American Labor History, 1900-Present

This course surveys the history of working people in the United States in the 20th and 21st century, focusing on the historical meanings of work and working-class culture. We will look at the ways in which a variety of scholars and “organic intellectuals” have drawn upon the methods and practices of labor history, social history, economic history, and cultural studies (including cultural geography), to examine the lives of working women and men. Throughout the course, we will be examining relations of power by looking closely at ideas about race, class, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. We will be especially concerned with how these ideas have shaped working-class lives, informed class relations, and organized communities of solidarity. Some of the questions we will address are: What is unique about US labor history and what is part of a shared international history of workers? How have processes of cultural fusion and cultural fragmentation operated to unite and divide workers? In what ways does an interrogation of the politics of space (place, location, landscape, architecture, environment, home, neighborhood, city, region, and territory) help us to understand working-class cultures? Questions about American Exceptionalism and the American Dream; community and solidarity; class formation and social identity; and the relationship between working-class strategies of resistance and the everyday lives of working people will be the focus of our course readings, films, discussions, and research projects during the semester.

Course Requirements

1. General

Class Participation. The success of the course depends upon your contribution to the creation of a community of scholars dedicated to cooperative learning. Thus, class participation includes: attending all class meetings, completing all reading and writing assignments in preparation for class discussions, and engaging in lively and respectful dialogue with one another.

2. Writing and Research

Film Critique. You will write one 3-page (approximately 900 words) essay discussing how one of the following groupings of films represents labor history:

Select one due date and write an essay on the films listed for that date:

Oct. 9: The Killing Floor & Uprising of ’34
Oct. 30: Wage Slaves: Not Getting By in America & Free a Man to Fight
Nov. 13: From Sleepy Lagoon to Zoot Suit & Chavez Ravine
Nov. 25: Yuri Kochiyama: A Passion for Justice & San Francisco State
Dec. 2: Uprising of ’34 & Harlan County, USA

Extra Credit: You may write 3-page essays on additional groups of films to earn extra credit toward your final grade in the course. These must be submitted by the due dates listed.
2. Writing and Research (cont.)

Working-Class History Research Project. You will conduct in-depth research using archival materials housed at the Wisconsin Historical Society and write a two-part essay.

Part One. Due Tuesday, October 14:

You will identify an archival collection at the Wisconsin Historical Society used in one of the single-author books assigned for this course listed below, familiarize yourself with the contents of the archival collection, and write a 900-word essay (approximately three pages) describing the contents of the collection.


Part Two. Due Tuesday, December 9. You will submit a second copy of Part One as the introduction to Part Two of your working-class history project.

You will write a 1,500-word essay (approximately five pages) explaining how the collection expanded your understanding of an event, issue, relationship, community, or institution that is addressed in your course readings. You must include examples and evidence from the collection (in the form of quotations or photocopied documents or photographs) to support your analysis. You will conclude your essay by suggesting or proposing future research projects based on the collection. Be insightful and brilliant.

3. Examinations

Midterm Examination. There will be an in-class midterm examination Tuesday, October 21, consisting of one long essay question and four short identification questions.

Final Examination. The final examination will cover material since the midterm. This will be an in-class examination on December 19, 12:05-2:25 p.m.

Grade Distribution:

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<tr>
<td>Class Participation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Film Critique</td>
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<td>Midterm Examination</td>
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<td>Research Project</td>
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Readings*

The following books are available for purchase at the University Bookstore, 711 State Street, and are on reserve in Helen C. White College Library. The Stuart Cosgrove essay, “The Zoot Suit and Style Warfare,” is on the Learn @ UW site for this course.

*Readings should be completed by Tuesday of each week, unless otherwise noted.

Required Readings


Recommended Style Books


An earlier version is available in the University Bookstore: Kate Turabian, *A Student’s Guide to Writing College Papers*, 3d rev. ed., (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977). This edition is not as comprehensive as the 7th edition listed above and does not include a section on conducting research.

Calendar and Assignments

**Week 1**  Labor History and Historical Meanings of Work
Sept. 2 & 4

*Readings*

*Film & Discussion:  Wage Slaves: Not Getting By in America*

*Labor Day, September 2 & Ramadan begins September 1*

**Week 2**  The Agrarian Dream and Wage Slavery
Sept. 9 & 11

*Readings (complete all readings by Tuesday of each week, before class)*

**Week 3**  Freedom and “Free Labor”
Sept. 16 & 18

*Readings*

**Week 4**  Workers’ Control of the Workplace
Sept. 23 & 25

*Readings*

*Film:  The Killing Floor*

**Week 5**  Working-Class Cultures and Class War
Sept. 30 & Oct. 2

*Readings*

*Photographs*

*Film: Uprising of ‘34*

*Rosh Hashanah, September 30-October 1 & Eid Al-Fitr, October 1*
Week 6  Revolution or Reform?
Oct. 7 & 9
Readings

Janet Irons, Testing the New Deal, pp. 3-62.

Due Thursday: Film Critique, *The Killing Floor & Uprising of ’34*

Yom Kippur, October 9

Week 7  “Bread and Roses”
Oct. 14 & 16
Readings

Due: Working-Class History Project, Part One

Week 8  “A Rainbow at Midnight”
Oct. 21 & 23
Tuesday  Midterm Examination


Film:  *Free a Man to Fight*

Week 9  Working-Class Culture War
Oct. 28 & 30
Readings

Stuart Cosgrove, “The Zoot Suit and Style Warfare,” pp. 3-22.


Film:  *From Sleepy Lagoon to Zoot Suit: The Irreverent Path of Alice McGrath*

Due Thursday: Film Critique, *Wage Slaves: Not Getting By in America & Free a Man to Fight*
Week 10  Labor Geographies  
Nov. 4 & 6
  Readings
  Film: *Chavez Ravine*

Week 11  Dividing Workers, Creating Consumers, Redefining Class  
Nov. 11 & 13
  Readings
  Film: *Yuri Kochiyama: A Passion for Justice*
  Due Thursday: Film Critique, *From Sleepy Lagoon to Zoot Suit & Chavez Ravine*

Week 12  The Politics of Working-Class Resistance  
Nov. 18 & 20
  Readings
  Film: *San Francisco State*

Week 13  “Which Side Are You On?”  
Nov. 25 & 27
  Readings
  Film: *Harlan County, U.S.A.*
  Due Tuesday: Film Critique, *Yuri Kochiyama: A Passion for Justice & San Francisco State*

*Thanksgiving Recess, November 27*
Week 14  The New Working Class
Dec. 2 & 4
Readings

Due Tuesday:  Film Critique, *Uprising of ’34 & Harlan County, USA*

Week 15  Everyday Practices and Spaces of Hope and Justice
Dec. 9 & 11

Tuesday  Working-Class History Research Paper Due* at 1:00 p.m.

*Submit Part One as the introduction to Part Two of your paper. The two parts should be merged into one polished research paper.

*No late papers accepted for any reason other than a documented religious or health excuse. No exceptions, including computer & transportation problems.


*Eid al Adha, December 9*

Week 16  Final Examination, 12:25 a.m.-2:25 p.m.
Dec. 19