

## REPORTS AND CORRESPONDENCE

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### The Ninth Annual North American Labor History Conference

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The ninth annual North American Labor History Conference, sponsored by the Department of History and the Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs at Wayne State University, was held in Detroit on October 22–24, 1987. Approximately 225 people participated in sixteen sessions. Average attendance at the sessions was about forty.

Labor as an agent of protest and reform emerged as the theme of the first day. Two meetings explored the interplay of class, ethnicity, and race in fostering labor militancy. In “Irish Workers/Working Irish: Labor Protest in the West,” chaired by JoEllen Vinyard (Eastern Michigan University), David Brundage (University of California, Santa Cruz) examined the influence of the Land League on a radical movement among Irish-Americans in Denver at the turn of the century. David Emmons (University of Montana) discussed the Irish component in the Butte copper strike of 1917. In “Maritime Workers and Labor Radicalism,” Eric Arnesen (Harvard University) and Richard Boyden (University of California, Berkeley) analyzed class and racial unrest among New Orleans waterfront workers and shipyard workers in turn-of-the-century San Francisco, respectively. Bruce Nelson (Dartmouth University) contributed a paper on J. Vance Thompson, a seamen’s union leader who moved from business unionism to syndicalism. Melvyn Dubofsky (SUNY, Binghamton) chaired the meeting.

Another set of sessions, “Unionization in the South” and “Class Conflict in the Nineteenth Century,” concentrated on immediate obstacles to effective organization. John Selby (Roanoke College) concluded that successful organizing drives in North Carolina were possible when the state could be neutralized. Daniel Clark (Duke University) described how workers used grievance procedures to frustrate management efforts to alter shop-floor practices. Gary M. Fink (Georgia State University) presided over the discussion. In the other session, Katherine G. Aiken (University of Idaho) and Peter Way (University of Maryland) highlighted the role of changing technology in mining and the peculiar financial demands of canal building in exacerbating employer-employee tensions in those industries.

The other two sessions of the first day dealt with “Unions and Civil Rights in the 1960s” and “Labor and Early 20th Century Economic Perspectives.” With John Bernard (Oakland University) as chair of the first session, Kevin Boyle (University of

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Michigan) recounted the United Auto Workers' involvement in the civil rights movement and Michael Flug of *News and Letters* looked at the Maryland Freedom Union. The commentator, B. J. Widick, and the controversial nature of the subject, evoked a lively response from the audience. Meanwhile, in the second session, which proceeded along two separate tracks, Michael Bernstein (University of California, San Diego) discussed Depression-era unemployment in the context of long-term trends in American economic history, and Andrew Howard (Boston University) focused on the connections between American trade unions and Caribbean labor organizations in the twentieth century. Leslie Tentler (University of Michigan, Dearborn) led the meeting.

If any one subject dominated the second day, it was labor at war—in the fighting years of 1917 and 1941; in the Cold War period; and in the 1960s at home. At a well-attended session on “Workers During World War I,” Elizabeth Lees (University of British Columbia) and Colin Davis (SUNY, Binghamton) argued that organized labor reacted unfavorably to the hiring of women, which skilled workers in particular saw as temporary, and to the more fundamental challenge of technological innovation. David Klinick (University of Windsor) directed the subsequent discussion. Moving on to World War II, Howard Kimeldorf (University of Michigan) and Robert H. Zieger (University of Florida) emphasized the heightened militance of the rank and file during that period. Kimeldorf concluded that the longshoremen came out of the war stronger than most unions; Zieger contrasted the postwar activity of the miners, steelworkers, and teamsters with the lumbering pace of the national federations. Christopher H. Johnson (Wayne State University) led a response from some of the participants in those developments.

During the Cold War, Stephen Burwood (SUNY, Binghamton) argued in a session devoted to that era, the AFL and CIO cooperated to promote the Marshall Plan in France in order to thwart the expansion of communist-dominated unions there. Federico Romero (European University Institute) adopted a more institutional approach, focusing on a clash between labor's demand for an increased role in policymaking and private management's reassertion of its traditional control. Alan Raucher (Wayne State University) noted that “discussion focused on institutional behavior without much consideration given to questions about the performance of the European economy or the standard of living of European workers after the European Recovery Program (ERP).”

“Labor Liberalism and the Left in the 1960s” was the title of a well-attended session chaired by Nelson Lichtenstein of Catholic University. In a paper delineating the relationship of the UAW and the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), 1960–65, Peter B. Levy (Lafayette College) emphasized their close cooperation. But Michael Musuraca, (Graduate Center, CUNY) highlighted the growing rift between the League of Revolutionary Black Workers and the UAW, a result, he said, of the limits set by traditional labor liberals. A very alert audience response underscored the increased interest in the impact of unionism on post-1960 liberalism.

The latter half of the second day of sessions was devoted to labor and the performing arts. Both “Labor in the Theater,” hosted by Elise A. Bryant (University

of Michigan), and “Links on the Chain: Songs of the Labor and Civil Rights Movement” demonstrated how drama and music can be effective history and teaching devices as well as entertainment. Collette A. Hyman (University of Minnesota) observed the ways in which dramatic presentations of two quite different unions reflected their labor philosophies. The efforts of the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union (ILGWU) were professional and conventional while the productions of the Wholesale and Warehouse Workers were rank-and-file attempts to challenge existing institutions. Nora Faires (University of Michigan, Flint) described how a class project on the 1937 sit-down strike brought students and participants together to make a vivid experience out of that fifty-year-old event. In the evening, Michael Honey (Wesleyan University) and David Sawyer accomplished the same thing in an occasional sing-along concert.

Contrary to past experience, the last day brought higher attendance than had the previous two. Daniel Leab presided over a popular session on “Unions and the Rejection of Radicalism” in which Gary L. Bailey (Indiana University), Robert G. Picard (Louisiana State University), and Ronald Edsforth (Skidmore College) concentrated on the 1940s and 1950s in studies of the late career of Powers Hapgood (Bailey); the New York Newspaper Guild (Picard); and the UAW (Edsforth). They agreed that organized labor participated fully in the growing anticommunism of the time, fanned as it was by United States-Soviet rivalry. They stressed the role of unions as barometers and purveyors of public opinion.

Finally, at a luncheon gathering directed by Sidney Fine (University of Michigan), Daniel Nelson (University of Akron) made a case for the limited extent to which scientific management practices affected working conditions during the movement’s “twilight” years, 1915–25.

By almost any measure, the three-day meeting was a success: more people came than ever before; a record number of sessions was held; and the spirited debates at those sessions often continued beyond the confines of the meeting rooms. Excluding the national professional conventions, the North American Labor History Conference is now the most important annual conference among American labor historians.

## The American Historical Association, Part 1

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Among the topics addressed at the December 1987 annual meeting of the American Historical Association were such seemingly far afield areas as white working-class resistance to school desegregation in the United States during the 1960s, the migration of Finnish-American Communists to Soviet Karelia during the 1930s, and the