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 which 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 Wednesday. A description of what I expect from these comments is 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 Tuesday October 18 at 2.00pm. The October 19 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 during exam period.

Finally, there will inevitably be some changes to the course readings and assignments as the semester progresses which 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:

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<tr>
<th>September 7</th>
<th>Introduction</th>
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<tr>
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<td>No reading. Showing of Final Offer.</td>
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<tr>
<th>September 14</th>
<th>Industrial Relations and Unions</th>
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<tr>
<td>Richard Freeman and James Medoff, What Do Unions Do?, chapter 1 (pages 3-19).</td>
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<td>Richard Hyman, Understanding European Trade Unionism: Between Market, Class &amp; Society, chapters 1-4 (pages 1-65).</td>
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British Universities Industrial Relations Association (BUIRA), “What’s the Point of Industrial Relations?” (pages 46-59) in Ralph Darlington, ed., What’s The Point of Industrial Relations? [2009].

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 21 Comparative Industrial Relations: National Systems, Convergence and Crisis

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

Kathleen Thelen, “Varieties of Liberalization and Trajectories of Change in Industrial Relations Institutions” (pages 1-58), draft paper for the Conference on the Future of Democratic Capitalism, Zurich [June 2011].


September 28 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).


October 5  
No Class

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

October 12  
Are Strikes Rational?


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 19  
Discussion of Research Paper Proposals

No reading. Post research paper proposals by Tuesday October 18 at 2:00pm.

November 2  
Labor, Law and Politics in the United States

Katherine Stone, *From Widgets to Digits: Employment Regulation for the Changing Workplace*, chapters 6, 9, 10 (pages 119-126 & 196-239).

Michael Piore & Sean Safford, “Changing Regimes of Workplace Governance” (pages 299-325) in *Industrial Relations* [2006].


November 9  
Inside the US Labor Movement

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

Thomas Geoghegan, Which Side Are You On? Trying to be for Labor When it’s Flat on it’s Back, chapters 1, 5-6, 10-13, and epilogue (pages 3-8, 84-136 & 204-287).

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

November 16  
Trade Union Strategies in the United States


Paul Osterman, “Community Organizing and Employee Representation” (pages 629-649) in British Journal of Industrial Relations [2006].

Ruth Milkman, “Two Worlds of Unionism” (pages 63-80) and Karen Nussbaum, “Working Women’s Insurgent Consciousness” (pages 159-176) in Dorothy Sue Cobble, ed., The Sex of Class: Women Transforming American Labor [2007].

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].


**November 23**  
No Class (probably)

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

**November 30 & December 7**  
Discussion of Research Paper Drafts

Copies of research paper drafts due by noon the Tuesday before class.