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Labor History at the American Historical Association

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In the midst of its bicentennial celebration, the city of Cincinnati played host to the American Historical Association convention, 27–30 December 1988. The number of potentially interesting sessions was more than any single person could attend; I managed to participate in four sessions on working-class life in late nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe and North America. While these sessions reflected the centrality of class as the key analytic category in understanding the lives of workers, the presenters, commentators, and audiences seemed to agree that class affects people's lives in complex ways. In particular, a number of factors—including race, gender, ethnicity, and skill, as well as political and legal influences—mediate the impact of material conditions. Only by considering these other factors and the ways in which they interact with economic conditions can we understand workers' experiences, political activity, patterns of protest, or consciousness. Adequate understanding of working-class life requires a sensitivity to these “mediating” factors, and a willingness to borrow from fields such as women's history, Afro-American history, cultural history, and political history.

A beginning session chaired by Leonard Rosenband (Utah State University) considered “Life, Work, and Culture in Company Towns.” Gary Freeze (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill) presented his research on the Odell Cotton Mills of North Carolina, 1877–1907, and the role of Methodism in the company town of Forest Hill. The Odells were able to impose their own “assumed reality” in the town by linking active Methodist proselytizing with paternalist policies. The employers relied on the preindustrial values offered in their Methodist church to ease the dislocation of new migrants to the mills. This system helped young male workers adapt to the loss of the patriarchal authority of the countryside, and religious piety offered them an opportunity for advancement in the church and mill. William E. French (Utah State University) then discussed miners in the Hidalgo District, Chihuahua, Mexico. In this case, middle-class reformers attempted to mold a group of transient, uncooperative workers into a reliable, disciplined labor force. The state cooperated by passing laws to control prostitution and gambling. Alongside this state activity, reformers launched a cultural offensive, encouraging middle-class family values as an alternative to the working-

class culture of taverns and street activity. French argued, however, that the reformers and their allies in the state could not win this battle; miners did not adopt middle-class morality, nor did they give up their brothels and taverns. In her paper on Powell River, Jean Barman (University of British Columbia) shifted the focus to the Canadian Northwest. In Powell River, a large paper company combatted unionization by creating an economic and cultural atmosphere that offered workers "optimum conditions," steady work, and a secure future. These conditions encouraged an independent but nonoppositional working-class culture. From her series of interviews, Barman has detected a correspondence of interest between the company and its workers. Workers themselves enforced the social status quo and women participated in the development of a culture that excluded them from employment and company-sponsored leisure. According to Barman, in this isolated community, paternalism worked because the workers and employers shared a common interest in steady, regular employment. The comments and discussion revolved around issues of power, culture, and class, suggesting the value of Gramscian theory in understanding the struggle to construct the order of people's lives and the role of cultural institutions, the state, and paternalist employers in this "struggle for hegemony."

Later that afternoon, I attended a session chaired by Ronald Schatz (Wesleyan University) entitled "Class, Race, and Gender in Twentieth-Century Working-Class History." Joe W. Trotter (Carnegie-Mellon University) discussed black miners in West Virginia, stressing the ability of these migrant miners to form their own working-class culture. Despite coercion, both public and private, black miners used kin and friendship networks to forge a proletarian way of life, reflecting their class and racial interest. Women, though generally excluded from mine employment, played an important role in maintaining this community, including keeping gardens or seeking paid labor outside the mines. Patricia A. Cooper (Drexel University) followed with her research on men and women in the Philadelphia electronics industry. She discussed the motivations leading both into the factory and the ways in which their actual situation often contrasted with their expectations. While job segregation by sex and the different mobility options for men and women helped shape worker experience, Cooper argued that these processes operated within complex and changing arenas of gender identity. She stressed the danger of trying to fit these workers into rigid categories of "male" and "female" experience. Nancy F. Gabin (Purdue University) then presented a paper on women automotive workers in Indiana. In the post-World War II era, these women developed a militant critique of their inferior position. She outlined the development of women's employment in the industry and their initial inability to challenge discriminatory practices. However, economic changes in the 1950s sparked a radicalization of women workers over the issue of separate male and female seniority lists and, eventually, women's leaders obtained support within the union movement for more equitable policies. The comments stressed the importance of recognizing the formation of a community among black coal miners and

the role of women in the process, the complexities of union policy toward job segregation and women's issues, and the role played by economic conditions in shaping women's labor activism.

The following day, Peter Whalley (Loyola University) chaired a session called "Skill and Protest in the Early Twentieth Century." Kathryn Amdur (Emory University) began with a paper on skill and militancy in the Loire mining and metallurgy industries. She criticized the view that French skilled workers suffered an erosion of their position in the interwar period. Rather, she suggested that, although wage differentials declined between semi-skilled and skilled workers, the latter were still well rewarded for their abilities. Workplace conditions did not promote solidarity between workers, and wage differentials had potentially disruptive effects on worker unity. She argued that examples of solidarity should be explained by particular political conditions, rather than by changes in the workplace. Jeffrey Haydu (Syracuse University) then presented research on the munitions industry in Bridgeport and Coventry. He suggested that protest patterns in these cities did not reflect a change from artisanal to proletarian protest, nor was cross-skill solidarity necessarily growing. He cited examples of cross-skill solidarity in both the English and American cases in 1917. Yet a year later, skilled workers protested independently, defending their separate positions. He argued that solidarity depends on "historically contingent" conditions, which can't be explained through workplace conditions. Craig Patton (Albion College) followed with a paper on the German chemical industry from 1900 to 1925. He stressed the role of skilled workers as the core of protest movements from 1919 to 1921. Despite the "shape" of these protests, short in duration, involving large numbers of workers, and often independent, skilled workers played an important role in coordinating and leading the protests. These tactics were adopted because the skilled leadership recognized their potential effectiveness. The protests over authority relations at the point of production and wage issues do not fit standard models of either proletarian or artisanal protest. Heather Hogan (Oberlin College) urged a rejection of narrow definitions of "deskilling," highlighting complex and gradual changes in workplace authority relations and practices. She urged a concentration on developing and changing power relationships in society as the key to working-class experience.

On the final day, Deborah S. Gardner (New-York Historical Society) chaired a session on "Working Women in the Industrial City: Family and Ethnicity." Mary Lou Locke (University of California, San Diego) presented work on the identity of and cultural participation by immigrant women in the nineteenth-century American West. She suggested that, beginning in the 1880s, young women, including domestic servants, participated in an independent, youth-oriented, working-class culture. However, she also argued that an ethnic content persisted within this new culture, and that participation in it did not necessarily reflect alienation from ethnic or family groups. Julia Kirk Blackwelder (University of North Carolina, Charlotte) then discussed her research on immigration and migration of women into urban

America. She stressed the importance of placing women's migration in the context of family and economic conditions. Seeking to maximize their families' economic positions, women migrated under different circumstances. Decisions to migrate were shaped by labor force segregation in the destination cities, and by the possible existence of kin or ethnic networks. Women's family roles and obligations were the key determinants of their migration decisions. Louise Tilly (New School for Social Research) urged a sensitivity to the difficulty in using "identity" as a category in historical analysis and suggested that the emerging working-class culture discussed by Locke applied to women at only one point in their life cycles. She also pointed out that varied places of origin may have had a dramatic effect on the experiences of migrant women. In her comments, Donna Gabaccia (Mercy College) stressed the importance of tying together "women adrift" and "family economy" approaches to the experiences of working-class women. She suggested that economic and cultural conditions are difficult to separate when studying immigrant women and recommended a comparative approach to the history of female migration.

These sessions revealed the need to approach working-class life with a sensitivity to the many factors mediating class experience. The sessions borrowed analytic insights from other disciplines to make sense out of working-class experiences, stepping outside rigid definitions of labor history and narrow conceptions of class. These labor historians benefit from analyses of race, gender, ethnicity, culture, and politics. Yet the various sessions were seldom talking to one another. These varied and useful approaches have eroded the unity of labor history and, while all would agree that something links the experiences of working-class people, it is difficult to blend the diverging approaches into a comprehensive understanding of working-class experience. While these papers offer rich analyses of worker life and protest, they lack an adequate theoretical tie, making sense out of what makes these different cases part of the same history, labor history.

Thirteenth Annual Meeting of the Social Science History Association

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The thirteenth annual meeting of the Social Science History Association was held 3–6 November 1988 in Chicago. Three hundred scholars participated in eighty-