

“Ordinary People, Extraordinary Lives”:  
Conference for Historians and Archivists

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A social history of twentieth-century New York City is a formidable project. Complexity abounds. To begin, there is the purely demographic—there are eight million different histories in the contemporary city. Racial and ethnic diversity renders any simple class analysis naive. Adding to the difficulty, theoretical dilemmas arise. A social historian of the working class must make a narrative judgment as to how much weight to give to the cultural world of workers versus the city's politics. Even if one is able to answer all the larger issues, the historian is still left with a most pressing obstacle: the sources. For if the goal is to get at the full variousness of the experiences of twentieth-century New Yorkers, the task of locating obscure archives and uncovering hidden records becomes crucial. The historian of the modern city must reckon with the vast number of sources and their current disorganized condition.

On December 10, 1993, the Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives and the Program in Public History at New York University held a day-long conference entitled “Ordinary People, Extraordinary Lives” for historians, archivists, educators, and museum professionals. The program was organized for all those “interested in preserving and disseminating the social history of working people in twentieth-century New York City.” Over one hundred participants from around New York State came together to discuss the fundamental puzzle at the heart of working-class history—namely, how to recover the voices of “ordinary” workers.

The day's events began with opening remarks from three speakers who represented the broad range of conference participants. First, Debra Bernhardt, the project director from the Wagner Labor Archives, announced that the purpose of the conference was “to let archivists, historians and creators of records get to know each other.” Larry Hackman, the director of the New York State Archives and Records Administration, followed Bernhardt's remarks by committing the support of the state government to ongoing efforts to collect and organize a wide range of historical records. George Altomare, education director of the NYC Central Labor Council, AFL–CIO, provided a general assessment of the day's goal—“to take back the history of the people.”

The morning unfolded with five panel sessions, each focusing on a different aspect of New York City labor history. Then, in the afternoon, the conference broke down into seven concurrent working groups to discuss reports from panels of archivists who had spent 1993 exploring and assess-

ing “underutilized or unknown archival collections in each subject area.” Each of these afternoon sessions agreed on an “action agenda” for future goals and strategies. Finally, the day ended with a plenary session led by Rachel Bernstein of NYU’s Public History Program. All seven working groups gathered together to discuss each group’s findings and to reach a consensus on an “action agenda” for the conference as a whole. Throughout the day, several breaks (with free refreshments provided by local unions) allowed historians, archivists, and labor activists to mingle together and share ideas. This unusual, but much needed, opportunity for interaction was the day’s greatest achievement.

The morning’s first session discussed the question, “Who are the Workers? Ethnic Succession and Migration.” It featured a talk by Betty Caroli (CUNY) and comments from Diana Lachatanere (Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture) and Nelida Perez (Centro de Estudios Puertorriquenos, Hunter College). Caroli stressed continuity throughout the twentieth century, with immigrant groups playing the “game” of ethnic succession. Violent conflict between groups was downplayed as Caroli opted for the competitive metaphor of immigrant “teams.” The enactment of the 1965 Immigration Act was a crucial turning point in this century, leading to a rapid increase in the Caribbean and Asian communities in the metropolis. Comments focused on the need for individual ethnic communities to “take back our history.”

Daniel Walkowitz (NYU) led the second session with an address concerning “The Workplace: The Changing Economic Structure of Work in the City.” Walkowitz emphasized the divided nature of the metropolitan work force, focusing on segregation by sex, ethnicity, race, and age. In addition, he asserted that New York’s rise to the status of global center has had a dramatic impact on working people. The city has been especially affected by post-1960 global restructuring, so much so that today it stands as a dual city with ever-widening class divisions. Deborah Gardner, a legal archivist at Cadwalader, Wickersham & Taft with previous experience at the New York Stock Exchange archives, offered extensive comments that barely touched on Walkowitz’s remarks, but were enlightening nonetheless. Gardner alerted all the labor scholars and activists in the audience to the vast range of sources located in corporate archives. Researchers can learn a great deal about workers’ lives and experiences from the records of employers. An important caveat was voiced by an audience member, who reminded Gardner that most business archives restrict access in some way.

The conference’s third session turned to the issue of culture, with a talk by Joshua Freeman (Columbia) on “How Have We Lived? Community and Working-class Culture.” Freeman centered his argument around the need for labor historians to avoid romanticizing the cultures of New York City’s workers. Scholars must remain alert to the simultaneous repulsion and attraction to community common to most working-class New Yorkers. If the goal is to write a cultural labor history, Freeman reiterated that we

must be aware that a fundamental tension has existed in the twentieth century between competing impulses toward parochialism and universalism. Francine Tyler (*The New Yorker* papers, New York Public Library) was the first commentator, focusing on radical artists. She lamented the generally scattered quality of such archives. Lucinda Manning, archivist for the United Federation of Teachers, followed with commentary on the absence of women from the historical record in many New York City labor collections.

Alice Kessler-Harris and Beatrix Hoffman (Rutgers University) led the fourth session with their talk on “Heroes, Leaders, and Ideas: A Popular Intellectual History of New York City.” Peter Filardo (Tamiment Institute Library) and Peter Wosh (American Bible Society) made comments. Kessler-Harris and Hoffman defined their project as an attempt “to find a collective voice of workers,” paying special attention to social and political movements. Their narrative of popular intellectual history traced a diminished sense of class across the century as workers grew ever more fragmented. Hoffman’s comments on recent working-class history suggested some of the tragic aspects of racial divisions among the metropolitan working class. The issue of race relations between workers was underemphasized throughout the day’s proceedings. Filardo informed the audience of the many problems involved in establishing and maintaining archives for radical intellectual sources. Wosh reminded the conference of the important role played by religious leaders and organizations in social movements in New York throughout the century.

The morning’s final session—“Trade Unions: Workers’ Institutions”—was led by Lois Gray (Cornell). An economist by training, Gray offered an overview of the contemporary metropolitan labor movement, highlighting strong areas of union organization and noting changes over the past few decades. New York still stands as the most organized city in the country, with rates of unionization twice the national average. Important differences within the work force do exist, as over 90 percent of public employees are unionized while most clerical workers are not. As commentator, Debra Bernhardt returned to her larger goals for the conference, especially the need to upgrade and update the holdings of labor archives throughout the state. Special areas in need of improved collections are the building trades, manufacturing, and the Port of New York.

At the end of the day, the plenary session came up with an “action agenda” for the future. Participants agreed on the need to expand the groups and constituencies involved in archival preservation. In addition, there was general agreement that future opportunities for interaction between archivists and historians should be a priority. To accomplish the project’s goals, ongoing efforts to secure funding from public and private sources will be stepped up.

Currently, the Wagner Labor Archives is actively involved in assembling a pictorial history of labor in New York. Anyone with photographs,

creative writing, oral histories, or any other documents of New York working-class history should contact Debra Bernhardt at the address below. Printed transcripts of the conference's proceedings are also available. As numerous interesting and underutilized archival materials were discussed, the conference's transcripts will be most useful to scholars interested in twentieth-century working-class history in New York. If you are interested, please contact the Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, 70 Washington Square South, New York, NY, 10012.