

History of Labor and Work in the United States, 1880 to 1945
Rutgers University 37:575:202:97
Tentative – Subject to Change
Spring 2026



Synchronous Classes: Wednesdays, 5:40 – 8:40 PM

Office Hours: You may schedule a meeting with me at chrismichael.com/schedule.

Instructor:

Professor Christopher Michael, J.D., Ph.D.

Phone: 917.341.2728 (cell)

Course Description: This course introduces the important developments and themes in the U.S. labor movement from 1880 through World War II. We will take a close look at how American workers built labor unions, civil rights organizations, and social movements to defend their interests during wars, depressions, and periods of conflict with those who controlled wealth and capital. By focusing on these struggles, we will learn about some of the people, ideas, and institutions that shaped the labor movement, while also exploring the workplace and the economy in political, social, and cultural terms.

Skills development: This course meets the writing distribution requirement for the School of Arts and Sciences. In addition to developing writing skills through writing successive drafts, students will learn to provide constructive feedback to their peers. The instructor will read and comment on drafts, meet with students for one-on-one conferences, and assess final papers. At the conclusion of the course, students will demonstrate an increase in their knowledge and skills in writing and revising academic essays. Specifically, students should be able to:

- Enter into a dialogue with specialists in a particular field of study,
- Read essays and extract and explain key points and terms,
- Organize a paper from thesis, to topic sentence, to conclusion,
- Interact with texts by using meaningful citations in their papers,
- Use a range of sentence structures, and
- Write meaningful, clear, and organized papers.

Learning Objectives: This course covers several School of Arts and Sciences (SAS), School of Management and Labor Relations (SMLR), and Labor Studies and Employment Relations (LSER) Department learning objectives.

School of Arts and Sciences

Students will learn to:

HST-1: Explain the development of some aspect of a society or culture over time.

SCL-1: Understand different theories about human culture, social identity, economic entities, political systems, and other forms of social organization.

WCR: 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.

WCD: Communicate effectively in modes appropriate to a discipline or area of inquiry; evaluate and critically assess sources and use the conventions of attribution and citation correctly; and analyze and synthesize information and ideas from multiple sources to generate new insights.

School of Management and Labor Relations

Students will learn to:

I: Communicate effectively at a level and in modes appropriate to an entry-level professional.

IV: Demonstrate an understanding of relevant theories and apply them given the background context of a particular work situation.

Labor Studies and Employment Relations Department

Students will learn to:

1: Demonstrate an understanding of the perspectives, theories, and concepts in the field of labor and employment relations.

4: Make an argument using contemporary or historical evidence.

Course Requirements

- 1. Read the entire syllabus** and make sure you understand it. This is your contract with your instructor.
- 2. Be prepared for class.** Always complete any reading and writing assignments for a class before the class meets. Check your email regularly for class announcements.
- 3. Be present and be on time.** Students are expected to attend all classes. Please note that the grade for attendance and participation relates to absence, lateness, and leaving early without a valid explanation. If you have a legitimate reason for your absence or lateness, or need to leave early, it must be provided in writing by email in advance, or soon after the occurrence. **Please note that each unexcused absence (i.e., without a valid explanation) will reduce your final grade by approximately 1 full point.**
- 4. Participation:** This course will utilize a variety of formats, including class discussions and group activities. Class participation includes active listening and talking. **The course may also include unannounced quizzes based upon assigned readings.** These grades will be evaluated as part of the overall participation grade.
- 5. Academic Integrity:** Academic integrity requires that all academic work be the product of an identified individual or individuals. Joint efforts are legitimate only when the assistance of others is explicitly acknowledged and permitted by the assignment. Ethical conduct is the obligation of every member of the university community, and breaches of academic integrity constitute serious offenses. Students must assume responsibility for maintaining honesty in all work submitted for credit and in any other work designated by the instructor of this course. Students are also expected to report incidents of academic dishonesty to the instructor or dean of the instructional unit. For more information on the Rutgers University Academic Integrity Policy, see:

<http://academicintegrity.rutgers.edu/academic-integrity-policy/>

- 6. Copyright:** The copyrights to the readings and films belong to their rights holders (authors, producers, publishers, etc.). Students may not copy or distribute this material without the permission of the instructor. Unauthorized distributions of course materials are serious offenses. For more information on the Rutgers University Copyright Policy, see:

<http://policies.rutgers.edu/sites/policies/files/50.3.7-current.pdf>

- 7. Disability Statement:** 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 instructor 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>

8. Statement on Academic Freedom: Freedom to teach and freedom to learn are inseparable facets of academic freedom. This course will introduce an array of sometimes-conflicting ideas and interpretations of U.S. history, and all who partake in the course should feel encouraged to express their views in an open, civic forum.

9. Missed Exams: All students are expected to take the scheduled exams (midterm and final) at the designated times.

10. Course Website: The course site features the syllabus and weekly modules with the reading, viewing, and writing assignments.

11. Written Assignments: You will submit all drafts of your papers electronically before the beginning of class on the day that they are due.

12. Lateness Policy: Late paper assignments may be marked down at the discretion of the instructor. Up to ten (10) points may be deducted for every 24-hour period of unexcused lateness. While the drafts are not assigned point grades, any unexcused failure to turn in a first or second draft may result in a loss of up to 33 points on the final paper grade. If you have a personal emergency that makes it impossible for you to meet the deadlines, please contact your instructor.

13. Required Readings: Many of the reading assignments will be chapters from *Who Built America? An Open Educational Resource*, which is a free online textbook, primary document repository, and teaching resource created by the American Social History Project/Center for Media and Learning at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. You can find the textbook at the following link:

<https://www.whobuiltamerica.org/>

In addition to the textbook, there are other required readings that will either be assigned to read before a class meets or read and discussed during a class meeting. These will be posted as PDF files, Word documents, or web links in the resources section of the course site. Some of the additional readings are primary sources: documents written in the past that provide perspectives and insight on historical developments and events. Other additional readings are secondary sources: commentaries and historical analysis provided after the events have taken place.

14. Evaluation:

Attendance and Participation: 10%

Paper 1: 20%

Paper 2: 30%

Midterm Exam: 20%

Final Exam: 20%

The syllabus, schedule, and assignments are subject to change as the course evolves.

Class Schedule

1/21: Introduction and Course Requirements

- Review syllabus and discuss course expectations, assignments, and goals.
- **Hand out and discuss Paper 1 assignment**

1/28: Industrial Capitalism and Workers in the Gilded Age (Part 1)

- Student writing surveys
- Artisan labor and republicanism in the 19th century
- The Knights of Labor
- Readings
 - *Who Built America*, Vol. II, Ch. 1-3
 - Alex Gourevitch, “Our Forgotten Labor Revolution,” *Jacobin*, August 26, 2015, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/08/knights-of-labor-jim-crow-labor-populism-reconstruction>

2/4: Industrial Capitalism and Workers in the Gilded Age (Part 2)

- **Paper 1 first draft due and peer review (second draft due in two days)**
- Craft unionism and the American Federation of Labor
- Eugene V. Debs and the Pullman Strike
- Readings
 - *Who Built America*, Vol. II, Ch. 1-3
 - Andrew Carnegie, “The Gospel of Wealth,” 1889, pp. 15-29
 - Samuel Gompers, “What Does Labor Want?,” August 28, 1893, pp. 388-396
 - “Statement from the Pullman Strikers,” June 15, 1894, <http://www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/pullmanstrikersstatement.html>

2/11: Race, Immigration, and Exclusion

- Racism, Nativism, and Empire
- Immigration and the Chinese Exclusion Act
- Readings
 - *Who Built America*, Vol. II, Ch. 1-3
 - Ida B. Wells, “Lynch Law in America,” 1900, <http://www.blackpast.org/1900-ida-b-wells-lynch-law-america>
 - “Our Misery and Despair”: Kearney Blasts Chinese Immigration, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5046/>
 - Wong Hau-Hon, “Reminiscences of an Old Chinese Railroad Worker (1926)”, pp. 39-42

2/18: NO CLASS (Writing Conference Week)

- Writing conferences with your writing instructor will be scheduled for this week

2/25: Reform and Radicalism in the Progressive Era

- **Paper 1 final draft due**
- Mother Jones, the Coal Wars, and the Progressive Era
- The IWW
- Film excerpt and discussion on *The Wobblies*
- Midterm exam review
- Readings
 - *Who Built America*, Vol. II, Ch. 4-5
 - Steve Golin, *The Fragile Bridge* excerpt, <http://patersongreatfalls.org/silkstrike.html>

3/4: Midterm Exam Week

3/11: World War I and The Red Scare

- World War I and Industrial Democracy
- The Red Scare and the 1919 Strike Wave
- **Hand out and discuss Paper 2 assignment**
- Readings
 - *Who Built America*, Vol. II, Ch. 6
 - Joseph McCartin, “Fighting for Industrial Democracy in World War I,” pp. 272-281
 - Jeremy Brecher, “Nineteen Nineteen,” pp. 101-113

3/18: NO CLASS (Spring Break)

3/25: Work during the Roaring Twenties

- Scientific Management and Welfare Capitalism
- Film excerpt and discussion of *The Great Depression: A Job at Ford's*
- Readings
 - *Who Built America*, Vol. II, Ch. 7-9
 - “Frederick Taylor Explains Scientific Management,” pp. 205-209
 - “Machinist Orrin Cheney Testifies to Congress on the Taylor System of Shop Management, 1911,” pp. 83-85
 - “Mrs. L.L. Ray Outlines Welfare Capitalism in a New York Department Store,” pp. 129-131

4/1: The Great Depression and the First New Deal

- **Paper 2 first draft due and peer review (second draft due in two days)**
- The First New Deal
- The Big Strike of 1934
- Readings
 - *Who Built America*, Vol. II, Ch. 7-9
 - Piven and Cloward, “Poor People’s Movements,” pp. 48-68

4/8: The Rise of the CIO

- Film excerpt and discussion on *With Babies and Banners*
- Readings
 - *Who Built America*, Vol. II, Ch. 7-9
 - “Louis Adamic Lists the Virtues and Advantages of the Sitdown Strike, 1936,” pp. 164-167
 - “Genora (Johnson) Dollinger Remembers the 1936-37 GM Sit-Down Strike,” pp. 345-349
 - Piven and Cloward, “Poor People’s Movements,” pp. 120-147

4/15: NO CLASS (Writing Conference Week)

- Writing conferences with your writing instructor will be scheduled for this week

4/22: Pop and Politics in the 1930s and 1940s

- The Arts and Politics of the Popular Front-era, including Woody Guthrie and Paul Robeson
- A. Philip Randolph and the March on Washington Movement
- Readings
 - *Who Built America*, Vol. II, Ch. 10
 - A. Philip Randolph, “Why Should We March?,” *Survey Graphic*, pp. 488-489, http://college.cengage.com/history/ayers_primary_sources/randolph_whyshouldwemarch_1942.htm

4/29: World War II and the Arsenal of Democracy

- **Paper 2 final draft due**
- Film and discussion on *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter*
- Final exam review