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, 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.

Laptops and Notetaking. The use of laptop computers or other screen-based devices is not permitted during lecture (including when films are screened). Please take notes by hand.

2. Writing and Research

Film Critique. You will write one 3-page (approximately 900 words) essay discussing how one of the following pairs of films represents labor history. Select one due date and write an essay on the films listed for that date:

March 26: The Killing Floor & Uprising of ’34
April 16: From Sleepy Lagoon to Zoot Suit & Free a Man to Fight
April 16: Wage Slaves: Not Getting By in America & Free a Man to Fight
April 30: Yuri Kochiyama, A Passion for Justice & From Sleepy Lagoon to Zoot Suit
April 30: Chavez Ravine & Yuri Kochiyama, A Passion for Justice
May 7: Uprising of ’34 & San Francisco State

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. Over the course of the semester, you will conduct original archival research in one or more of the collections listed below and write a 2,300-word (approximately eight-page) essay describing the collection and explaining how the sources you found in the collection expanded your understanding of an event, issue, relationship, community, or institution that is addressed in your course readings. You will conclude your essay by suggesting or proposing future research projects based on the collection.

**Part One** of the research project consists of a 900-word (approximately three-page) essay in which you will identify one of archival collections at the Wisconsin Historical Society listed below, offer a brief overall survey of the collection, and give a more detailed description of one box contained in the collection. **Due Tuesday, March 3.**

Students for a Democratic Society Records
United States Servicemen’s Fund Records, 1967-1973
Stanley Aronowitz Papers
Paul Booth Papers
Robb Burlage Papers
Committee for Miners Papers
Labor Leadership Assembly for Peace Papers
Stoughton Lynd Papers
Sam Shirah Papers
Teaching Assistants Association, American Federation of Teachers, Local 3220, Records, 1966-76
Walter Tillow Papers
George Tselos Papers, 1961-71
Lee Webb Papers
James P. Cannon Papers
Robert S. Gabriner Papers
Wisconsin Women during World War II Oral History Project Interviews
Michael Lipsky and David J. Olson Papers

**Part Two** of the research project consists of a 1,500-word essay (approximately five pages). You will submit a second copy of Part One as the introduction to Part Two of your working-class history project (you may revise Part One, if you wish). Your final paper will be a 2,300-word (approximately 8-page) essay.

Your essay should expand on the introduction you wrote as Part One of your project. It should explore one or more of the questions about U.S. working-class history sparked by your research in the archival collection and explain how the collection can enhance our understanding of an event, story, issue, relationship, community, institution, or other aspect of U.S. working-class history. You may draw on the insights, arguments, and perspectives presented in course readings, films, lectures, and discussions (both inside and outside class) in making your argument. You will, of course, be insightful and brilliant. **Due Tuesday, May 5.**
3. **Examinations**

**Midterm Examination.** There will be an in-class midterm examination Tuesday, March 10, 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 Sunday, May 10, 2:25 to 4:25 p.m.

**Grade Distribution:**

- Class Participation 20%
- Film Critique 10%
- Midterm Examination 20%
- Research Project 25%
- Final Examination 25%

**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” and the Barbara Ehrenreich essay, “Down and out in America: Barbara Ehrenreich Talks about Life as a Minimum Wage Employee,” are on the Learn @ UW site for this course.

**Required Readings**


**Style Books**


Calendar and Assignments

Week 1  Labor History and Historical Meanings of Work  
Jan. 20 & 22  
Readings  

Film & Discussion:  Wage Slaves: Not Getting By in America  
Barbara Ehrenreich interview (cited above)

Martin Luther King Day, Jan. 19

Week 2  The Agrarian Dream and Wage Slavery  
Jan. 27 & 29  
Readings  

Week 3  Freedom and “Free Labor”  
Feb. 3 & 5  
Readings (complete all readings by Tuesday of each week, before class)  
Tera Hunter, To Joy My Freedom, pp. vii-129.

Week 4  Workers’ Control of the Workplace  
Feb. 10 & 12  
Readings  
Tera Hunter, To Joy My Freedom, pp. 130-238.

Week 5  “Bread and Roses”  
Feb. 17 & 19  
Readings  

Photographs  

Film:  The Killing Floor
Week 6  Race, Riots, and Community
February 24 & 26
Readings


Week 7  Mass Culture & Working-Class Communities
March 3 & 5
Tuesday  Part One of Research Project due

Readings

Week 8  Revolution or Reform?
March 10 & 12
Tuesday  Midterm Examination

Readings

Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, pp. 159-211.

Film: *Uprising of ’34* (12:50-2:15; 85 minutes long)

Week 9  Spring Recess
March 17 & 19

Week 10  “Adrift in the Great Depression”
March 24 & 26
Readings

Due Thursday:
Film Critique, *The Killing Floor & Uprising of ’34*
**Week 11**  
**Working-Class Culture Wars**  
March 31 & April 2  
*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*

**Week 12**  
“A Rainbow at Midnight”  
April 7 & 9  
*Readings*  
*Film:* *Free a Man to Fight*  
*Passover, April 9  Good Friday, April 10*

**Week 13**  
**Geographies of Class and Culture**  
April 14 & 16  
*Readings*  
*Due Thursday:*  
Film Critique, *From Sleepy Lagoon to Zoot Suit & Free a Man to Fight*  
Film Critique, *Wage Slaves: Not Getting By in America & Free a Man to Fight*  
*Film:* *Chavez Ravine*

**Week 14**  
**The Politics of Working-Class Resistance**  
April 21 & 23  
*Readings*  
David Cortright, *Soldiers in Revolt*, pp. 1-156.  
*Film:* *Yuri Kochiyama: Passion for Justice*
**Week 15**  
“Which Side Are You On?”  
April 28 & 30  
*Readings*  
David Cortright, *Soldiers in Revolt*, pp. 159-243.  

*Due Thursday:*  
Film Critique, *Yuri Kochiyama: Passion for Justice & From Sleepy Lagoon to Zoot Suit*  
Film Critique, *Chavez Ravine & Yuri Kochiyama: Passion for Justice*  

*Film: San Francisco State*  
*Film Clips: The War at Home*  

*International Workers’ Day, May 1*

**Week 16**  
“We Shall Overcome” & New Communities of Solidarity  
May 5 & 7  
*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.  

*Thursday*  
**Reading & Discussion:**  

*Due Thursday:*  
Film Critique, *San Francisco State & Uprising of ’34*

**Week 17**  
Final Examination, Sunday, 2:25 a.m.-4:25 p.m.  
May 10  
1651 Humanities