Introduction

This course asks a straightforward question: what is the future of organized labor? Or, perhaps more apocalyptically: does organized labor have a future? Its concern is with organized labor rather than simply workers because historically it is when workers have been able to act collectively that they have made economic, social and political gains. The course examines the ways in which the form, strategy and practice of workers' organizations, primarily trade unions, have evolved in response to a variety of economic, social, and political challenges. Its focus is the labor movements of the United States and Western Europe.

Labor today is faced with a range of serious challenges: the changing nature of work; the changing composition of the workforce; greater workplace flexibility; international economic integration; political hostility, and more. All of these pose a threat to the organizational structures, strategies, and tactics employed by labor in the past. The result has been a decline in the strength and influence of organized labor across the advanced capitalist world that has raised questions about the continued survival of collective forms of labor organization and industrial action. This course grapples with the question of whether there are new structures, strategies, and tactics that will enable labor to mount an effective defense of its interests. Topics include collective action and internal union democracy, new organizing strategies, the role of labor law, and the effectiveness of strike action.

Engaging in a significant research project is a major aim of this seminar. A significant part of the semester will be taken up with discussion of student research papers, as students present their papers, and other students and the instructor offer comments and constructive criticism.

Requirements

This is a seminar and the primary requirement is that students do the assigned reading (which is about 200 pages a week) on time and be prepared to discuss it in class. Each student must write comments (anywhere from a paragraph or two to a page or two) on the readings each week. The purpose of the comments is to identify the main issues,
questions and criticisms so that we can incorporate them into class discussion. Students will frequently make oral presentations of the readings in class. The written comments must be posted to the “Discussion” section of Blackboard by 6.00am (in the morning!) every Monday. A description of what I expect from these comments can be found at the end of this syllabus and is also available at the ‘Assignments’ tab on Blackboard. These comments, plus class participation and presentations, will be worth one third of the grade.

The other two thirds of the grade will come from a long (roughly 20-25 page) research paper on a topic chosen by the student. In addition, each student must hand in a prospectus for their research paper (the topic plus a preliminary bibliography) by Sunday October 27 at 2.00pm. The October 28 class period will be devoted to a discussion of those proposals. For the last two or three weeks of the semester, class periods will be devoted to discussion of draft research papers with students acting as discussants. The research paper is due by 4:00pm on Friday December 20.

Finally, there will inevitably be some changes to the course readings and assignments as the semester progresses that are not included on this syllabus. I will provide regular updates in the “Announcements” section of the Blackboard web site for this course. Always check the Blackboard site before you start the reading and before each class. In the unlikely event that you miss a class, you should always check the web site in case I have announced something of importance.

Course readings

There are no books to buy. All readings are available electronically on Blackboard, at the “Course Readings” tab. They are arranged alphabetically by first author. You can then read (and, if you wish, print) this material. Check page numbers carefully, so that you read the correct section of each reading at the correct time; in many cases I have had some sections of a book scanned in that you do not need to read, or that you read at different points in the semester.

CLASS SCHEDULE:

September 9

Introduction

No reading. Showing of Final Offer.

September 16

Industrial Relations and Unions

Richard Freeman and James Medoff, What Do Unions Do?, chapter 1 (pages 3-19).


Jill Rubery and Colette Fagan, “Comparative Industrial Relations Research: Towards Reversing the Gender Bias” (pages 209-236) in *British Journal of Industrial Relations* [1995].


**September 23**

**Marxism and Trade Unionism**


Miguel Martinez Lucio, “Union Politics, Purpose and Democracy” (pages 35-51) in *Capital & Class* [2011].

Ralph Darlington and Martin Upcharch, “A Reappraisal of the Rank-and-file Versus Bureaucracy Debate” (pages 77-95) in *Capital & Class* [2011].

**September 30**

**Are Strikes Rational?**

John Kelly, *Rethinking Industrial Relations*, chapters 3-6 (pages 24-107).


Richard Hyman, “Reflections on the Mining Strike” (pages 330-354) in *Socialist Register* [1985/86].


Showing of the documentary *American Dream*, by Barbara Kopple (98 minutes).
October 7                     Comparative Industrial Relations

Kathleen Thelen, “Varieties of Labor Politics in the Developed Democracies” (pages 71-103) in Peter Hall and David Soskice, eds. *Varieties of Capitalism* [2001].


October 14                     No Class

No reading or class. Individual meetings with me. Write paper proposals.

October 28                    Discussion of Research Paper Proposals

No reading. Post research paper proposals by Sunday October 27 at 2:00pm.

November 4                   Trade Union Strategies in Western Europe

George Ross and Andrew Martin, eds., *The Brave New World of European Labor*, chapters 1 and 8 (pages 1-25 & 312-367).


Graham Taylor, Andrew Mathers and Martin Upchurch, “Beyond ‘Political Economism’: New Identities for Unions in Western Europe?” (pages 17-34) in *Capital & Class* [2011].

Melanie Simms, “Imagined Solidarities: Where is Class in Union Organizing?” (pages 97-115) in *Capital & Class* [2011].
Heather Connolly and Ralph Darlington, “Radical Political Unionism in France and Britain: A Comparative Study of SUD-Rail and the RMT” (pages 235-250) in European Journal of Industrial Relations [2012].

November 11

**Inside the US Labor Movement**

Talk by Jonas Goldstein, researcher with the United Auto Workers, Oberlin 2010.


Suzan Erem, Labor Pains: Inside America’s New Union Movement, chapters 6-13 (pages 34-83).

November 18

**Trade Union Strategies in the United States**


Kate Bronfenbrenner et al., eds., Organizing to Win, chapters 1, 2, 5 & 6 (pages 19-53 & 87-119). Chapters by Bronfenbrenner & Juravich, Fletcher & Hurd, Ness, and Waldinger, Erickson, Milkman et. al. [1998].

Lowell Turner & Richard Hurd, “Building Social Movement Unionism” (pages 9-26), Paul Johnson, “Organize for What?” (pages 27-58), and Ruth Milkman &


November 25 No Class (probably)

No reading or class. Consult with me. Write research paper drafts.

December 2 & 7 Discussion of Research Paper Drafts

Copies of research paper drafts due by noon the Sunday before class.
How To Do The Weekly Reading Comments Assignment

This assignment is not complicated, but it is easy to misunderstand. The purpose of these sets of comments is threefold. First, I want to know that you have read the assigned material ahead of class so that I can structure the class on the assumption that we have a shared starting point, and so that we can set about discussing the reading rather than having me simply lecture on it. The class is reading-driven because I am trying to expose you to a wide range of different viewpoints and approaches to the topic, and that requires that I do everything I can to encourage you to do the reading. Second, I need to know ahead of time if some part of the reading was consistently misunderstood so that I can concentrate on going over that material in class. It is often the case that one author or piece of reading is open to multiple interpretations, and if several students interpret it differently from me, we will need to discuss that. I may be expecting you to get something from the reading when you in fact take away something quite different. There may also be language and concepts that you don’t understand, so the written comments are an opportunity to let me know what you would like me to explain in class. Third, your reaction to the reading plays a central role in helping me decide how to organize class discussion. I am particularly interested in which readings resonated with you, and why, and which readings you found weak, irritating, ignorant, or whatever, and why. The critiques of the readings are the best place to start a class discussion – and it means I can call on you to explain your reaction.

What does this mean for the comments you write? It means that, at a minimum, I want the comments to demonstrate that you did the reading. That means a brief summary of the main themes and arguments presented in the reading. You can do this by writing a paragraph on each reading, or by drawing out some themes and using your comments to illustrate how each reading addressed those themes. You do not need to summarize and/or discuss every reading if you do not want to. I want a sense that you have done all the reading, but if you found some of the readings particularly insightful or heinous, then, by all means, focus on them in your comments. Do identify terms or concepts that you would like me to go over in class. Finally, along with your summary and questions, please offer comments, critiques and reactions to the readings. Again, you can do this for every reading, or just a few; you might organize your comments around a general critique of the readings for that week, or point to surprising similarities or differences.

The “product” should be written comments ranging from a couple of paragraphs to a couple of pages. They should be posted to Blackboard at the ‘Discussion Board’ tab by the deadline listed on the syllabus. Please write and post your comments before reading those of other students in the class. I want your reactions to the reading, not your reactions to the comments of other students. You are welcome to respond to student comments after posting your own.

Here is how I grade the comments. I DO NOT make comments on them. If you post comments that demonstrate that you have done the reading, or the great bulk of it, regardless of the quality of those comments, you get one point. If you post no comments, or your comments appear to be about reading for another class, you do not get a point. On rare occasions your comments may be so impressive that I give you two points. In the past this has been true for only about 10% of students each week, and it only happens for comments that go well beyond summary and questioning to offer insightful reaction and critique. You can check that I read and graded your comments by going to the Blackboard gradebook each week. I’m also happy to meet with you to give you some further feedback on your written comments.