

Diego Rivera, *Man at the Crossroads*, 1933

RUTGERS UNIVERSITY– SYLLABUS FALL 2025

UNITED STATES WORK & LABOR – THE GILDED AGE TO WORLD WAR II

PEOPLE AND POWER

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Office Hours: Wednesday, 2-3pm, 248 Janice Levin Hall

Course Description: Welcome to U.S. Work and Labor from the Gilded Age to World War II at Rutgers University. This course is designed to introduce you to both field of history as a discipline including specific critical thinking skills, and the content of labor studies; the people, events, and ideas that produced our world today.

The content of the course will trace labor history between the 1880s and the Second World War. This is a big expanse, and we will not be able to cover everything. Instead, we are going to focus on particular moments, themes, and ideas. As such, we will look at cultural and material factors in history, the ideological, social, cultural, political, environmental, and economic forces that shape that history. Through this we will work on developing arguments of historical causation. And above all we will be in a constant process of reading, writing, and asking questions.

Among the key questions this course asks are, why does work and labor in the United States look the way that it does? Why did the U.S. fail to create racial equality during Reconstruction? How should we understand capitalism in relation to human labor? How did the process of industrialization and urbanization impact labor in America? How have workers related to US war and empire? What role has race and gender played in shaping U.S. labor? Why is U.S. labor history so violent?

With these questions, learning the methodology of history is important. Interrogating sources, developing analysis, and crafting your ideas are skills that take practice. They are the building blocks of critical thinking. They will undoubtedly help you in your future course work as a university student, but more than this, the process of history helps us develop essential life skills. Ultimately, the process of historical discovery is also a process of self-

discovery. It is a process of discovering your own ideas about our world, about how we got here, and what we can do to make it a better place. Therefore my hope is that as better historical and critical thinkers, you'll be happier, stronger, and more engaged social and historical agents.

In addition to a substantial reading load, you will be writing essays based on primary source materials. Participation and engagement in class discussion is vitally important; the expectation is that every one of you has something to contribute, and the more you engage in the work of the class, the richer the class discussions will be. To that end there will be weekly reading responses, in class discussion sessions, and two argumentative essay exams.

Finally, if we are to succeed in our goals for this course we must work together to create a collaborative, inclusive and respectful learning culture. I look forward to getting to know you and working together this year.

Goals

This course covers several School of Arts and Sciences (SAS), School of Management and Labor Relations (SMLR), and Labor Studies and Employment Relations (LSER) Department learning objectives.

Rutgers Core - you will be able to:

- HST-1: Explain the development of some aspect of a society or culture over time.
- SCL-1: Understand different theories about human culture, social identity, economic entities, political systems, and other forms of social organization.
- WCR: Communicate complex ideas effectively, in standard written English, to a general audience, and respond effectively to editorial feedback from peers, instructors, and/or supervisors through successive drafts and revision.
- WCD: Communicate effectively in modes appropriate to a discipline or area of inquiry; evaluate and critically assess sources and use the conventions of attribution and citation correctly; and analyze and synthesize information and ideas from multiple sources to generate new insights.

School of Management and Labor Relations - you will be able to:

- I: Communicate effectively at a level and in modes appropriate to an entry-level professional.

- IV: Demonstrate an understanding of relevant theories and apply them given the background context of a particular work situation.

Labor Studies and Employment Relations Department - you will be able to:

- 1: Demonstrate an understanding of the perspectives, theories and concepts in the field of labor and employment relations.
- 4: Make an argument using contemporary or historical evidence.
- To develop strong writing and critical thinking skills
- To develop the practice of asking productive, conceptual questions
- To learn how to participate effectively and contribute meaningfully to class discussion
- To understand the work of historical scholarship
- To understand labor history as diverse, contested, and nonlinear
- To be able to discuss and debate the structures of class in American society
- To have an introductory knowledge of class as historically contingent and a social construction

Expectations

- To come to class each day prepared and ready to engage in the work
- To turn in all work complete and on time
- To provide fellow students with helpful feedback and constructive criticism
- To take responsibility for one's own learning, and our collective learning environment
- To be respectful of others' views even if different from your own

Absences

I want to make special allowances for you all if you're struggling with mental health, dealing with life outside of the classroom, or just need a break given the pace and severity of events unfolding around us. You must contact me *in advance* and get an agreement in writing for these allowances, and they will be made on a case by case basis. Additionally, if you need help or want advice I'm here for you. Please reach out to talk anytime.

We are going to have to work extra hard to create a fun, friendly, and harmonious class. This will take work from me, but also extra work from you, to be friendly and respectful, to get to know your fellow classmates and instructors, to be bold and to share together in our class sessions. We are all getting through this together, let's talk about it and support one another as we work towards our own learning development.

Essays

There will be two short essay exams over the course of the term. Each essay will ask you to craft a unique argument using class readings only. All work will be completed in class. The process of editing, revising, and rethinking can and should involve colleagues and teachers. More information about the essays will be provided during the term.

Weekly Analysis and Argumentation Assignments

A central component of this course is discussion. It is important that our conversations revolve around your own questions and not just mine. As you are reading the material, not only should you be sorting through the ideas in the text, the way in which those ideas are expressed, and in general coming to an understanding of the text, but you should also be asking questions: what is the central argument or idea from a text? How does this writer's ideas compare with another's? What does the author's argument reveal about the values and attitudes of the time? What is confusing about this text, what is problematic, what is beautiful? How does this text inform our understanding of the historical period we are studying? Bringing one or two of those questions to the table in class discussion is your responsibility as a member of our community of scholars. To help facilitate this process, you will have weekly reading and discussion assignments to be completed in class

Finally, in all of our class time the use of all electronic devices is not allowed, this includes laptops, tablets, and cellphones. The only exception to this policy is documented medical or learning needs.

Plagiarism and Academic Integrity

Please note, I do not accept late work. This means that tardiness to class, if you miss the opening assignment, you will not be able to make it up. Please be sure to be on time.

The process of learning is hard, and sometimes students are tempted to take shortcuts in the form of plagiarism. However, any student who uses words, ideas, or sources without proper citation will be given a failing grade and reported for further action in line with the University's policies. This includes using the work of AI generated essay content in any way, including brainstorming, drafting, or writing by AI technologies. We will talk more about what constitutes plagiarism and how to avoid it in class.

Break Policy

We will take regular breaks as part of class time. These breaks are provided for ten minutes at the end of the first and second hour of class. Because of these scheduled break time there are no "up and down" privileges in this class. Students are asked to come to class prepared, meaning, ready to participate in course content in 60 minute uninterrupted sequences. Please use the restroom before class and during these designated break periods.

Use of the Canvas site

We will be making use of Canvas, an on-line system that allows for easy transmission and organization of assignments and other materials. You will be sent an invitation to join the site, and thereafter will have access to the History Canvas. You will turn in work and check the site for information. However, most of our communication will be via email or in person.

Assignments and Grading Policies

- 22% In Class Assignments
- 32% Essay Exam 1
- 46% Essay Exam 2

Textbooks

Course Packet available as pdf on the Canvas site

Class Schedule and Assignments

Week 1

Course Introduction: From Labor to Class in the Industrial Era

Central Question: What is history? What is labor, work, and class?

Readings: Mintz, Bowdoin, Birkenstein etc.

Assignment: Due, Weekly Reading Response

Week 2

Age of Chaos: The Great Strike of 1877

Central Question: What caused the great railroad strike of 1877?

Readings: Excerpts from Brecher, Jeremy. *Strike!* Expanded, Revised, Updated edition. Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2014.

Primary Source medley: Albert Parsons on 1877, B & O Workers Manifesto, Clark on the Great Strike, Harper's on the Great Strike, Women's Warfare 1877

Week 3

Age of Chaos: The Great Strike of 1877

Central Question: What caused the great railroad strike of 1877?

Readings: Excerpts from Brecher, Jeremy. *Strike!* Expanded, Revised, Updated edition. Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2014.

Primary Source medley: Albert Parsons on 1877, B & O Workers Manifesto, Clark on the Great Strike, Harper's on the Great Strike, Women's Warfare 1877

Week 4

Immigrant workers

Central Question: What explains the variety of immigrant worker's experiences?

Readings: Excerpts from Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans*, (Little, Brown and Company, 1998); Either "Gan Saan Haak" or the "Tide of Turbans" chapter, Congress debates Chinese Exclusion,

Week 5

Working Class Women and Triangle Shirtwaist

Central Questions: What explains the conditions working class women faced in the 1890s?

Readings: Excerpts from Argersinger, Jo. *The Triangle Fire: A Brief History with Documents*. Third edition. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2016.

excerpts from Boris, Eileen, and Nelson Lichtenstein, eds. *Major Problems in the History of American Workers*. Wadsworth, Paperback, 2002.

"Working Her Fingers to the Bone: Agnes Nestor's Story." <https://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5728>.

Week 6

Race, Culture, and Property

Central Question: What explains the rise of jazz and the blues the US in early 20th century?

Readings: Wald, "Jelly Roll Blues," Thomas Brothers, "Louis Armstrong's New Orleans,"
Traditional Work Songs, Library of Congress

Week 7

First Essay in class mid term exam

Week 8

Paterson, New Jersey

Central Question: What explains the contours of the struggle in Paterson, New Jersey?

Readings: "Satan's Dark Mills," excerpt from Dubofsky, Melvyn. *We Shall Be All: A History of the Industrial Workers of the World*. Abridged ed. The Working Class in American History. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000.

Flynn and Haywood remember the Paterson Strike

The Pageant as a form of propaganda

Week 9

World War I: Repression and Migration

Central Question: What role does war and empire play in relation to black worker's movements?

Readings: Excerpts from Reich, Steven A. *A Working People: A History Of African American Workers Since Emancipation*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2015; selected primary sources; "Great Steel Strike - Document - Gale eBooks." Crystal Eastman, "Now We Can Begin," *Liberator*

Week 10

Progressivism in the 1920s

Central Question: Was Progressivism progressive? What explains the rise, and failures of the Progressive Movement?

Readings:

Dearstyne, Bruce W. *Progressive New York: Change and Reform in the Empire State, 1900-1920: A Reader*. 1st ed. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2024.

; Jane Addams, from *Twelve Years at Hull House*; Simkhovitch, "The City Worker,;" Van Kleeck, "Protecting Women Workers"

Week 11

The Great Depression and New Deal

Central Question: What explains the advent of the New Deal?

Readings:

DOL. "Chapter 5: Americans in Depression and War By Irving Bernstein.;" *With Babies and Banners: Story of the Women's Emergency Brigade*, Documentary, 1979; Preamble to the Wagner Act; "General Motors Recognizes United Auto Workers - Document - Gale eBooks."

Week 12

World War II

Central Question: Why did divisions in the American working class persist during the war?

Readings: excerpts from Archibald, Katherine. *Wartime Shipyard: A STUDY IN SOCIAL DISUNITY*. 2nd edition. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006.

A woman's work in a California Warplane factory

Week 13

Writing Conferences

Week 14

Second Paper in class

Week 15

Final Essay in class exam