

1995 North American Labor History Conference

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More than 150 scholars attended the Seventeenth Annual North American Labor History Conference held, as usual, at Detroit's Wayne State University. Organized around the theme of "Community and Culture in Working Class History," this year's gathering directed fresh critical attention to the core concepts which were so important to the emergence of the New Labor History in the 1970s. Twenty-eight panel sessions and three plenaries approached the constructs of "community" and "culture" from a variety of perspectives. While no consensus was reached about their meaning and continuing validity, the three-day conference bore testimony to the ways in which these organizing principles continue to animate the field of social history in general and working-class history in particular.

Many of the panels showed how fragile working-class communities have been in the American past, and several papers highlighted how the story of labor in the twentieth century has been as much a story of community breakdown as community formation, as much a history of division as of solidarity and unity. These dynamics received sustained attention in a panel on steelworkers. Four very different papers showed how workers' solidarity often was undermined at its very foundation by the persistent divisions of skill, race, and gender. Through a history of gender and labor in the company town of Sparrow's Point, Maryland, Karen Olsen offered a nuanced explanation for racial and gender divisions among steelworkers, rooting them both in the culture of male workers—who shared a rough shop-floor masculinity—and managers who reinforced divisions by race and gender through their segregated plan for the community and for company-sponsored domestic training programs. Offering an alternative explanation for the small number of women in the steel industry, Elizabeth Jones, drawing from oral histories conducted during World War Two, argued that female steelworkers were influenced by mainstream ideas about gender difference and viewed their industrial employment as "a temporary opportunity." In a deeply researched study of the Steel Workers Organiz-

ing Committee (SWOC), Jim Rose highlighted the salience of divisions by skill, even as the SWOC forged an alliance between black and foreign-born unskilled and semiskilled workers. Bringing the story through the late twentieth century, John Hinshaw offered a strikingly original reinterpretation of the interaction of race and deindustrialization in the steel industry. Hinshaw documented the persistence of an intricate division of labor in Pittsburgh's mills, one that was imposed by management but sustained by white workers through their defense of separate seniority systems. Ironically, just as black workers achieved some success in challenging the racial status quo in the 1970s, the American steel industry collapsed. Without interracial solidarity, Hinshaw argued, Pittsburgh's steelworkers could not respond effectively to deindustrialization.

Deindustrialization and its devastating impact on working-class communities was the focus of a plenary session in which Walter Licht and Thomas Dublin traced the fate of miners and their families in the Pennsylvania anthracite region during its rapid decline after World War Two. Combining rich data from a survey of anthracite-region high-school graduates with material gleaned from oral interviews, Licht and Dublin showed how many workers moved to nearby industrial areas in search of employment, some commuting as far as the automobile plants of northern New Jersey and the Fairless Hills steel mills outside of Philadelphia. Essential to the survival of coal miners' families was women's paid labor, particularly in the low-wage garment factories that sprang up in the valleys of central Pennsylvania. Nearly a third of workers remained in the Panther Valley despite its economic troubles, and a sizable number returned to the region to live out their old age—a testament to the strength of community ties.

The way in which tidy notions about “community” and “culture” break down when subjected to detailed empirical study was made particularly evident in two sessions: “Communities of Interest, Communities in Conflict: Labor in the Progressive Era,” and “Memory, Culture and the Chicago Working Class.” In the first of these panels, Kathleen Banks Nutter and Patricia Reeve brought a new focus to familiar stories of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century labor politics and reform. In the second, Larry Peterson and Joseph Bigott demonstrated the importance of material and visual culture for exploring the lives of workers. In a conference (and a discipline) overly committed to the written word and the quantified subject, Peterson and Bigott showed that “real” people do not live their lives in the compartments that historians' categories and disciplinary boundaries suggest. In the paralinguistic language of the built environment and the photojournalism of union periodicals, workers can be seen straddling the realms of home and work, of labor politics and popular culture, of production and consumption, and of personal and collective identities.

Holding to a more traditional methodology, Reeve and Nutter combed the landscape of turn-of-the-century Massachusetts to probe the limits and

possibilities of “community” and “culture” for labor activists and rank-and-file petitioners. Reeve’s paper set out to chart a long-neglected aspect of this struggle over keywords and their meanings as she explored the rhetorical strategies of labor unionists, in this case white male workers who turned to the courts for legal redress against the risks of employment in the dangerous and unhealthy workplaces of nineteenth-century industrial manufacturing. Reeve’s reading of the symbolic language of liability reform exemplifies a growing number of studies that have sought to problematize rather than assume the construction and institutionalization of gender difference. She persuasively underscored the importance of exploring the constitutive function of language in “making whole” the bodies of human labor that capitalist societies simultaneously shape and disassemble. Reeve’s workers gave particular readings to occupational accidents that related both to their position within the class structure of industrial capitalism and to the sex/gender system of working-class Anglo-European immigrant culture. From both these locations, wage-earning men emerged not as passive recipients of class and gender codings but as actors in the discursive formation of each.

Focusing on the built environment, Joseph Bigott moved away from workers’ words to the material objects with which they built, if not a better life, then at least a better house. Arguing against architectural historians who traditionally view working-class homes as mere reflections or distillations of middle-class fashions and values, Bigott examined the Polish community of Hammond, Indiana, and found that changes in construction patterns between 1870 and 1930 could better be explained by changes in tool production and the development of component manufacturing. Working-class housing in the 1920s was shaped by the availability of stock pieces that allowed for such styles as the bungalow, which was cheap and easily put together by semiskilled workers. The availability of mass-produced doors, windows, sashes, and siding meant that workers could leave the high-rent districts of the urban center and expand outward. Typically, a Polish homeowner would purchase a double lot, build a house, then erect a smaller one for kin or rent-paying compatriots. Bigott noted the decline of “landlordism” for these immigrants and suggested that more attention be devoted to these newer types of homeownership immigrant communities.

In a complementary paper, Larry Peterson made it especially clear that historians neglect the visual world at their own peril, allowing others to set the agenda and shape the contours of “popular” culture. Arguing that photography became the universal language of the mid-1930s to 1950s, he demonstrated the popularity of the camera and the photo for workers and for the unions that sought to organize them. Hundreds of camera clubs and photo leagues were organized by unions and, with the publication of *Steel Labor* in 1936, the Congress of Industrial Organizations established itself as an important image-maker during the next two decades. Reviving the

styles of pictorial magazines put out by the Industrial Workers of the World, *Steel Labor* sought to give workers a forum to highlight the diversity of the industrial union movement and its grassroots origins. The proliferation of local photographic studios and workers' access to "snapshot" cameras provided labor magazines with a ready supply of visual materials. Peterson showed how workers used sophisticated photographic techniques to renew older traditions of community involvement and family support, contrasting themselves with professional photojournalism and rejecting the manipulated realism of the 1930s social documentary. Perhaps most importantly, Peterson took issue with Elizabeth Cohen's emphasis on the influence of welfare capitalism in molding workers' consciousness. *Steel Labor* developed a laborist visual tradition which accommodated "untutored visualizations of free association and participation—what no welfare capitalist had ever allowed, least of all in industrial photographs," appealing "to supporters of Debsian socialism, radical industrial unionism, social Catholicism, social democratic industrial councils, and simple collective bargaining." Finally, Peterson's paper offered a critical reminder that a key part of labor organizing involves "breaking through the ideological influences of capitalist media" and the ability to imagine an alternative form of collectivity.

Contested theories of community received further attention in a roundtable session entitled "Community as a Construct in Working-Class History." Donna Gabaccia drew attention to the spatial and territorial dimensions of community, emphasizing the need to study linkages between communities of production and reproduction. Drawing upon her ongoing research on Italian workers around the world, she observed that simplistic notions of communities as fixed spatial entities are challenged by the phenomenon of cyclical migration. Similarly, the gendered aspect of labor migration calls into question widely accepted notions of power relations within traditional communities. Gabaccia concluded with a call for a "diaspora methodology" with a transnational framework to raise questions about the ways "communities" inform labor activism in a variety of settings.

Gabaccia's stress on the construction of boundaries—both imagined and real—was amplified by Earl Lewis, who presented a "multipositional" approach to the study of racial boundaries in a study of a 1925 court case concerning a light-skinned African-American socialite who managed to pass, for a time, as white. (See, in this issue, "A Modern Cinderella.") Using the case to explore the ways in which different ideas of community can overlap and move apart over time, Lewis sparked a lively discussion which centered on the mechanisms of "boundary maintenance" and definition. Several audience members criticized the New Labor History for downplaying the exclusive nature of communities, noting that the most solidaristic collectivities (such as skilled workers, Catholic parishes, or all-white communities) depend upon strictly enforced definitions of membership (skill,

religion, race) and barriers to entry (apprenticeship, baptism, defended urban space). Since the way in which such boundaries are challenged and redefined helps determine the labor movement's successes and failures, "community" is likely to remain a key idea in working-class history for some time to come.

1996 French Historical Studies Conference

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The spirit of Versailles rather than of the Bourse du Travail animated the Forty-Second Annual Meeting of the Society for French Historical Studies, held at Boston University, March 21–23, 1996. Labor history as many of us first knew it—as an examination of workers' organizations or class struggle—barely appeared on this year's program. Instead, panels investigated the many aspects of the reign of Louis XIV, whose restoration as a subject of historical inquiry was marked by the *fleur de lis* imprinted on each page of the program. When in attendance, working men and women appeared most often outside of work: in their negotiations with the state, family members, religious institutions, police brigades, or neighborhood associations. The conference thus offered a glimpse of the remapping of French labor history.

The most innovative scholarship drew inspiration from the combined disciplines of labor and women's history. Lisa DiCaprio (Rutgers) and Janine Lanza (Cornell) offered original explanations of how independent and indigent working women negotiated the economic upheaval accompanying the transition from the Old Regime to the revolutionary economy. Lanza's paper on widows of master guild artisans argued against recent scholarship's claims that the Old Regime offered women more economic freedom and social maneuverability than did the post-revolutionary period. Her research documents that masters' widows' claims to status within the guilds, as well as their exercise of power within their own shops, met with constant challenges from sons, journeymen, and guild officials.

Di Caprio's detailed research on the revolutionary government's spinning workshops, established to absorb unemployed female laborers from the luxury industries, documented that spinners, weavers, and carders melded new ideas of patriotism, expectations for recently achieved rights, and some attributes of Old Regime paternalism to define a place for themselves in the new economic and political order.

The exploration of workers' relationships to the state became more