

PERSPECTIVES ON LABOR STUDIES

Rutgers University

Spring 2025

SYLLABUS

Class Meetings: Rutgers Canvas (<https://canvas.rutgers.edu>).

Mode of Instruction: Asynchronous online.

Weeks start on **Tuesday**.

Office Hours: I'm always happy to do office hours if you have an extra question or want to talk about the course content. Send me an email with a couple times that would work for you and we'll set a time. The zoom link we'd use for the office hours is [here](#).

Instructor:

- Eric Blanc (eric.blanc@rutgers.edu)

Course Overview:

This course plays a central role in the labor studies and employment relations major as the only required advanced class. It engages students in critically analyzing the main theoretical propositions of the field, covering constitutive intellectual traditions, historical trajectories, and cutting-edge literature.

In line with the title of the course, the field draws from a variety of *perspectives*, ranging from classics on political economy to the modern social sciences, such as sociology, political science, and economics. This course examines how the field of labor studies and employment relations brings these different lines of inquiry together around a set of core thematic concerns, analytical commitments, and normative convictions. Class discussions interrogate social theories in their historical contexts and evaluate their impact, revealing them as central drivers of how the world of work is governed.

As students in this class examine some of the big questions of the field, they will gain increased proficiency in important skills: reading for analytical insight, debating ideas, and communicating with others. From the theoretical to the practical, students should be able to use what they learn in this class for whatever their next steps might be, including making valuable contributions across workplaces, leading change in society, and pursuing further academic study.

Learning Objectives: The student is able to...

School of Management and Labor Relations

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

Department of Labor Studies and Employment Relations

- Demonstrate an understanding of the perspectives, theories, and concepts in the field of labor and employment relations. (Goal 1)

Additional course objectives from the instructor

Identify core concepts of the field of labor studies & employment relations.

- Apply those concepts to understanding contemporary developments in work.
- Synthesize information from multiple sources to generate new insights

How will you learn in this online course?

Most weeks you will:

- Review text, PowerPoint slides, and videos provided by the instructor(s) on the page in the online shell. These are like lectures but much shorter.
- Read, view, and listen to theorists and analyses offering a variety of perspectives. There will be an emphasis on reading, but in many weeks you will also have the opportunity to review a video or videos, or listen to an audio file.
- Participate in threaded discussions with other students, posting at least 3 times a week. Alternatively, you might be asked to complete a writing assignment, group project, quiz, or exam.
- Read a weekly message from the professor (posted in Announcements).

Evaluation:

Grading Component	Points	Percent of Total Grade
Introductions (week 1)	50	5%
Discussion Forums (7 discussion forums in weeks 2, 4, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13) - 50 points each	350	35%
Pop Quiz	50	5%
Podcast Forum (week 6)	50	5%

Midterm Exam (week 6)	250	25%
Final Exam (weeks 14 & 15)	250	25%
Total	1000	100%

Points have no “absolute meaning,” – in the end, the professor will use judgment in translating points into grades for the course. *For example, typically a B+ is 87-89.9 points, but the professors may decide to use some other range of points.*

Plagiarism and use of AI — Please read closely

In a class like this, it is very easy for me to tell when you haven’t done the readings and are just copying (with slight modifications) what you’ve found online and/or through an AI program like ChatGPT. If you try to do this, *you will get caught!* (Since ChatGPT and similar AI programs provide the same general answers to your fellow students this semester and in previous semesters, I’ve seen dozens of times exactly what attempts to pass off AI as your own work looks like.) If you try to skip the readings and rely instead on answers found online, I will have to [report you](#) to University.

As noted in [Rutgers Academic Integrity Policy 10.2.13](#), the principles of academic integrity require that students make sure that all submitted coursework be “the student’s own and created without the aid of impermissible technologies, materials, or collaborations.”

The use of any form of artificial intelligence tools for this class is strictly prohibited. Using these tools will result in you receiving 0 points on the assignment/test, and could potentially lead to failing the course. Don’t try it! I will be using the latest AI detection instruments to check for this.

Keep current – avoid being late!

This is an interactive class – you need to keep current in the reading and forums so that you can interact with others in the class. An online class is somewhat flexible to fit your schedule, but you are responsible for managing your time and for getting online each week no matter what else is going on in your life.

You should inform the professor of serious personal emergencies that arise – for instance, hospitalization that makes it impossible to get online. A trip associated with your job is not such an emergency, nor is a problem with your personal computer. There are many ways to get online in hotels and in campus computing facilities.

Disability:

Rutgers University welcomes students with disabilities into all University’s educational programs. To receive consideration for reasonable accommodations, a student with a

disability must contact the appropriate disability services office at the campus where you are officially enrolled, participate in an intake interview, and provide documentation: <https://ods.rutgers.edu/students/documentation-guidelines>.

If the documentation supports your request for reasonable accommodations, your campus's disability services office will provide you with a Letter of Accommodations. Please share this letter with your instructor and discuss the accommodations with them as early in your courses as possible. To begin this process, please complete the Registration form on the ODS web site at: <https://ods.rutgers.edu/students/registration-form>.

Course Organization:

The course is set up in four units.

- **Unit I: The Promise of Labor Studies & Employment Relations** (weeks 1-2). This unit interrogates the “value proposition” of the field, clarifying core thematic concerns and central theoretical propositions.
- **Unit II: Big Ideas about the Economy and Work** (weeks 3-7). This unit tracks the development of thinking about the economy and work by exploring classic ideas and the historical contexts that gave rise to them.
- **Unit III: Ideas and Institutions** (weeks 8-10). This unit more closely explores the interplay between theorizing on employment relations and the governance of work.
- **Unit IV: Labor (Studies) in Contemporary Society** (weeks 11-14). This unit engages contemporary questions in labor studies to provide further depth to earlier discussions and encourage student to reflect on ways they might be able to leverage the lessons from the course in their respective lives.

Discussion Posts:

Discussion posts are a big part of your grade and it's important to take them seriously! This is the main way I can tell you've actually done the readings. As I noted above, it's pretty obvious when you've just skimmed the readings or googled (or Chat GPT'ed) the topic online, so it's important to be as specific as possible in your posts and to **cite separately at least two different page numbers** (or, in videos/podcasts, two different times) *relevant to the question* and to show me you've done the readings. If you try to get through this class without doing the readings and demonstrating to me that you've done so, you won't pass!

Topics and Assignments:

Unit I: The Promise of Labor Studies & Employment Relations

Week 1: You and Your Major (January 21-27)

Democracy Now!. 2022. "200 Starbucks & Counting: Barista Jaz Brisack Says Union Busting Can't Stop Worker solidarity." Video.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qsa2sOrEXcQ>. (6:30 min.)

Jaz Brisack. 2022. "Labor and Freedom." *Dissent*, Fall. (3 pages)

Aj-jen Poo. 2019. "The Work that Makes All Other Work Possible." Ted Talk.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JqcDzptviFw> (16:01 min.)

Patrick Litré. 2016. "The Role of the Chief Human Resources Officer in a Transformation."

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1_vvXKmhZ8o (1:54 min.)

Assignment: Introductions to Learning Community

Week 2: A Contemporary Take on Labor Studies (January 28-February 3)

Tobias Schulze-Cleven and Todd E. Vachon. 2021. "Revaluing Work(ers) for Democracy and Sustainability." In Schulze-Cleven and Vachon, eds. *Revaluing Work(ers)*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. READ PAGES 3-17 ONLY (i.e., SKIP 18-26).

Tobias Schulze-Cleven. 2021. "Beyond Market Fundamentalism: A Labor Studies Perspective on the Future of Work." In Schulze-Cleven and Vachon, eds. *Revaluing Work(ers)*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. READ PAGES 34-47 ONLY (i.e., SKIP 27-33 and 48-52).

Assignment: Discussion Forum #1

Unit II: Big Ideas About the Economy and Work

Week 3: Liberalism and Markets (February 4 –10)

Robert Heilbroner. 1999. *The Worldly Philosophers* (rev. 7th Ed.). New York: Touchstone, excerpt of chapter on Smith (pp. 50-63).

Adam Smith. 1991 [1776]. *The Wealth of Nations*. Buffalo: Prometheus Book, chapters 1-2 (pp. 109-121).

John Cassidy. 2011. "The Demand Doctor." *New Yorker*, October 3. (17 pages)

John Lanchester. 2014. *How to Speak Money*. New York: Norton, excerpt (pp. 52-61).

Assignment: Do all the readings. There's no discussion forum this week because I want to give you all enough time to really dig into the readings. You'll still be expected to know this material for the tests, fyi!

Week 4: Marxist Perspectives on Capitalism (Feb 11-Feb 17)

PBS. 2005. "Marx and Engels." Excerpt from Documentary "Heaven on Earth."
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gPLbjTrHHvA>

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. 1848. *The Communist Manifesto*. Very short excerpts (pp. 14-21, p. 34).

Leo Panitch. 2009. "Thoroughly Modern Marx." *Foreign Policy* (May/June): 140-145.

David Harvey. 2010. "RSA Animate: Crises of Capitalism."
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qOP2V_np2c0

Assignment: Discussion Forum #2

Week 5: Tensions in Managing and Organizing Work (Feb 18 – Feb 24)

Frederick Winslow Taylor. 1947. *Scientific Management*. New York: Harper and Row, 39-73.

Harry Braverman. 1974. *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Monthly Review, part of chapter 3 (pp. 78-83) and part of chapter 5 (pp. 124-131).

Richard Edwards, Michael Reich, and Thomas Weisskopf. 1978. *The Capitalist System* (2nd Ed.). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 265-268 (“Alienation”).

Arlie Russell Hochschild. 1983. “Exploring the Managed Heart.” In *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 3-12.

Assignment: TBA

Week 6: Political Economy and Social Democracy (Feb 25-March 3)

Robert Kuttner. 2014. “Karl Polanyi Explains It All.” *The American Prospect*, April 15. (14 pages)

Karl Polanyi. 2001 [1944]. “The Self-Regulating Market and the Fictitious Commodities: Labor, Land, and Money.” In *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*. Boston: Beacon Press. (7 pages)

PBS. 2005. “Eduard Bernstein and a Crisis of Faith.” Excerpt from Documentary “Heaven on Earth.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1HULP8WHgVs&t=1456s> (3:12 minutes, starting around minute 24 min)

Assignment: Podcast Forum

Week 7: Midterm Exam (March 4 – March 10)

Assignment: Midterm Exam

Unit III: Comparing Labor Movements

Week 8: Spring Break & Comparative Labor Relations: What Explains Union Growth and Decline? (March 11-March 24)

Jelle Visser, Susan Hayter, and Rosina Gammarano. 2017. "Trends in Collective Bargaining Coverage: Stability, Erosion or Decline?" *International Labour Organization*, pp. 1-8.

John Schmitt and Alexandra Mitukiewicz. 2012. "Politics Matter: Changes in Unionization Rates in Rich Countries, 1960–2010." *Industrial Relations Journal*, pp. 261-277

Bruce Western. 1997. *Between Class and Market: Postwar Unionization in the Capitalist Democracies*, pp. 3-9, 66-80.

Assignment: Discussion Forum #3

Week 9: US Labor in Comparative Perspective: What Makes the US Exceptional? (March 25 – March 31)

Vox. 2022. "The Fall (and Rise?) of Unions in the US." Video.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KtxITylE73U>

John Godard. 2009. "The Exceptional Decline of the American Labor Movement." *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, pp. 82-103.

Barry Eidlin. 2016. "Why Is There No Labor Party in the United States? Political Articulation and the Canadian Comparison, 1932 to 1948." *American Sociological Review*, pp. 1-20.

Assignment: Discussion Forum #4

Week 10: Labor, the State, and Capital in the Global South (April 1- April 7)

Vivek Chibber. 2015. "Development from Below," *Jacobin*.

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/11/development-state-korea-india-nehru-postcolonial-global-south-chibber>

Mark Anner. 2015. "Labor Control Regimes and Worker Resistance in Global Supply Chains."

Vidu Badigannavar, John Kelly, and Manik Kumar. 2021. "Turning the Tide? Economic Reforms and Union Revival in India." *Industrial Relations Journal*, pp. 364-382.

Assignment: Discussion Forum #5

Unit IV: Labor (Studies) in Contemporary Society

Week 11: Gender, Social Reproduction, and Capitalist Crises (April 8-April 14)

Nancy Fraser. 2022. Interview with *Deutschlandfunk* about her Benjamin Lectures. Podcast.

Nancy Fraser. 2016. "Contradictions of Capital and Care." *New Left Review* 100 (July-August): 99-117.

Cathy Cohen. 1997. "Punks, Bulldaggers, Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 3(4): 437-465. READ PAGES 439-457 ONLY.

Assignment: Discussion Forum #6

Week 12: Race and Class (April 15- April 21)

Kara Voght. 2020. "Is It Race or Class? Darrick Hamilton Showed Bernie the Answer." *Mother Jones*, February 27.

Herbert Hill. 1996. "The Problem of Race in American Labor History." *Reviews in American History* 24(2): 189-208.

Robin D.G. Kelley. 2018. "What Is Racial Capitalism and Why Does It Matter?" Katz Distinguished Lecture in the Humanities part of "Capitalism and Comparative Racialization," a 2017-2018 John E. Sawyer Seminar on the Comparative Study of Cultures.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=REo_gHlpvJc

Assignment: No assignment this week.

Week 13: Collective Action Today (April 22-April 28)

Marilyn Sneiderman and Stephen Lerner. 2022. "Making Hope and History Rhyme: A New Worker Movement from the Shell of the Old." *New Labor Forum*, December.

Chris Brooks. 2022. "How Amazon and Starbucks Workers Are Upending the Organizing Rules." *In These Times*, May 31.

Erica Smiley & Sarita Gupta. 2022. "Closing Fireside: The Future We Need with Sarita Gupta & Erica Smiley." Center for Transformative Action.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UkflNQZxw7k>

Assignment: Discussion Forum #7

Week 14/15: Review and Final Exam (April 29 – May 10)

Assignment: Final Exam due May 10