

Working-Class Notes

The Newsletter of the Working-Class Studies Association

Volume 2, Issue 1

Fall 2007

Dear Colleagues and Friends,

It's an honor to write for the first time as President of the Working-Class Studies Association (WCSA) and a pleasure to work with our newly-elected Steering Committee. Together, I believe we can move forward. First, let me thank former WCSA presidents, Sherry Linkon and Peter Rachleff. Under their leadership, WCSA has grown from a small organizing committee of perhaps 15 members to a bona fide professional organization with a growing membership, an ambitious agenda, and a broad vision. Writing in this newsletter a year ago, Peter expressed that vision simply but eloquently: "We strive to provide a big tent within which scholars of working-class life, history and culture; academics of working-class backgrounds; teachers of working-class students; labor educators and makers of working-class culture can come together, meet and greet each other, learn from each other, and find support for ourselves and our work."

The WCSA was nothing more than a good idea when an organizing committee of about a dozen people met during the 2004 United Association for Labor Education conference. We had a mutual interest in interdisciplinary studies of working-class life and a particular interest in the potential of scholarly alliances with cultural workers, labor advocates, and other social activists. Fortunately, we had behind us the experience—and support—of pioneer programs in working-class studies at Youngstown State University, SUNY-Stony Brook and the Consortium for Working-Class Studies in Chicago. In June 2004, we

launched the WCSA at SUNY-Stony Brook, with these goals:

- Promote awareness, growth, and legitimacy of working-class studies internationally
- Promote models of working-class studies that actively involve and serve the interests of working-class people
- Promote critical discussions of the relationships among class, race, gender, sexuality, nationality, and other structures of inequality
- Promote interdisciplinary, multi-disciplinary, and disciplinary approaches to studying and teaching about the lived experience of working-class people
- Provide opportunities for academics, artists, activists, workers, independent scholars, students, and others to share their work, make connections with colleagues and professional organizations, and learn about resources
- Facilitate conversations and critical debate engaging diverse intellectual and political approaches to scholarship, teaching, and outreach in working-class studies
- Create partnerships that link scholarship with activism in labor, community, and other working-class social justice organizations

If you attended the 2007 WCSA conference at Macalester College, you know we've made good progress toward those objectives. The conference was notably diverse, not only in its panels and presentations but also in its national and international scope. It was a thrill to present our

first awards to scholars and artists in the field (winners are announced on p. 6). The conference boosted our membership and resulted in decisions on a number of projects, including the development of a website—now in progress (see p. 8 for details)—and an electronic journal, along with our existing listserv and newsletter. We made long-range plans for conferences in Stony Brook, Pittsburgh, and Chicago; and we envisioned collaborative projects with sister organizations, including the Labor and Working-Class History Association. Finally, we committed ourselves to more aggressive outreach.

On page 12, you will find a membership form. If you are not already a WCSA member, I urge you to join today and to pass along the invitation to others you think should be involved. If you are already a member, please help us build the organization by joining one of the following committees: Awards, Communications, Conference, Finance, and Outreach. We will have a WCSA membership meeting at the "How Class Works" conference, sponsored by the Center for the Study of Working Class Life at SUNY-Stony Brook. (See the conference call on p. 7.) I look forward to seeing you there and to working with you.

In solidarity,

Kitty Krupat

President, WCSA

Working-Class Notes

Working-Class Notes is published twice a year, in fall and spring, by the Working-Class Studies Association. The deadline for submissions is October 1 for the fall issue and March 1 for the spring issue. Send submissions electronically to Sherry Linkon, sllinkon@ysu.edu. Issues are mailed to members and posted online in early December and early May.

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Membership Renewal Reminder

If you haven't already done so, *please renew* your WCSA membership for 2008. In order to vote at the WCSA meeting held at annual conferences and to vote in elections, a member must be in good standing as of April 15th in the year of the conference and election.

Go to www.wcstudies.org/membership to renew your membership online or use the form on p. 12.

The WCSA listserv and membership database will be updated shortly and only actively enrolled members will receive online announcements and the biannual newsletter. If your contact information has changed since you joined, or if you have any questions about your membership, please email Terry Easton at terry.easton@lcc.gatech.edu.

*Thank you for your continued support
to the WCSA.*



WCSA Past-President and conference organizer Peter Rachleff speaks at the annual business meeting.

"Teaching to a Different Crowd"

by Ehren Helmut Pflugfelder
PhD Candidate, Rhetoric and Composition, Purdue University

Scholars and teachers in working-class studies expend a great deal of energy discussing the pedagogy of teaching to the working classes, but we often ignore the other side of the student population. How do we teach working-class studies to those who aren't in the working class, who may be ambivalent about the value of the field, or who are antagonistic to the basic tenets of working-class studies? What pedagogy do we have for instructing students who have implicit beliefs in social Darwinism or to those who believe the struggles for racial, gender, and economic equality are over? While we often envision teaching classes filled with energetic, open-minded students, the fact remains that many humanities instructors teaching working-class issues or cultural studies find students unreceptive and unwilling to consider the value of such inquiry.

About a year ago, I found myself in just such a situation, albeit of my own making. I was lecturing at a mid-sized, Midwestern university, teaching a freshman and sophomore-level class on working-class history. The class was selected by students, though it fit a rather unpopular requirement for a population where nearly 70% of undergraduates seek majors in hard sciences, medicine, or a pre-professional field, while just over 10% choose a humanities major. In a science-based research institution with a student population like I've described, it would hardly be advisable to load a syllabus with radical literature and expressly political perspectives. Students would pull away as if they were burned. I've seen colleagues perform similar maneuvers and accomplish little more than the creation of considerable resentment. In this context, an effective working-class pedagogy needs to encourage identity formation within multiple contexts and deal with the material existence in which students find themselves.

In order to accomplish this goal, I structured the class around local history—a topic I feel can create immediacy for students without shocking them with (what they may perceive as) radical ideologies. My goal was to make the context of our city's working population my students' context as well, so that they could engage with the material whether or not they had political and social beliefs in opposition to the theory and methods of cultural or working-class studies. I built the class around local field trips, guest speakers, detailed accounts of our city's history, interview assignments, oral history projects, and true "outsider" voices—all in the hope that students would become more immersed in doing local, working-class history.

Now that the class is over, I can look back on both success and failure. Some topics, discussions, and guest speakers "fell flat" as students became more interested in reading about and performing their own local histories than understanding the working classes in general. While class discussion centered on local culture, many students came to some substantial political realities concerning their local area. Perhaps because of these interests, the research projects were some of the best I have ever received—students performed unique and critical investigations of previously unexamined local history. I fully intend to teach working-class studies with this method again, as it appears to be a valuable pedagogy—especially for a reluctant student population.

Note: To see Pflugfelder's syllabus, visit the Syllabus Library at the Center for Working-Class Studies website, www.centerforworkingclassstudies.org

Class Action

Class Action has been working with a variety of educational institutions, both K-12 and higher education. We've been working with teachers and students in public schools as well as independent schools. We are in the process of putting out a call for our second zine focused on issues of class.

Through our Class on Campus program, we raise awareness about class and classism and help catalyze action to reduce the class/caste system that is at the core of the institutions of higher education. Recently, we put on a mini-Conference on Class and Classism at Hampshire College, and a student activist group formed and is now organizing around class on campus. We have worked with Dartmouth College over a few years, and they have been doing a variety of interesting things including a three year Class Divide project using the arts to raise class awareness organized by the Hopkins Center for the Arts. Class Action was invited to be a partner in the Class Divide project and will conduct educational workshops in 2007-2008 and 2008-2009. Check out the Class Divide project at <http://hop.dartmouth.edu/classdivide/>. Think about bringing Class Action to your campus.

We also launched our Race/Class Intersections Program to look at issues of class within communities of color and help to build cross-race coalitions within class and cross-class coalitions within race. We are also working with Betsy Leondar-Wright (one of our Board members) to research Class Culture Clashes within different racial/ethnic communities.

The DVD *Enough: A Kid's Perspective* is being distributed along with a curricula to teachers and youth groups to jump start the class conversation. You can learn more about all of our resources on our website, www.classism.org.

Please contribute to our web resources, or consider being a Guest Editor for an E-news. Every month Class Action (www.classism.org) publishes an E-news on a different theme. In the past the themes have included:

- Class and Climate Change
- Class and the Harvest
- Class and the Commons
- Class and Food
- Class and Leisure

From the Centers

As a Guest Editor you would choose a topic such as Class and Gender, Class and Literature, Class and the Media, Class and Healthcare, or another one of your choosing. Each e-news reviews a book or books, videos or other resources related to the topic, provides links to other articles on the topic and/or organizations working on the issues, a survey question related to the theme, and an action folks can take that is relevant to the theme. You would provide the above content (or some portion of it). If you have a particular interest and are interested in the possibility of being a Guest Editor e-mail us if you're interested!

If you'd like to receive our E-news or if you'd like to receive our print newsletter, please let us know at info@classism.org.

Michigan State

Our Daily Work/Our Daily Lives is happy to report a busy year. Our exhibit, "Workers Culture in Two Nations: South Africa and the United States," closed at the Michigan State University (MSU) Museum in August, but it is being prepared to travel in both South Africa and the U.S. in 2008. It will open on May 1st (the real Labor Day) in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, at the Red Location Museum. Port Elizabeth is often called the "Detroit of South Africa" because of the early establishment of factories by both Ford and General Motors in the decades prior to World War II. Red Location is the oldest township in the city and the Museum commemorates the struggle against Apartheid in Port Elizabeth and the surrounding Eastern Cape Province (Home to Nelson Mandela, Govan Mbeki, and other leaders of the movement and one of the strongest centers of resistance during the struggle).

Working-class poet, fiction writer, and screenwriter Jim Daniels travelled to the MSU campus in September to do a reading in the Michigan Writers Reading series and from his recently published collections of both poetry (*Revolt of the Crash-Test Dummies* [Eastern Washington University Press], *Now Showing* [a chapbook from Ahadada Press], and *In Line for the Exterminator*, [Wayne State University Press]) and fiction (*Mr. Pleasant* [Michigan State University Press]). He also was featured in a night of film and discussion of the two films based on his screenplays, *No Pets* and *Dumpster*. Our Daily Work/Our Daily Lives coordinated Jim's trip to campus.

We also hosted historian and activist Michael Honey on the MSU campus on October 22nd talking about his new book, *Going Down Jericho Road: The Memphis Strike, Martin Luther King's Last Campaign* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2007) and the importance of economic democracy as the greatest unfinished agenda within King's life and work.

The current schedule of brown bag presentations for the Spring includes:

Juan Javier Pescador
MSU Department of History
"Detroit-Tenochtitlan: Utopia, Myth and History in Diego Rivera's Transnational Art"
January 25, 2008

Ryan Pettingill
MSU Department of History
"Go Get 'em Tigers': The 1968 Detroit Tigers and Working-Class Culture"
February 8, 2008

Dionicio Valdes
MSU Department of History
"Plantation Agriculture in Hawaii and the ILWU"
March 14, 2008

All presentations take place 12:15-1:30 in the MSU Museum Auditorium

Youngstown

The Center for Working-Class Studies (CWCS) continues to focus its work in education and public knowledge. This summer, we hosted a dozen K-12 teachers for a week-long institute on teaching about immigration. We've also updated the resources on teaching about class and working-class culture on our website, making available some of the materials created for and in the 2006 institute on Class in the Classroom.

Our new and improved website is finally up and running at

centerforworkingclassstudies.org.

The new design is easier to use for both readers and our staff. We've also updated many sections of the site, so please visit soon.

We will soon be adding two additional sections to the website, reflecting our ongoing partnership with Youngstown State University's Journalism Program. The Worker Portraits site will feature the profiles of Mahoning Valley workers and background information about how work is changing in our community. The Journalism Field Work site will showcase the work of our undergraduate journalism students, including articles from their field work in West Virginia last spring. These reports focus on life in the community near the Sago mine a year after the terrible accident there in 2006. We will add to that site later this year, as students begin a project comparing deindustrialization in Youngstown with deindustrialization in Allentown, Pennsylvania, after their next field experience in December.

The Center continues to be active in the local community. This year, we helped organize the rededication of a historical marker commemorating the 1937 Little Steel Strike, and we organized a very well-attended and powerful commemoration of the 30th anniversary of Black Monday, the day Youngstown Sheet and Tube announced the first major mills closing in Youngstown. The event featured a panel of speakers who were all involved in various ways, including Staughton Lynd, Gerald Dickey, Rev. Ed Weisheimer, and William Farragher. More than 200 people gathered at the Youngstown Historical Center ("the steel museum") for the event.

CWCS Co-Director Sherry Linkon began a new radio program this year on

WYSU, Youngstown's NPR affiliate. After doing interviews with visiting scholars at the Center for the last eight years, Linkon is now on every week with her own show, Lincoln Avenue (both the radio station and the CWCS have their offices on Lincoln Avenue). The new show emphasizes local issues, including regional development, education, and local history. You can listen to the show by visiting Linkon's blog, linkonavenue.blogspot.com. You can hear interviews with Brian Corbin about the Ecumenical Coalition that organized to fight the steelmill shut-downs in Youngstown and with Terry Easton, WCSA Treasurer and 2007 Constance Coiner Dissertation Award Winner, about day laborers in Atlanta.

CWCS Co-Director John Russo has also been active in the media, doing many interviews related to the 30th anniversary of the first major steel mill closing in Youngstown and to the GM strike, especially the health care and job security issues involved. Russo appeared in the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Financial Times*, and many other newspapers. He's also appearing once a month on the radio, on WKTU and WELW Talk Radio (serving Northeast Ohio), discussing labor and work issues.

Our 2007-2008 Lecture Series features five events, starting with the Black Monday commemoration. Other speakers include Terry Easton, Aaron Fox, author of *Real Country: Music and Language in Working-Class Culture*; labor historian Heather Thompson, who will talk about prisons and labor; and Katie Quan, from the UC-Berkeley Henning Center for International Labor Relations, discussing labor issues in China.

2007 WCSA Awards

At the WCSA Conference at Macalester College, we gave our first annual awards recognizing excellent work in the field. The winners are:

Studs Terkel Award for Media and Journalism

Pepi Leistyna, *Class Dismissed: How TV Frames the Working Class*

Tillie Olsen Award for Creative Writing

Jim Daniels and Charlee Brodsky, *Street*

2007 Working-Class Studies Association CLR James Award for Best Book or Article

Nicholas de Genova, *Working the Boundaries: Race, Space and 'Illegality' in Mexican Chicago*

Constance Coiner Dissertation Award

Terry Easton, "Temporary Work, Contingent Lives: Race, Immigration, and Transformations of Atlanta's Daily Work, Daily Pay"

I also want to acknowledge the members of the WCSA Awards committee, who generously reviewed nominated materials:

Renny Christopher
Gary Hicks
Diane Gilliam
Tami Gold
Tom Zaniello
Dale Maharidge

Christie Launius
Elizabeth Faue
Ray Mazurek
Andrew Ross
Janet Zandy
LeAnn Fields

Sherry Linkon, Chair, 2007 Awards Committee



Among the highlights of this year's WCSA conference was a panel honoring the life of Tillie Olsen. Panelists included Barbara Jensen, Cherie Rankin, Sherry Linkon, Steve Zeltzer, Janet Zandy, and Julie Olsen Edwards.

Call for Papers

How Class Works

**SUNY Stony Brook
June 5-7, 2008**

The conference seeks to explore ways in which an explicit recognition of class helps us understand the social world in which we live and ways in which analysis of society can deepen our understanding of class as a social relationship. Presentations should take as their point of reference the lived experience of class; proposed theoretical contributions should be rooted in and illuminate social realities. Presentations are welcome from people outside academic life when they sum up social experience in a way that contributes to the themes of the conference. Formal papers will be welcome but not required. All presentations should be accessible to an interdisciplinary audience.

The conference welcomes proposals for presentations that advance our understanding of any of the following themes (fuller descriptions of these themes are available on the conference website: <http://www.workingclass.sunysb.edu>):

- The mosaic of class, race, and gender, with a special focus on the legacy of Theodore W. Allen's work on the invention of the white race and its implications in the new racial and ethnic mix of 21st century U.S. society
- Class, power, and social structure
- Class and community
- Class in a global economy
- Middle class? Working class? What's the difference and why does it matter?
- Class, public policy, and electoral politics, with a special focus on class, health, and health care
- Class and culture
- Pedagogy of class

Proposals must include a) title; b) which of the eight conference themes will be addressed; c) a maximum 250 word summary of the main points, methodology, and slice of experience to be addressed; d) institutional affiliation (if any) and the training or experience the presenter brings to the proposal; e) presenter's name, address, telephone, fax, and e-mail address. A person may present in at most two conference sessions. To allow time for discussion, sessions will be limited to three 20-minute or four 15-minute principal presentations. Sessions will not include official discussants. Proposals for poster sessions are welcome. Proposed presentations may be assigned to poster session.

Proposals for sessions are welcome. Session proposals must include the information above for all presentations and an indication of willingness to participate from each presenter.

Submit proposals as hard copy by mail to the How Class Works 2008 Conference, Center for Study of Working Class Life, Department of Economics, SUNY, Stony Brook, NY 11794-4384 or as an e-mail attachment to michael.zweig@stonybrook.edu. Proposals must be received by **December 17, 2007**. Notifications will be mailed on January 16, 2008.

Conference registration and housing reservations will be possible after February 15, 2008. Details and updates will be posted at <http://www.workingclass.sunysb.edu>.

For more information, contact Michael Zweig, Director of the Center for Study of Working Class Life, at the address or e-mail listed above or at (631) 632-7536.

Communications Committee Report

The new Working-Class Studies Association Website, wcstudies.org, offers many features useful to WCSA members and the general public. Members have password-protected access to contact information in the membership directory (which any member can ask to withhold), the full text of our newsletter (current and archived), minutes of WCSA meetings, and information about the membership of all WCSA committees. Everyone coming to the site has access to information about the WCSA, a calendar of conferences and other national events related to working-class studies, links to related organizations, access to various resources, a listing of WCSA members (which any member can ask to be kept from), table of contents of our newsletter, and ways to join the WCSA on-line or by downloading a form to submit with check or credit card information. Having the website is a major advance in our capacity to serve our members and get our message out to the wider world. Thanks go to Sam Butler, our web designer and a graduate student in philosophy at SUNY Stony Brook.

The Communications Committee and Steering Committee would also like to establish a peer-reviewed WCSA journal. We expect to start with an on-line e-journal, available on the website to members only for a period before making the full text available to all. We need to resolve a number of questions - from frequency to scope to editorial standards and process to recruitment of editors and support staff - before we can initiate the journal. The Communications Committee welcomes ideas that would clarify thinking and advance practical progress on this important project.

Michael Zweig, WCSA Secretary and Chair of the Communications Committee, mzweig@notes.cc.sunysb.edu

Book Review: Jim Daniels, *In Line for the Exterminator: Poems* (Wayne State University Press) and *Revolt of the Crash-Test Dummies: Poems* (Eastern Washington University Press)

Reviewed by Jamie Daniel, Director of Organizing, UPI Local 4100, AFT/IFT/AFL-CIO

Jim Daniels's stunning new collection of poems, *In Line for the Exterminator*, begins with a poem of the same title in which Daniels and his young son are at an amusement park in Pittsburgh, waiting in a line that "crawls forward like a whipped dog / toward the dark door behind which it's promised / we are all to be scared." He looks around at the sweaty, aggressive crowd of mostly young people and wonders, "How many / in this room make minimum wage? How many / in this room will ever own a house? / What if we all made a giant wad of gum / and rolled it out of this park and onto the front lawn / of the richest motherfucker in this city?"

The lines are typical of the sharp edges that characterize Daniels's considerable body of work, which includes not just these two recent collections of poems, but numerous previous collections of poetry and short stories (such as the recent *Mr. Pleasant*), which he writes under the name Jim Ray Daniels. There's both considerable, focused anger expressed at the fact that the young people in line face lifetimes of under-employment and resulting financial and psychological instability far scarier than any amusement park ride, and frustration at what an adequate response to this situation might be, beyond an unfocused mass-adolescent prank to irritate the rich guys who own their houses.

Daniels's work is fiercely rooted in his hometown of Warren, Michigan, although he's been teaching for some time in Pittsburgh (relocating out of the deindustrializing frying pan into the post-industrial fire, as it were). Although he writes a lot about his growing up there, it's never with sentimentality – quite the opposite. He remembers the weirdness of Catholicism along with teen pregnancies, suicides, and boys finding ways to compete and humiliate each other as they wait to get out of school and replace their fathers in the auto plants. But he also remembers the dizzying impact on his family of his father being laid off: "At dinner, my father informs us / he's been laid off...", and the family dinner table suddenly becomes a boat in choppy waters, with five children and a wife and aging grandmother looking to the head of the table for stability: "and we wolf down meatloaf and canned corn, / white bread and milk, racing to anchor / ourselves . . .". After cursing his bosses, "My father pushed away / from the table and started swimming. / We watched him disappear / hoping he'd be strong enough / to come back with help."

But in this poem and others, help never comes, and men are set adrift, unable to be the heads-of-household they were raised to be, and unable to imagine an alternative. There are lots of divorces or ought-to-be-divorces in these poems, lots of fights between couples heard over the backyard fence, and other couples who seem to drift together more out of force of habit than real affection or desire. One of the devastating strengths of Daniels's work is its representation of the emotional and psychological impact of the vertiginous transition of Michigan from (relative) job security to its current status as "the job loss state" (as one contemporary t-shirt reads). Although the damage done clearly lands on everyone, he is

Book Review (cont'd)

particularly good at getting its debilitating impact on men. For many years he's written a series of poems in which the aging autoworker Digger tries to make sense of things as he loses his job, his teeth, and his grip. In "Digger Laid Off," he reels from blows even the UAW contract couldn't protect him from: "Eight years since the last time. / Never thought / it'd happen again. // Seniority's hole -- / the deeper you dug, the safer / you felt. // At the unemployment office / you shuffle in line with the rest, / shifting from foot // to foot, a wobbling bowling pin. / Angry, but at who, what?"

Jim Daniels writes from the inside, for the inside of working-class experience. There is nothing about his writing that asks for middle-class sympathy or understanding; he's not concerned with "translating" or explaining working-class life for people who don't know it. Or with apologizing for anything about it. His work makes no concessions. It's got the teeth and claws and the kind of defensive balls that people have to develop when they know that everything can be pulled out from under them at any time. This makes it, in my view, the most effective and honest poetic representation of contemporary working-class life out there.

BOOK NOTES

The Cinema of Globalization: A Guide to Films about the New Economic Order (Cornell), Tom Zaniello

A new film guide by the author of the indispensable *Working Stiffs, Union Maids, Reds, and Riffraff*, and with very little overlap in coverage, it has the same kind of insightful film-by-film commentary combined with easy-to-access information on directors, running time, etc. A great deal of energy and thought has gone into categorizing the films (often in multiple ways) to assist both viewers and teachers in using them. The films and commentaries are organized alphabetically, but a topical index lists various groups of films, both fiction and documentaries. There are, for example, 17 films listed under "Neocolonialism," including *Up In Smoke* and *Inch' Allah dimanche*, and four under "Mock Documentaries," including *A Day without a Mexican*. Many of the 14 "Must-See Films" you probably have not seen, but most are available through online DVD rentals.

Household Accounts: Working-Class Family Economies in the Interwar United States (Cornell), Susan Porter Benson

This book shows that most working-class families did not participate in "the rise of mass consumption" that supposedly defined the Roaring Twenties in the U.S., let alone during the Great Depression of the 1930s. Instead, the book reveals a whole different world of family economies where hand-me-downs and the informal trading of tasks and second-hand goods were nearly as important as income. Based in part on contemporary interviews with women wage earners by Department of Labor researchers, the book provides a vivid picture of a working-class culture very different than the middle-class one. As one reviewer says, it shows how "ordinary people lived their lives not as individuals freely engaged in market exchanges but as connected people . . . deeply embedded in complex webs of human relationships as they daily came up against hard material reality."

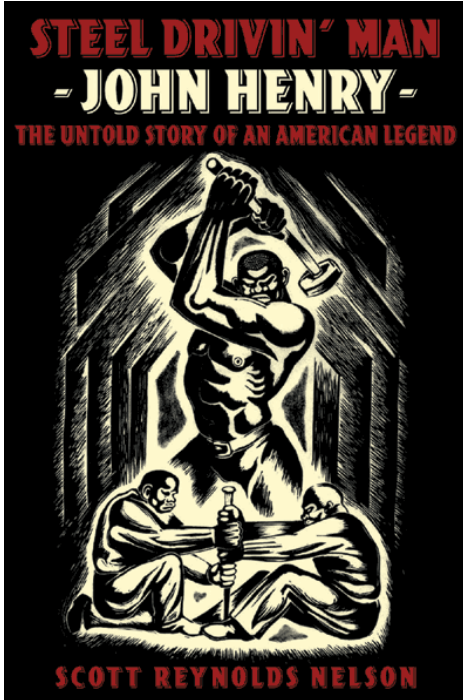


The State of Working America 2006/2007 (Economic Policy Institute/Cornell), Lawrence Mishel, Jared Bernstein, Sylvia Allegretto

New edition of the now standard EPI tome on working and living standards in the U.S. gives the lie to the mainstream media drumbeat about how good the economy is. Reporters and their elite sources seem to think that relatively good unemployment and inflation numbers should make workers contented if not joyous. Even a glance at *Working America's* documentation of stagnant real wages, declining family incomes, and growing inequality, all as aggregate wealth and labor productivity are growing substantially, might help explain why such large majorities of workers think America is on "the wrong track" at home as well as abroad. The Executive Summary is 15 pages of must reading, and the rest is an essential reference that should be in all union halls, public libraries, taverns and prayer meetings.

BOOK NOTES

Steel Drivin' Man: John Henry, the Untold Story of an American Legend (Oxford), Scott Reynolds Nelson



The real John Henry was scarcely five-feet-two-inches tall, the perfect height for digging tunnels through mountains in the 1870s. A chain gang laborer imprisoned at the Virginia Penitentiary in Richmond, he was among more than a hundred men, mostly black and mostly in their twenties, who died digging the Lewis Tunnel for the Southern Railway. The tunnel was dug by “convicts and steam drills, working side by side . . . [and] steam drills were pitted against men.” The men won that contest, with the drill being withdrawn two years before the men finished the tunnel, but at a terrible cost in lives that were buried beneath “the white house” (mentioned in the song) at the Penitentiary. Scott Nelson found those lives in the records, and he tells us about them based on a sketchy written record and the various verses of what is by no means a simple song. Early chapters are an account of Nelson’s historical detective work and an attempt to flesh out the real John Henry. From New Jersey, John Henry was convicted on trumped up charges because he was “one of the young black men who raised the hackles of local whites” in the Reconstruction South: “He would have been a free black person who . . . had the confidence of a conqueror.” Later chapters range over a variety of subjects: railroading, convict labor, and American capitalism in the heyday of the Southern Railway; hammer songs as the source of the backbeat in rock’n roll music; and the way the song and legend of John Henry evolved from the 1870s until today. The power and complexity of the song itself, with all its verses printed in a “Coda” at the end of the book, is that no matter which verses you choose to leave in or out, it remains at once both a paean to and a warning against working hard and always doing your best.

Death at the Old Hotel: A Bartender Brian McNulty Mystery (St. Martin’s), Con Lehane

McNulty just wants to earn a living as a bartender, but when he takes a new job at a down-at-the-heels Manhattan hotel, he winds up in the middle of a labor dispute and murder investigation. As in the first two novels in this series, he turns detective to find out who done it. Booklist says: “Lehane has come up with an intriguing premise, and he turns it into an engaging narrative, with a good mixture of wit and drama.” *Publisher’s Weekly* thinks “Lehane does a good job of depicting the underbelly of the city’s working class. Readers will look forward to more outings from his world-weary, savvy and imperfect protagonist.” A former bartender and union organizer, the author is now an editor for the National Education Association.

Blue-Chip Black: Race, Class, and Status in the New Black Middle Class (California), Karyn R. Lacy

An ethnographic study of four different kinds of middle-class communities in the suburbs of Washington, D.C., *Blue-Chip Black* focuses on African-Americans who make more than \$50,000 working in predominantly white professional environments and who live in middle-class suburbs where poor blacks are not present. In the words of one reviewer, “how black families negotiate the murky and sometimes combustible terrains of race, class, and place illuminates the hard work that goes into forming and claiming a particular identity.” Karyn Lacy is a sociology professor at the University of Michigan.



BOOK NOTES

***Deer Hunting with Jesus: Dispatches from America's Class War* (Crown), Joe Bageant**

A successful journalist and editor on the downside of midlife, Joe Bageant returned from Oregon in 2001 to live in his hometown of Winchester, Virginia, a hard-scrabble place in the Appalachian part of the state, near both West Virginia and western Maryland. His research questions: "How in the hell can it be that one part of a nation knows so little about the lives of the other? What great illusion in the theater of American life holds us so captive that we cannot even see those around us, much less persuade them not to vote against their own best interest?" Sounds like another *What's the Matter with Kansas?*, but this one is more about the people than the politicians. According to Howard Zinn, "[Bageant] evokes working-class America like no one else." Another reviewer calls *Deer Hunting* "a raging, hilarious, and profane love song to the great American redneck."

***What Workers Say: Employee Voice in the Anglo-American Workplace* (Cornell), Richard Freeman, Peter Boxall, Peter Haynes, eds.**

Based on a linked set of surveys of workers in the U.S., Canada, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Australia, and New Zealand, this collection analyzes the present and potential forms of worker representation in what the authors see as the market-oriented Anglo-American economic model vs. the "Nordic" and European Union "social dialogue" models. More than half the volume reports on what workers say in each of these six countries, followed by analytic essays on the implications of these findings for unions, employers and governments.

***The Sex of Class: Women Transforming American Labor* (Cornell), Dorothy Sue Cobble, ed.**

The phrase "the sex of class" has multiple meanings in this comprehensive collection of essays by scholars and activists. One of them is that though men are still about a 54% majority in the American workforce as a whole (including professionals and managers), in working-class occupations, no matter how you define those, women are a clear majority. As editor Sue Cobble explains: "a revolution has occurred: women have moved from the margins to the center of the working class. Yet our theories of class and our understanding of the jobs workers do, the problems they face, and the kind of social movements they are creating are decades behind these demographic realities." This volume takes a big step toward correcting that situation with essays by some of the best writers, scholars and activists on workplace issues, including Janice Fine, Ruth Milkman, Karen Nussbaum, Katie Quan, and Vanessa Tait.



***Working-Class White: The Making and Unmaking of Race Relations* (California), Monica McDermott**

For her dissertation in sociology Monica McDermott worked as a convenience store clerk in white working-class neighborhoods bordering black neighborhoods in Atlanta and Boston, where she studied interactions between white and black fellow workers and white and black customers. Of course, she found racism and racial tensions, but what she focuses on is the subtlety and complexity of retail interactions that are freighted with class as well as race prejudice on both sides of both divides. The comparison of similar neighborhoods in two very different cities adds additional complexity to the picture. McDermott is a close observer, including of her own reactions as a white woman with a bit of an attitude, and some of the best moments in the book are when she analyzes different interpretations of the same event among her workmates. Refreshingly, she isn't always sure that the well-educated sociologist's is the correct interpretation.

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