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.” Yet throughout the past 100 years, Americans have consistently debated how best to balance the rights of labor versus those of capital, reconcile the prerogatives of the employing class with the needs of the working class, and more recently, determine the proper 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, and a profound faith in the free market. 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 integral to the health 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, growing wage inequality, the far-reaching impact of technological change, and a surge of immigration, workers face new if not totally unfamiliar challenges in their efforts to attain or hold onto the promise of the American Dream.

This course will seek to examine and understand the complex, multiple forces that have affected the fortunes of workers and unions during the twentieth century. 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 itself, 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, memoirs, 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. 3-5 page essay due January 25
II. 5-7 page essay due February 22
III. 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.

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 will be used extensively throughout the term. Your participation in discussions, along comments and questions you have during lectures, is strongly encouraged!

Grading

I. 3-5 page essay- 20%
II. 5-7 page essay- 25%
III. Final paper- 45%
IV. Attendance and participation- 10%

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 January 25. 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 also available at the UO Bookstore. They are:


Cheri Register: Packinghouse Daughter
Readings for the course will also be on reserve at the Knight Library.

**Syllabus**

**Week One (January 9, 11): The Labor Question at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century**

**Readings: Eileen Boris and Nelson Lichtenstein (eds.), *from Major Problems in the History of American Workers***

“Helen B. Sayre Praises the Progress of Women in Industry,” 1924- pp. 170-173.
“China, Laundryman” 1929- pp. 176-177.
“Miner John Brophy Learns His Trade,” 1907- pp. 201-203.


- Film clip on the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire

**Week Two (January 16, 18): Workers on Offense: The Wobblies, World War I, and the Quest for Industrial Democracy**


- Film clip from “The Killing Floor”

**Week Three (January 23, 25): Management on Offense, Labor on Defense: the 1920s**


**First essay due January 25**

**Week Four (January 30, February 1): Glory Days: Depression, New Deal, and the Rise of Industrial Unionism**


Melvyn Dubofsky, “Not So Radical Years: Another Look at the 1930s”: pp. 304-314, in Lichtenstein and Boris.

- Clips from “The Grapes of Wrath” and PBS series on the Great Depression

**Week Five (February 6, 8): The Waning of the New Deal and World War II**


- Film clips on A Philip Randolph and Rosie the Riveter

**Week Six (February 13, 15) Mature Labor Relations and Cold War (I)**

- B. J. Widick, “The Tarnished Image of Labor,” from *Labor Today*, pp. 31-44
- Harvey Swados, “The UAW- Over the Top or Over the Hill,” from *A Radical at Large*, pp. 69-92.

**Week Seven (February 20, 22) Mature Labor Relations and Cold War (II)**

- Cheri Register: *Packinghouse Daughter*, pp. 1-129.

**Second essay due February 22**
Week Eight (February 27, March 1): New Faces, New Challenges, New Circumstances: The Sixties and Beyond (I)

- Film clip on farm workers

Week Nine (March 6, 8): New Faces, New Challenges, New Circumstances (II)


P. 196 from Rubin is missing from the packet. I will copy and provide it beforehand.
- Film clip from “At the River I Stand”

Week Ten (March 13, 15): Back to the Future: The Labor Question at the Dawn of the Twenty-First Century


Thomas L. Friedman, “Wake Up and Face the Flat Earth,” an interview with Thomas L. Friedman, Yale Global, April 18, 2005, [http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/article.print?id=1-8](http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/article.print?id=1-8).

- Film clip from “Is Wal-Mart Good for America?”