

REPORTS AND CORRESPONDENCE

Labor History at the Twenty-Second Meeting of the Social Science History Association

Andrew Diamond
University of Michigan

Lex Heerma van Voss
International Institute of Social History

Priscilla Holcomb
New School for Social Research

The Social Science History Association (SSHA) held its twenty-second annual meeting (October 16–19, 1997) in Washington, DC, a site that inspired efforts by the conference organizers to bring in panelists from the public sector who could draw links between historical research and current political issues. Whether a reflection of the intentions of the SSHA's network representatives or an indication of the scholarly direction of the organization's membership, state-centered and policy-minded approaches dominated the overall field of work presented here. Leading the way in sheer numbers were panels that addressed the role of the state in the politics of welfare and immigration/citizenship. However, not far behind were sessions examining each of the following faces of state power: criminal justice systems, interventions in labor struggles, educational policies, and public health regulations. Methodologically, the conference demonstrated a strong tendency to transcend national boundaries in constructing interpretive frameworks, as numerous sessions sought to compare research from different regions.

What forms did the project of labor history take in this setting? To begin with, if the SSHA meeting in Atlanta two years ago abounded with discussion of the idea of a crisis in labor history, the fate of the field seemed more secure this year. The SSHA Labor Network sponsored twenty-one of the conference's 176 panels in 1997, and several other sessions fielded by other networks involved topics closely related to the study of labor, narrowly and broadly defined. It appears from a survey of the work presented that the field has responded to the new intellectual and political problems associated with the increasing globalization of capital.

International Labor and Working-Class History

No. 54, Fall 1998, pp. 126–144

© 1998 International Labor and Working-Class History, Inc.

Perhaps more than any other network, the SSHA's labor historians appeared engaged in the task of connecting their scholarship to present concerns. For example, in a particularly prescient session entitled "Labor Internationalism," AFL-CIO official Joe Uehlein joined sociologist Jody Knauss (University of Wisconsin, Madison) in examining the prospects of transnational unionism in the auto industry. Knauss illuminated how the globalization of capital has placed new challenges on the labor movement by creating disparate working conditions in plants located as closely together as Detroit, Michigan, and Windsor, Ontario. Complementing these findings, Uehlein's paper argued that, given the international character of contemporary capital, the labor movement must become transnational or face its demise. In another panel indicative of this pragmatic approach, an official of the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service brought his professional experience to presentations on the role of the state in labor struggles in the United States and Brazil.

If one takes the body of labor scholarship at an SSHA conference as representative of larger analytical currents, the proliferation of such panels could signify that something of a paradigm shift is taking hold among students of labor. Aside from the four sessions that dealt with the contributions of recently published books and the notable exception of a provocative roundtable discussion, "Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Working-Class Masculinities," most of the labor panels confined their perspectives to the conditions of work and institutional struggles to change them. While perhaps more symptomatic of trends within the SSHA than within the profession as a whole, the scholarship collected here signaled a departure from the interpretive models of poststructuralism and cultural studies.

There were some exceptions. Most notable among them was the enriching discussion on Fred Cooper's pathbreaking book, *Decolonization and African Society*. Here, poststructuralism was alive and well as panelists Gay Seidman (University of Wisconsin, Madison), Ron Aminzade (University of Minnesota), and Carolyn Brown (Rutgers University) applauded Cooper's use of discourse analysis for understanding how the languages of colonial administration, particularly that of "developmental national unity," came to play a central role in the labor struggles of postcolonial Africa. Brown noted how Cooper, in placing labor at the center of the story of decolonization, points toward contacts between African and European workers, thereby paving the way for a much-needed dialogue between scholars of Europe and Africa. Aminzade criticized the book for leaving out the voices of ordinary workers, referring to the danger of inhibiting our understanding of working-class formation and collective action; and Gillian Feely-Hornik (Johns Hopkins University), drawing upon her own research on French colonial labor policy in Malagachi, suggested that scholars consider colonization as a matter of detaching unwanted labor from Europe.

The panel entitled "Struggles in Steel: The Fight for Equal Opportunity," which featured the screening of a documentary of the same name

on African-American steelworkers in Pennsylvania, offered a compelling glimpse of the kinds of histories that can elude the scope of institutional approaches to working-class history. By using some profoundly evocative interviews of former steelworkers, this film captures the emotional pain of black steelworkers whose advancement on the job was blocked by the discriminatory practices of employers. While several workers comment on the indispensability of the union, the film illuminates how employers' racism, combined with the effects of postwar deindustrialization, undermined the social mobility of a whole generation of African-American industrial workers. It was disappointing that this panel was so poorly attended. A collaborative effort by independent filmmakers Tony Buba and Ray Henderson (a former steelworker), who were on hand to lead the session, this film reveals a working-class perspective (rather than a perspective on the working class) that illustrates how seamless the connections between work, family, and community can be.

A general view of the labor studies gathered at this conference indicates that the field has evolved in response to all the talk about crisis. The turn appears to be away from cultural theory and toward the state, the unions, and the conditions of work. After all, methodologically speaking, the linguistic turn precipitated much of the notion of a crisis in the first place. Thus, a more specialized, increasingly pragmatic field of labor history appears to be emerging, a change that could potentially open an interpretive gap between the workplace and the spheres of human experience outside of it.

Workers and the City: Nineteenth Annual North American Labor History Conference

Nancy Quam-Wickham
California State University, Long Beach

Lawrence Glickman
University of South Carolina

Claudia Clark
Central Michigan University

The nineteenth annual North American Labor History Conference, held in October 1997 at Wayne State University in Detroit, was energized not only by discussions about a new labor history organization but also by excellent panels on the theme of "Workers and the City." (On the former,