” pp. 138-148. [MPHAW]
Video Clip: “The Grand Army of Starvation”

→Assignment due by Feb. 1: Response Paper/Writing Assignment 1

Week 3: INDUSTRIAL CAPITALISM IN THE GILDED AGE (1880 to 1893)

Monday, February 2 - Sunday February 8

Readings:

- WBA Chapter 1 - pp. 23-49, 64-71 (begin on p. 64 with the section “Extractive Industries and Exploited Workers”).

→Assignment due by Feb. 8: Group Forum Discussion

[Please note the initial submission to the forum discussion is due by Friday of this week.]

Week 4: WORKING PEOPLE’S RESPONSES TO INDUSTRIAL CAPITALISM (1880 to 1893)

Monday, February 9 - Sunday February 15

Readings:

- WBA Chapter 2 – pp. 77-78, 91-120 (begin on p. 91 with the section “The Workingman’s Hour”).
- Video Clip: “Homestead Strike of 1892”

→Assignment due by Feb. 15: Exam #1 – Online, “open book” exam based on the “Check Your Understanding” questions from Weeks 2, 3 and 4

Week 5: INDUSTRIAL CAPITALISM TRIUMPHS (1893 to 1900)

Monday, February 16 - Sunday February 22

Readings:

- WBA Chapter 3 – pp. 125-157, 167-174 (begin on p. 167 with the section “Business on the Rebound”).
- “Statement from the Pullman Strikers” (1894), pp. 234-236. [Primary Source - VPHUS]
- "How to Write an Argumentative Essay"

Video Clip: “Video on Writing Assignment 2”

→Assignment due by Feb.22: First Draft of Writing Assignment 2

Week 6: THE TRANSFORMATION OF WORK AND HOME (1900 to 1914)

Monday, February 23 - Sunday March 1

Readings:

- WBA Chapter 4 - pp. 180-202.
- “Machinist Orrin Cheney Testifies to Congress on the Taylor System of Shop Management” (1911), pp. 83-85. [Primary Source - VOP]
- Video Clip: “The Beat of the System”

→Assignment due by Mar. 1: Peer Review and Edit of another student’s Writing Assignment 2

Week 7: FINAL VERSION OF WRITING ASSIGNMENT 2

Monday, March 2- Sunday March 8

Readings:

- "Revising Your Paper"

→Assignment due by March 8: Final Version of Writing Assignment 2

Week 8: REFORM AND RADICALISM IN THE PROGRESSIVE ERA (1900 TO 1914)

Monday, March 9 - Sunday, March 15

Readings:

- WBA Chapter 5 – pp. 223-255.
- “Radical Alternatives” (pp. 134-137). [Primary Source - AL]
- “Proclamation of the Striking Textile Workers of Lawrence” (1912), pp. 272-275.
[Primary Source - VOPH]

→Assignment due by Mar. 15: Submit a 1 to 2 pages summary of an article that has been approved by instructor.

Spring Break. March 16- March 22

Week 9: THE IMPACT OF WORLD WAR I ON WORKERS AND THEIR ORGANIZATIONS (1914 to 1920)

Monday, March 23 - Sunday, March 29

Readings:

- WBA Chapter 6 – pp. 279-294, 307-312, and 320-329.
 - “Post-War Backlash” (pp. 149-154). [Primary Source - AL]
- Video Clip: “The Seattle General Strike”

→Assignment due by Sun, Mar. 29: Exam #2 – Online, “open book” exam based on the “Check Your Understanding” questions from Weeks 5, 6, 8, and 9

Week 10: THE “LEAN YEARS” FOR AMERICAN WORKERS (1920 to 1929)

Monday, March 30 to Sunday, April 5

- WBA Ch. 7 – pp. 335-352, 375-385.

→Assignment due by Apr. 5: Group Forum Discussion

[Please note the initial submission to the forum discussion is due by Friday of this week.]

Week 11: THE GREAT DEPRESSION & THE FIRST NEW DEAL (1929 to 1934)

Monday, April 6 to Sunday, April 12

Reading:

- WBA Chapter 8
- Video Clip: “San Francisco General Strike”

→Assignment due by April 12: First Draft of Writing Assignment 3

WEEK 12: FDR’s SECOND NEW DEAL (1935 to 1939)

Monday, April 13- Sunday, April 19

Reading:

- WBA Chapter 9 - pp. 445-455, 473-480.

→Assignment due by Apr. 19: Peer Review and Edit of another student’s Writing Assignment 3

Week 13: THE CIO & THE INDUSTRIAL UNION MOVEMENT (1935 to 1939)

Monday, April 20- Sunday April 26

Readings:

- WBA Chapter 9 - pp. 455-473, 480-491.
- “Industrial Union Upsurge” (pp. 187-193). [Primary Source - AL]
Video Clip: “AFL vs. CIO Split in 1935”

→Assignment due by Sunday, April 26: Final Version of Writing Assignment 3

Week 14: WORKING PEOPLE & WORLD WAR II (1939 to 1946)

Monday, April 27- Sunday May 3

Reading:

- WBA Chapter 10 – pp. 497-505, 517-536, and 541-547.
- "World War II" (pp. 194-205). [Primary Source - AL]

Video Clips: "Manpower Needs in World War II" and "Rosie the Riveter: Real Women Workers in World War II."

→Assignment due by May 3: Group Forum Discussion

[Please note the initial submission to the forum discussion is due by Friday of this week.]

Week 15: Final Exam Due

Wednesday May 7 to Sunday, May 10

Exam is available on Canvas on Wednesday, May 7 to Sunday, May 10

This is an online, “open book” exam based on the “Check Your Understanding” questions from Weeks 10 through 14. There will also be a short essay question.

Grading Criteria:

A 90-100%

B+ 85-90%

B 80-85%

C+ 75-80%

C 70-75%

D 60-69%

F 59% and below

**900 to 1000 points 850 to 899 points 800 to 849 points 750 to 799 points 700 to 749 points
600 to 699 points 0 to 599 points**

GRADING CRITERIA AND COMPONENTS

Unless there is prior notification and a legitimate reason, all late papers will be downgraded ½ letter grade (e.g. A→B+)

Grading Components:

#1 –Forum Discussions: Weeks 3, 10, & 14

Each forum discussion = 50 points. 3 x 50 = 150 points – 15% of the grade

#2 – Peer Review and Edit of another Student’s Writing Assignment: Weeks 6 & 12

Each peer review = 50 points. 2 x 50 = **100 points = 10%** of the grade

#3 – Writing Assignments: Weeks 2, 5, 7, 11, & 13

Week 2 - Response Paper/Writing Assignment 1 = 50 points **Week 5** - First Draft of Writing Assignment 2 = 50 points **Week 7** – Final Version of Writing Assignment 2 = 100 points **Week 11** - First Draft of Writing Assignment 3 = 50 points **Week 13** – Final Version of Writing Assignment 3 – 100 points Total: = **350 points = 35%** of the grade

#4 – Exams

All exams are “open book” and online. The questions are based on the “Check Your Understanding” questions for each week of the course.

Week 4, Exam #1 (Weeks 2 through 4) = 80 points

Week 9, Exam #2 (Weeks 5 through 9) = 120 points

Final Assignment, Exam #3 (Weeks 10 through 14) = 150 points Total: = **350 points = 35%** of the grade

#5 – Write a paper about a current labor event (Any time between Weeks 8 to 15)

Submit a 1 to 2 pages summary of an article on a current labor issue.

50 points = 5% of the grade

Total Course Points = 1000 = 100% of the grade.

Unless there is prior notification and a legitimate reason, all late papers will be downgraded by at least 1/2 letter grade (e.g. A→B+), depending on the length of lateness.