



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

37:575: 202 (Section 92) – Spring 2026

Instructor: Mike Slott

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To contact the instructor: Use the Canvas message system or email me at ptslott@smlr.rutgers.edu

Office Hours via Zoom: Meetings will be scheduled by mutual agreement

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 and the School of Management and Labor Relations (SMLR) 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-1).
- Understand different theories about human culture, social identity, economic entities, political systems and other forms of social organization. (SCL-1).
- 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).
- 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).

From the School of Management and Labor Relations (SMLR):

- Knowledge of Theory, Practice and Application – including:
 - Analyze the degree to which forms of human difference shape a person’s experience of and perspectives on work
 - Analyze a contemporary global issue in their field from a multi-disciplinary and intersectional perspective
 - Analyze issues related to business strategies, organizational structures, and work systems
 - Analyze issues of social justice related to work across local and global contexts
- Professional Development – including:
 - Develop effective presentation skills appropriate for different settings and audiences
 - Develop career management skills to navigate one’s career
 - Develop capabilities to work and lead in a multicultural and diverse environment
 - Work productively in teams, in social networks, and on an individual basis
 - Develop cultural agility competencies
 - Demonstrate lifelong personal and professional development skills

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:

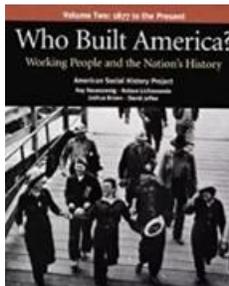
- Understand the critical role of the labor movement in our society.
- Recognize why and how workers have formed different types of labor organizations.
- Demonstrate an understanding of how workers and their organizations (including unions) have been shaped by the larger society of which they are a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

Statement on Disabilities: Rutgers University welcomes students with disabilities into all of the University's educational programs. In order 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>.

Resources for SMLR Students:

1. **Student resources** – Click on the following link if you are in need of help in the areas of (a) mental health, (b) academic coaching, and (c) financial assistance: <https://smlr.rutgers.edu/academic-programs/current-students>
2. **Scholarships** – For information on scholarships offered through SMLR, go to: <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 these readings are **primary sources**— i.e., they are from the time period discussed in the text. Other readings are secondary sources; they are interpretations and evaluations of 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.
- ***Voices of a People's History of the United States (VPHUS)***, edited by H. Zinn and A. Arnove, Seven Stories Press, 2004.
- ***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

Tuesday, Jan. 20 to Sunday, Jan. 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.

Reading:

- Slott and Voos, “A Very Brief History of U.S. Labor until 1877”.
- Course Syllabus

→Assignments due by Jan. 25:

- 1) Introduce yourself to other students by writing an on-line introduction.
- 2) Provide “Account Related Information” for the Canvas website.
- 3) Post comments using the Hypothesis annotation tool regarding the syllabus and grading system.

Week 2: THE GREAT UPHEAVAL OF 1877

Monday, Jan. 26 to Sunday, Feb. 1

Assigned Reading:

- Jeremy Brecher, “The Great Upheaval,” pp. 13-35. Chapter 1 of Brecher’s book, *Strike!* (PM Press, 2020).

Assigned Video:

- The Grand Army of Starvation

→Assignment due by Feb. 1: Writing Assignment 1

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

Monday, Feb. 2 to Sunday, Feb. 8

Assigned Reading:

- 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:** Small Group Discussion on Writing Assignment 1. You'll meet with me on Zoom with other students in a small group to discuss your and other students' papers. (I'll provide dates/times for these meetings, and you'll sign up for one of them.)

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

Monday, Feb. 9 to Sunday, Feb. 15

Assigned Reading:

- WBA? Chapter 2 – pp. 77-78, 91-120 (begin on p. 91 with the section “The Workingman’s Hour”).

Assigned Video:

- Homestead Strike of 1892

→**Assignment due by Feb. 15:** Small Group Discussion using the Hypothesis Annotation tool on the American Federation of Labor (AFL) vs. the Knights of Labor (KoL)

Week 5: INDUSTRIAL CAPITALISM TRIUMPHS (1893 to 1900)

Monday, Feb. 16 to Sunday, Feb. 22

Assigned 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]

Assigned Video:

- Guidelines for 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, Feb. 23 to Sunday, March 1

Assigned 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]

Assigned Video:

- The Beat of the System

→ **Assignment due by March 1:** Peer Review and Assessment of another student’s Writing Assignment 2

Week 7: REFORM AND RADICALISM IN THE PROGRESSIVE ERA (1900 TO 1914)

Monday, March 2 to Sunday, March 8

Assigned Readings:

- WBA? Chapter 5 – pp. 223-255.
- “Radical Alternatives” (pp. 134-137). [Primary Source - AL]

Assigned Video:

- Bread and Roses: The Lawrence Textile Strike

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

Week 8: THE IMPACT OF WORLD WAR I ON WORKERS AND THEIR ORGANIZATIONS (1914 to 1920)

Monday, March 9 to Friday, March 13

Assigned Readings:

- WBA? Chapter 6 – pp. 279-280 (Intro), 290-294 (beginning with “Mobilizing the Home Front”), 307-312 (beginning with “Militancy, Repression, and Nativism”), and 320-329 (beginning with “Postwar Strikes and Race Riots”).
- “Post-War Backlash” (pp. 149-154). [Primary Source - AL]

Assigned Video:

- The Seattle General Strike

→ **Assignment due by March 13:** Exam #1 – Online, “open book” exam based on the “Check Your Understanding” questions for Weeks 2 through 8

SPRING BREAK: SATURDAY, MARCH 14 TO SUNDAY, MARCH 22

Week 9: CURRENT LABOR EVENT & ITS RELATIONSHIP TO U.S. LABOR HISTORY

Monday, March 23 to Sunday, March 29

Assigned Reading:

- “What the Labor Movement Can Learn from Its Past” - <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/05/kim-kelly-interview-labor-unions/629716/>

→**Written Assignment due by March 29:** 2-page paper which summarizes an article on a current labor event and discusses the relationship of this event to the course material.

To complete the assignment: Meet with me on Zoom with other students in a small group to discuss your and other students’ papers during the last week of the course. (I’ll provide dates/times for these meetings, and you’ll sign up for one of them.)

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

Monday, March 30 to Sunday, April 5

Assigned Reading:

- WBA? Ch. 7 – pp. 335-352, 375-385.

→**Assignment due by April 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

Assigned Reading:

- WBA? Chapter 8 – pp. 391-392, 404-435.

Video:

- San Francisco General Strike

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

Optional: **Extra credit opportunity** – 2 to 3-page paper on one of the **Closer Look** essays related to textbook topics. **Due May 3**. Maximum of 50 points.

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

Monday, April 13 to Sunday, April 19

Assigned Reading:

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

→ **Assignment due by April 19:** Peer Review and Assessment of another student’s Writing Assignment 3

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

Monday, April 20 to Wednesday, April 26

Assigned Readings:

- WBA? Chapter 9 - pp. 455-473, 480-491.
- “Industrial Union Upsurge” (pp. 187-193). [Primary Source - AL]

Assigned Video:

- AFL vs. CIO Split in 1935

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

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

Monday, April 27 to Sunday, May 3

Assigned Readings:

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

Assigned Video:

- Rosie the Riveter: Real Women Workers in World War II.

→**Assignment due by May 3:** Small Group Discussion using the Hypothesis Annotation tool on the Debate over the No-Strike Pledge During World War II

Final Assignments – Exam #2, Essay Question

Thursday, May 7 to Friday, May 8

The exam is available on Canvas on **Thursday, May 7 through Friday, May 8.**

This is an online, “open book” exam based on the “Check Your Understanding” questions for Weeks 10, 11, 12, 13, and 14.

There will also be an essay question, due by Friday, May 8.

GRADING CRITERIA AND COMPONENTS

Grading Criteria:

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|-----------|----------------------|---------------------------|
| A | 90-100% | 900 to 1000 points |
| B+ | 85-90% | 850 to 899 points |
| B | 80-85% | 800 to 849 points |
| C+ | 75-80% | 750 to 799 points |
| C | 70-75% | 700 to 749 points |
| D | 60-69% | 600 to 699 points |
| F | 59% and below | 0 to 599 points |

Grading Components:

Small Group Activities: Weeks 3, 4, 10, & 14

Week 3 – Small Group Discussion (Zoom with instructor) on Writing Assignment 1 = 50 points

Week 4 - Group Discussion (using Hypothesis Annotation) on the AFL vs. the Knights of Labor

Week 10 – Group Forum Discussion on the Labor Movement in the 1920s = 50 points

Week 14 –Group Discussion (using Hypothesis Annotation) on the No-Strike Pledge = 50 points

Total = **200 points = 20%** of the grade

Peer Review and Assessment of another Student's Writing Assignment: Weeks 6 & 12

Each peer review = 50 points.

Total = **100 points = 10%** of the grade

Writing Assignments: Weeks 2, 5, 7, 9, 11, 13, & Final Essay

Week 2 - 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 9 – Summary of current labor event = 50 points

Week 11 - First Draft of Writing Assignment 3 = 50 points

Week 13 – Final Version of Writing Assignment 3 = 100 points

Final Assignment – Final Essay = 50 points

Total: = **450 points = 45%** of the grade

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

Online Exams

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

Week 8, Exam #1 (Weeks 2 through 8) = 150 points

Final Assignment, Exam #2 (Weeks 10 through 14) = 100 points

Total: = **250 points = 25%** of the grade

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

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| Optional: One extra credit opportunity – Maximum points added = 50 |
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