



WAYNE STATE UNIVERSITY

Labor@Wayne

Labor History, Family History, and a History of Democracy

In 2023 the United States saw an explosion in workers' strikes and labor unrest that stood in stark contrast with preceding years. An estimated half-million workers walked off the job in more than 400 strikes last year. While these numbers are still dwarfed by the labor unrest seen in the 1970s, the sheer impact of these strikes place them among the most important in US history. The 45,000+ member SAG-AFTRA strike ended as the longest actors' strike against Hollywood studios in their history. The Kaiser Permanente strike, which lasted just three days and involved over 75,000 workers, became the largest healthcare workers strike in US history and ended with wage increases of up to 21% for workers. The UAW's Stand-Up Strike similarly won historic gains for workers after taking on all of the Big Three automakers. But how will we remember labor's struggles? Who will preserve and tell our memories of them?

Many of us have fond memories of stories shared by our parents and other family members when we were younger. Often, these stories can involve the first chance meetings between parents or comical stories of youthful rebellion. How often, though, are these tales about labor? How often do we hear of a parent's first job, or how our relatives underwent stressful testing at work? These and other thoughts must have been racing through Elizabeth Faue's mind when she uncovered an old collection of union buttons and other memorabilia left for her by her mother, father, and grandparents. "I knew about my grandfather, but I never knew my grandmother belonged to a union," Faue recalled, "I always felt that she was fairly conservative, but I found this union dues book of hers. She was a member of the same union local that my mother was in when she worked at the hospital."

Elizabeth's father, Vincent Faue, a custodian and stationary engineer with the Minneapolis Public Schools, prided himself on being a union man. Faue recalled how her father took part in the critical 1951 Minneapolis School Janitors' strike. Although members of Public School Employees Local 63 were legally prohibited from striking, public workers like Vince Faue nevertheless took part in walkouts protesting low pay and wage cuts. After the strike had gone on for over a month, the school board sued to have an injunction placed on the workers, but the plan backfired when Minnesota's Supreme Court sided with the workers. The janitor engineers of Local 63 won their strike soon after. Although the Minnesota State Legislature banned public employee strikes after the 1951 strike, public employees nationwide began making progress in securing collective bargaining rights in the 1960s and 1970s.

Stories like these are not exclusive to Director Faue's family. Labor@Wayne's Academic Services Officer, Sean O'Brien, similarly can recall tales from members of his own family involved in the ironworking, elevator construction, and other building trades. Jamie McQuaid, our Program Extension Coordinator, also recalls stories from his autoworker relatives. Labor history is more than a series of strikes and contract dates. Labor history is also a history of protest, the assertion of one's own rights and the rights of others, and the expression of shared democratic principles.



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Work, Democracy, Education

There will be a presidential election in the United States in 2024 which, following several years of renewed labor militancy, will have significant importance for the future of labor and working people in this country. As labor scholars, activists, archivists, and union members, we consider the relationship of the labor movement to democratic governance and the contribution of workers and their institutions to our democratic society. The labor movement's resurgence comes at a time of crucial importance for our nation's democratic foundations. These labor actions are, in fact, remarkable expressions of democracy.

In the Classroom

Starting this Fall Semester, Wayne State University will begin offering a new course for incoming students, ELR 1100: Work and Democracy: An Introduction. The course is not meant to be exclusive to students in the Employment and Labor Relations Program, but it is a general education course designed for university students to elect to fulfill one of their requirements for their Bachelor's degree. Work and Democracy explores the role of working people and the labor movement in our democratic institutions and in helping to wage battles for social justice and equality. Classes like these are how Labor@Wayne can educate the next generation of American workers about the relationship between work and labor's role in democracy.

At the Labor School Graduation

On June 3, 2023, over 150 people attended the Labor School's graduation ceremony on campus. Seventy nine students graduated, including 59 from the Labor School certificate program and 20 from the Labor Academy. The graduates came from over forty different union locals representing workers in education, fire, police, administrative services, manufacturing, building trades, casinos, and retail. Family, friends, instructors, and union leaders joined to celebrate. Keynote speaker Steve Babson, labor activist, educator, and historian, discussed the importance of worker organizing. The graduation program also included the passionate speeches of four graduates: Tania Flowers, David Hartsuck, Christopher Nobles, and Towanda Perry-Sawyer. They addressed the value of labor education, their journey to union leadership, and commitments to share their skills with workers everywhere.

At Student Events

Labor Spring, Labor@Wayne's annual student teach-in on labor history, union organizing, and workers' issues is returning on March 20th. With 2024 being an election year, Labor Spring will explore the crucial overlaps between workers' rights and national politics and how, as unionists like UAW Leader Walter Reuther have said, "there's a direct relationship between the ballot box and the bread box."

In Academia

The North American Labor History Conference (NALHC), held annually since 1979 and now biennial, is returning for its forty-first meeting, October 10-12, 2024, on the theme of Labor and Democracy. NALHC issues a call inviting panels, workshops, round-table sessions, and papers discussing the experience of workers in democracies and impacts on democracies of organized labor and social movements of working people. Submissions should be sent as a single PDF file by April 10, 2024, to NALHC@wayne.edu



Work and Democracy will center on labor and its role in our democratic society in this new gen-ed class



Panelists from last year's Labor Spring teach-in discuss organizing tactics and solidarity



Labor School Associate Director Gayle Hamilton in the classroom



The North American Labor History Conference returns biennially in 2024



More on Labor@Wayne's

Previous and Upcoming Programs



Workforce Development Institute's Alumni Association Holds Planning Meetings with Labor@Wayne

At the end of last year, Labor@Wayne hosted a planning meeting and reception with Workforce Development Institute's Alumni Association. The event was organized both to celebrate the achievements of WDI's graduates as well as to look ahead and prepare for continuing students' labor education.



UC-UAW Strike Organizers Talk about Archives and Preserving Labor's Memory with Labor@Wayne

In January, Labor@Wayne hosted a panel presentation on the 2022 University of California Academic Workers' Strike which, involving more than 48,000 striking employees, is the largest academic strike in the United States to date. How was such a monumental effort across many different campuses organized so effectively and how can the UAW's success be repeated by other unions? In part of a wider discussion on archiving strike documents with the Walter P. Reuther Archives, the home of Labor@Wayne, panelists discussed why archives are so valuable to our field and how important it is for labor to maintain a record of its history.

Dr. William P. Jones Visits Wayne to Discuss Essential Workers

Dr. William P. Jones, University of Minnesota, joined Labor@Wayne, the Douglas Fraser Center for Workplace Issues, the Department of African American Studies, and the Department of History on February 23rd to discuss the category of essential workers in his talk, "Essential Workers: Public Employment and the Dignity of Labor." The talk was preceded by a meet and greet with light refreshments.

Labor@Wayne Director Dr. Elizabeth Fae Presents Lecture on C-SPAN: "The Times, They Are A'Changin'"

C-SPAN invited Labor@Wayne's Director, Dr. Elizabeth Fae, to give a guest lecture on American labor history. Her talk, titled "The Times They Are A'Changin': Worker Militancy, Diversity, and the Emerging Service Economy - The Long 1970s." Her lecture delves into these and a host of other adjacent topics, like the 1973 Oil Embargo, the rise of public sector organizing, and the emergence of "Low cost, low wage" big-box retailers along with other ascendant service industries. Rather than the end of the rebellions of the 1960s, the 1970s were a time of profound labor militancy, but what does this time have to teach today's labor movement? Look for Dr. Fae's lecture, which will be available soon.



Upcoming Events

March 2024

- March 20: Second Annual Wayne State Labor Spring Teach-In
- March 21: Irving Bluestone Lecture Series with Joseph A. McCartin, Georgetown University and Kalmanovitz Initiative for Labor and the Working Poor, "Labor Spring: Higher Ed, Union Revival, and Labor History at a Crossroads"

April 2024

- April 4: Margot Canaday, Princeton University, "Queer Career: Sexuality and Work in Modern America"

May 2024

- May 22: Dave Miller Labor Lecture with Steve Babson, "The Great Fear, Then and Now: Dave Miller Faced HUAC in His Time, as We Now Face the Threat to Democracy in Ours"

October 2024

- October 10-12: North American Labor History Conference

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*Would you like to learn
more about our academic
programs?*




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