

RUTGERS UNIVERSITY– SYLLABUS Fall 2026

37:575:192:MA

YOUR JOB – ALL LABOR HAS DIGNITY

Instructor: Dr. John Lavin

JL2600@connect.rutgers.edu

Cell: 610-724-1404 (talk or text)



Depicted above: Diego Rivera (1886 – 1957) cast workers in vibrant colors, dignifying employees in Mexico and the United States who give society food, transportation, shelter, and safety. Rivera captured moments that convey compassion for working people who deserve the sense of empathy and solidarity at the premise of our course.

Course Description: Welcome to this *special topics* labor studies course for students who have paying jobs. This one-unit course, “Your Job: All Labor has Dignity,” is designed to help you reflect on your work experience. Labor defines all that we do. From the work it takes to being a student, a caretaker, or in our paid work, labor is force that gives our lives meaning. We will be starting from the premise expressed by Martin Luther King, Jr in support of striking sanitation workers in 1968, that “all labor has dignity,” and we will be using this heuristic to think about how it may relate to your experience.

The content of the course will cover the work in your paid employment, and you must be engaged in paid work of some type in order to enroll in this class. Paid work is a huge topic, and we will not be able to cover everything. Instead, we are going to focus on particular moments, themes, and ideas of today’s work experience. As such, we draw on the words, ideas, and images of others who have thought about work before us. We will be asking whether and how our work experiences relate to others, how we understand our own work, and why we find ourselves faced with these circumstances. Above all, we will be asking questions of ourselves, the texts, and our experiences.

Among the key questions this course asks are:

- *Why does work and labor in the United States look the way that it does today?*
- *What do we experience in our day-to-day work lives and why?*
- *How does your personal life and individual experience relate to your work life?*
- *What might it take to change, improve, or modify our working conditions?*

With these questions in mind, we will not only explore your working life, but we will also rely on articles, poems, memes, artwork, and ideas from others about work. 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 analysis 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 critical thinkers, you’ll be happier, stronger, and more engaged social agents.

Each week course work will engage with one source, whether a text or film, a short video from me, and a written response from about your work week and ideas from the class. And, 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.

It is important to note “that all work submitted in a course, academic research, or other activity is the student’s own and created without the aid of impermissible technologies, materials, or collaborations (Rutgers University Code of Conduct). Thus, the use of Chat GPT and similar technologies is not permitted in composing essays for our class. Our Canvas site’s policy on use of artificial intelligence will be reviewed and confirmed by our learning community during Week Two of our course.

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.

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

- Analyze and synthesize information and ideas from multiple sources to generate new insights
- Use evidence-based analysis to appraise the validity of various hypotheses, theories, and approaches to workplace issues
- Analyze the degree to which forms of human difference shape a person’s experience of and perspectives on work
- Analyze a contemporary global issue in their field from a multi-disciplinary and intersectional perspective
- Analyze issues of social justice related to work across local and global contexts (LSER)
- Develop capabilities to work and lead in a multicultural and diverse environment Labor Studies and Employment Relations Department - you will be able to:
 - Assess and critique relevant evidence and research findings
 - Analyze the degree to which forms of human difference shape a person’s experience of work
 - Analyze contemporary global issues using multiple perspectives
 - Analyze issues of social justice both in the U.S. and globally

Expectations

- To turn in all work complete and on time
- 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

Life Under Covid

This school year as in past years, we face the additional challenge of life under the coronavirus. 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.

The covid challenge also means that 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.

Culminating Assignment

There will be one culminating assignment due at the end of the term. This assignment will ask you to reflect on your work experience this semester and use the ideas from class to analyze that experience. The culminating assignment could be a short (2 page) essay, a LinkedIn post, a video reflection, a work of visual art, or something else of your choice. More information about the assignment will be provided during the term.

Weekly Reading and Participation Assignments

It is important that our conversations revolve around your own questions and not just mine. Each week we will explore a text, either reading, visual or audio, and I will ask you to relate it to your work experience. You will be asked to consider whether the ideas presented in class apply to your job? Why are why not? What explains these conditions? Most importantly, can you formulate a question each week about course material and your job and try to answer it?

These assignments will be due on the canvas discussion board and will require an initial post as well as a response to another student.

Plagiarism and Academic Integrity

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 content. Suspicion of AI or plagiarized work will result in a failing grade. We can talk more about what constitutes plagiarism and how to avoid it.

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 Canvas. You will turn in work and check the site for information. I do not accept late work without prior agreement.

Assignments and Grading Policies

Final course grades may be registered on a pass / fail basis.

- 60% Discussion boards
- 40% Culminating project

Textbooks

Course articles available as pdf on the Canvas site Class Schedule and Assignments

Week 1 – Our Jobs

Course Introduction: Contemporary Labor

Central Question: What is labor and work post pandemic?

Assignment Nick Reynolds, "Life for American Workers," *Newsweek*, June 1, 2023; Michael Beyea Reagan, excerpts on the labor theory of value.

Due Saturday, September 5th -- Weekly Response Discussion Post

Week 2 – Service Work

Assignment: Michael Collins, “The Post-Industrial Service Economy isn’t working for the Middle Class,” *Industry Week*, Aug. 11, 2023; “Dolores Dante: Waitress” in Harvey Pekar, *Studs Terkel’s Working: A Graphic Adaptation*, (New York: The New Press, 2009).

Due Saturday, September 12th – Weekly Response Discussion Post

Week 3 -- Unions and Race

Assignment: Josh Bivens, “Unions Promote Racial Equity,” *Economic Policy Institute*, July 31, 2023, <https://www.epi.org/publication/unions-promote-racial-equity/>.

Due Saturday, September 19th – Weekly Response Discussion Post

Week 4 -- Climate Change

Assignment: Kim Kelly, “Climate Disaster is a Labor Issue,” *Teen Vogue*, May 23, 2019

Due Saturday, September 26th – Weekly Response Discussion Post

Week 5 -- Labor & Social Media

Assignment: AllThingsLabor TikTok account

Due Saturday, October 3rd – Weekly Response Discussion Post

Week 6 – Worker Literature

Assignment: Poems from Xu Lizhi and Philip Levine Assignment; “Cyborg Legs,” from Steve Orth, *The Life & Times of Steve Orth* (Dogpark Collective, 2020).

Due Saturday, October 10th – Weekly Response Discussion Post

Assignment: Due Wednesday, October 14th – Culminating project