At the conclusion of World War I, President Woodrow Wilson declared: “The question that stands at the front of all others is the question of labor.”

Nearly a century later, it is difficult to imagine a politician let alone a president asserting the importance of what was once called the “labor question.” However, recent efforts to revoke collective bargaining rights for public employees and enact right-to-work legislation remind us that labor unions still play a significant social role. Moreover, amid the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression, record levels of income inequality, and the heated political debate that has arisen around these issues, questions about the meaning of class, the status of American workers, and the future of the American Dream have become matters of profound social and political concern.

This course will seek to examine and understand the complex, multiple forces that have affected the fortunes of workers and unions over the past century. Throughout this period, Americans have vigorously debated how best to balance the rights of labor versus those of capital and more recently, determine the appropriate alignment between public and private interests. During the twentieth century, the social pendulum has shifted with regard to the labor question. Over the past three decades, it has swung sharply in the direction of support for managerial interests, a minimal regulatory role for government, a profound faith in the free market, and skepticism about the role of labor unions. Earlier in the century, however, the pendulum tilted towards government intervention in the market, support for labor unions as representatives of workers’ interests, and a belief that promoting democracy in the workplace was essential for the preservation of political democracy.

The labor question now plays out in a global context. With the flow of jobs and capital overseas, the shift from a manufacturing to a service economy, the sharp decline of union power, transformative changes in the employment relationship, the far-reaching impact of technological change, and a surge of immigration, workers face new if not unfamiliar challenges in their efforts to attain or hold on to the promise of the American Dream.

During our time together, we will consider the varied strategies and tactics used by workers to exert social influence, the impact of race, gender, and ethnic status on working-class consciousness and solidarity, the impact of technological change and managerial practice on the
process of work and the lives of workers, and the emergence of capital mobility and globalization as critical economic and social challenges. We will use a variety of primary and secondary sources to assist us in our exploration of the working-class experience, including historical monographs, fiction, film, iconography, and oral histories. These sources will enable us to consider the labor and working-class experience from a variety of perspectives and allow students to evaluate the relative merits of different kinds of historical materials.

Class Requirements

I. 4-6 page essay due April 26

II. 5-7 page essay due May 24

III. Brief Reaction Papers (due each Thursday, except for weeks when exams are due. These are 1-page reactions to our weekly readings in which you will describe which aspects of the reading made the greatest impression on you or what major themes or arguments you found most significant.

IV. Take-home final exam

Academic Honesty

Academic honesty is essential to one’s personal integrity and the integrity of the class. Plagiarism or other forms of cheating are serious offenses and are unacceptable.

Class Format

Tuesday’s class will be largely done in a lecture style. A segment of Thursday’s class will be reserved for discussion. Film clips and videos will be used extensively throughout the term. I strongly encourage your active participation in discussions and encourage you to ask questions during the lectures.

Grading

I. 4-6 page essay 20%
II. 5-7 page essay 25%
III. Final paper 40%
IV. Class participation and reaction essays 15%

Late work will be penalized by one half-letter grade for each day it is overdue.
Graduate Students

Graduate students taking this course for credit as History 510 will write a 15-20 page paper due at the end of the term as their major class assignment. A prospectus outlining your topic will due by April 19. Graduate students will also meet separately with the instructor on several occasions during the term to discuss the weekly readings.

Readings

Course readings are available in a class packet that can be purchased at the UO Bookstore.

Books for the course are available at the UO Bookstore. They are:

Thomas Bell: *Out of This Furnace*

Leon Fink: *The Maya of Morganton: Work and Community in the Nuevo New South*

Studs Terkel: *Working*

All class materials will also be placed on reserve at the Knight Library.

Class Schedule

**Week I: April 3, 5: The Labor Question at the Dawn of the Twentieth Century**

Walter Lippmann, “A Key to the Labor Movement,” from *Drift and Mastery*, pp. 77-100

Mary Van Kleeck: “Working Hours of Women in Factories,” in *Charities and Commons*, 12 pages


**Week II: April 10, 12: Workers on Offense: The Wobblies, World War I, and the Quest for Industrial Democracy**


Week III: April 17, 19: Management on Offense, Labor on Defense: the 1920s

Thomas Bell, *Out of This Furnace*, 3-208.

Week IV: April 24, 26: Glory Days: Depression, New Deal, and the Rise of Industrial Unionism

Thomas Bell, *Out of This Furnace*, 209-413.

First essay due: April 26

Week V: May 1, May 3: The Waning of the New Deal and World War II


Ruth Milkman, from *Gender at Work*, pp. 49-127.

Week VI: May 8, May 10: Mature Labor Relations and Cold War (I)


Elizabeth Fones-Wolf, from *Selling Free Enterprise: The Business Assault on Labor and Liberalism*, pp. 189-254

Week VII: May 15, May 17: Mature Labor Relations and Cold War (II)


Week VIII: May 22, May 24: New Faces, New Challenges, New Circumstances: The Sixties and Beyond (I)


Second Essay Due: May 24
Week IX: May 29, May 31: New Faces, New Challenges, New Circumstances (II)

Leon Fink, *The Maya of Morganton*, pp. 1-103.

Week X: June 5, June 7: Back to the Future: The Labor Question One Decade Into the Twenty-First Century