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IWS briefing, Winter 2005 Volume 5 Issue 1

Abstract

[Excerpt] A newsletter on workplace issues and research from the School of Industrial and Labor Relations at Cornell University.

Keywords

ILR, Institute for Workplace Studies, IWS, labor, market, employee, managers, culture, class, political, social, Jefferson Cowie, women, union, AFL, Ileen DeVault, Samuel Bacharach, William Sonnenstuhl, R. Brinkley
Smithers Institute for Alcohol-Related Workplace

Comments

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IN THIS ISSUE

- 1 Culture and Class
- 1 Workplace Series
- 2 Keeping Women in Line
- 2 Journalism Series
- 3 Challenges Persist
- 3 Smithers Fellows

Institute for Workplace Studies

A newsletter on
workplace issues
and research from
the School of
Industrial and
Labor Relations at
Cornell University

CORNELL

'70s Culture and Class Concerns

IMAGINE WHAT YOUR RESEARCH STRATEGY MIGHT BE if you were interested in the transformation of working class politics during the 1970s: watch lots of movies (*Saturday Night Fever*, *Norma Rae*, and *9 to 5* for starters), listen to golden oldies (Bruce Springsteen, Merle Haggard, and Lynyrd Skynyrd come to mind), maybe rummage around for a few strands of beads or browse the local flea market for a discarded hard hat.

Sound fanciful? Perhaps. But not to Jefferson Cowie, associate professor of labor history at ILR. Since 2000, Prof. Cowie has been mining cultural artifacts of that not-so-long-ago decade to understand how and why working class consciousness ceased revolving around collective bargaining, pay, and labor rights and instead lurched toward an identity rooted in whiteness, patriarchy, guns, and faith. Anchoring this project are the long hours Prof. Cowie has also spent trolling the historical materials found in presidential archives, union documents, and national and regional newspapers.

"The '70s is the most important and least studied period of the post-World War II era," he explains. "It's the other bookend to the '30s, when all the things built up before the war began to fall apart."

A confluence of events — the failure of labor law reform, racial backlash against civil rights gains, a stagnant economy burdened by inflation, dissension over the Vietnam war, and cynicism towards government — drained economics from the notion of class. With a strong push from an increasingly assertive and sophisticated political right, that vacuum was quickly filled by a cultural conservatism that permeates American society to this day. "Under (then-President) Nixon's leadership, the right waged a cohesive and well-coordinated campaign to win the hearts and minds of blue collar workers," Prof. Cowie says. "The goal was to build a new majority to replace the old FDR coalition. White males were the key."

The ideas, concerns, and conflicts that roiled the political and social scene quickly seeped into popular culture. Artists working in a variety of media struggled with the contradictions inherent in what they regarded as core values and what they perceived as the emerging cultural dynamic. "It was a politically charged decade," Prof. Cowie notes. "To be meaningful, artists had to deal with issues."

Did they ever. High on Prof. Cowie's list of engaged creative types are "new left" movie directors and scriptwriters who focused on working-class themes. Against the backdrop of Vietnam, they voiced their anger at blue-collar workers' reluctance to support the anti-war movement. In *Easy Rider*, for example, the working class is metaphorically indicted through the actions of politically reactionary rednecks who kill motorcycle-riding hippies. Filmmakers' imaginations were also captured by the drudgery and hierarchical oppression of work and its destructive effect on social relations. *Blue Collar*, a dark, cynical drama set in a factory modeled on a General Motors assembly plant depicts the rapid transformation from idealized working class solidarity to violent

continued on page 2

Schedule Announced for 2005 Workplace Series

In honoring the memory of two eminent and long-time ILR faculty members who recently passed away, the **Institute for Workplace Studies** 2005 Workplace Colloquium Series will feature a broad-ranging look at critical issues affecting the contemporary workplace. Prof. Maurice Neufeld, a founder of the school and primary architect of its first curriculum, taught labor history and comparative labor movements and remained an active researcher long after his retirement in 1976. His colleague, Prof. John Windmuller, joined ILR in 1951 and put his attention to the study of comparative and international industrial relations and to forging a link between comparative political economy and "corporatism."

This year, the colloquium series will consist of three evening sessions. Sarosh Kuruvilla, professor of comparative industrial relations and director of Cornell's Southeast Asia Program, will speak on March 17 about the development of India's outsourcing industry. On April 21, Harry Katz, Jack Sheinkman Professor of Collective Bargaining, will lead a panel discussion on public sector bargaining. Martha Sherman, vice president and organizational development consultant at JPMorganChase, will guide another panel in a critical discussion of human resource practices on May 19.

Check www.ilr.cornell.edu/iws or contact Katie Briggs at (212)340-7931 or kb41@cornell.edu for details.

Keeping the Women in Line

THESE DAYS IT'S COMMONPLACE to see men and women walk the picket line together. And while women may be less prominent than their male colleagues, there's no discounting or ignoring the role women play in modern day unions.

But what is true now was not so true back then. Back in the days, that is, when gender was as deep a divide in the labor movement as craft and skill, when women were barely acknowledged as vital participants in economic life, let alone regarded as battle-ready troops in the ongoing tussle between labor and capital. And yet, in the hundreds of strikes that were mounted in the waning years of the 19th century and the dawn of the 20th, Ileen DeVault, associate professor of labor history at ILR, managed to identify more than 400 instances in which men and women joined forces to protest a variety of perceived injustices.

"Men and women were united apart," Prof. DeVault explains, echoing the title of her recent book, *United Apart: Gender and the Rise of Craft Unionism* (2004. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press), in which she closely analyzed 40 mixed-gender strikes. "Industry was built on the segregation of labor by sex," she says, "and there was need for

male jobs and female jobs. But to have a successful strike, you had to find a way to bring everyone together."

And so the unions did, more or less. Relying on detailed data published by the Bureau of Labor Statistics in 1894, microfilm of local newspapers, industry journals, and copies of *The American Federationist* (the monthly magazine published by the American Federation of Labor, a.k.a. the AFL), Prof. DeVault focused on strikes that occurred in boot and shoe manufacturing, clothing production, textiles, and tobacco — the four industries that employed 85% of female manufacturing workers. She found that strikes brought to the surface the gender-based tensions that were otherwise glossed over on the shop floor. But the friction was not dealt with overtly; it either exploded or simmered in the background. And the longer the strike, the greater its effect on the outcome. Successful strikes were usually short, Prof. DeVault says, while lengthy walkouts invariably imploded.

After developing her case studies, Prof. DeVault concluded that the craft union affiliates of the AFL had a complicated attitude toward, and relationship with, women workers. Craft unions were organized along strict occupational lines, and men and women rarely performed the same work. Only men were trained as skilled craftsmen while women were assigned tasks their male co-workers and bosses considered unskilled. This division of labor resulted in separate men's and women's unions and the corollary assertion by male union members and leaders that they need not organize unskilled female workers. The women, however, were undeterred. Shunted off to the side, they relied on their own resources and developed their own leaders. In this, the AFL

continued on page 4

New Journalism Series

THE IWS IS INTRODUCING a new professional development program for journalists that will begin in early 2005. Focused on work, employment, and the workplace, the series will deepen reporters' understanding of, and knowledge about, the world of work. Sessions will be led by full-time ILR faculty and will focus on topics ranging from India's response to the influx of outsourced jobs to the effect of aging on the American workplace, the role of union mergers in the revitalization of the labor movement, and discrimination and workers' rights issues raised in recent class action lawsuits. For details, contact Maralyn Edid at (607)255-4380 or me16@cornell.edu. ■

Culture and Class

continued from page 1

interracial hatred on the shop floor. The movie *Joe* explores the confusion and hostility felt by working class whites who watched from the sidelines as affirmative action and "liberal guilt" netted jobs and government grants for African-Americans.

Other artists showed their political stripes in equally potent ways, Prof. Cowie says. Carroll O'Connor, the actor who played the stereotyped bigot Archie Bunker on the television show *All in the Family*, refused to cross a picket line when electricians on the set went out on strike. Rock musicians like Bruce Springsteen and country music stars like Johnny Paycheck sang about workers and jobs, disillusionment and the American dream. Even the Bee Gees, whose spirited tunes graced many a disco hall, sang of alienation and hopelessness tempered by resigned acceptance.

By decade's end, Prof. Cowie says, the matter of class seems to have faded away. In *Saturday Night Fever*, another iconic film steeped in the social tensions of the era, the smooth, dance-crazed hero played by John Travolta segues from the constraints of working class Brooklyn to the tantalizing (and illusory?) possibilities of cosmopolitan Manhattan. Prof. Cowie sees in this either the character's denial of his class identity or his desire to cover it up. Regardless, the blue-collar community ceases to exert its hold on the character...and by extension, on the audience as well.

The refashioning of class and politics that began three decades ago still reverberates. A once reliable working class electoral bloc that identified with its economic interests now responds to and votes what Prof. Cowie calls its "cultural resentments." Anger over race, gender, and effete elites continues to fuel a white male backlash that overrides concern for the material self-interests of the working class. And that, Prof. Cowie contends, facilitates the enduring supremacy of the real power elites in American society.

Look for Prof. Cowie's book on the interrelated and changing nature of politics, work and unions, and popular culture in 2006. He can be reached at jrc32@cornell.edu. ■

Challenges Persist for Women at Work

WOMEN IN THE WORKPLACE. No longer a novel idea, let alone an unusual occurrence. Yet ILR's Institute for Women and Work (IWW) has no shortage of projects and no illusions about the challenges that remain as women strive to become fully integrated in the workplace, fairly compensated for their efforts, and readily accommodated in their quest to balance work and family life.

Active at the state, national, and international levels, the IWW undertakes applied research and engages in educational outreach that together keep women's workplace issues high on the public policy agenda. The institute is led by longtime director Francine Moccio, who uses a variety of tools (including foundation grants, collaborative networks, conferences, government hearings, technical assistance and skill training) to foster and promote women's economic independence while raising awareness about the sometimes problematic intersection of their personal and working lives.

Currently the IWW is developing a quality of life index that seeks to compare, across national divides, governmental and corporate policies on matters such as parental leave, elder care, and child care. The end result will be an anecdotal survey compiled from data supplied through the Web from respondents in developed and developing countries. Betty Friedan, distinguished visiting professor at Cornell who directed an earlier IWW project funded by the Ford Foundation, is once again joining with the institute in seeking continued support from Ford for this new line of research.

Immigrant women are also claiming a fair amount of institute attention. "They're slipping through the cracks in the benefits given to American workers," Ms. Moccio notes. "For starters, there's a language barrier. And they don't know about the Fair Labor Standards Act." In an effort to close these gaps, the IWW has been working with the New York Committee for Occupational Safety and

Health to develop case studies for peer education training that will be targeted to immigrant workers in low-end service occupations. Two recent workshop conferences on women's poverty and entrepreneurship were geared toward Asian, Caribbean, and Hispanic women and brought them into contact with

government agencies, banks, and corporate leaders.

The IWW participates in a variety of collaborative activities with organizations such as the Children's Defense Fund, the International Labour Organization, and Cornell Law School. The institute also works closely with labor unions on gender and discrimination issues and with the labor committees from both houses of the New York State legislature.

Ms. Moccio can be reached at fam5@cornell.edu or (212)340-2836. The institute's Web address is <http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/extension/iww/>. ■

Smithers Fellows Pursue Research Agendas

FOR SOME STUDENTS, classes and friends and a few extra-curricular activities constitute the whole of their college experience. But for others, the chance to share in the research agenda of a faculty member adds a richness to their time on campus that is otherwise hard to replicate. So starting this year, the R. Brinkley Smithers Institute for Alcohol-Related Workplace Studies is inviting several ILR undergraduates to help further the work of the institute while enhancing their own knowledge and skills.

ILR professors Samuel Bacharach and William Sonnenstuhl, director and co-director of the institute, respectively, serve as the students' mentors. They are guiding this year's cohort of five undergrads through the rigors of literature searches, qualitative interviews, data analysis, and archival explorations. The efforts of these Smithers Fellows will inform larger research projects connected to the institute, expand the institute's Web content, add to the general understanding of alcohol-related issues, and affect workplace practices. "This is a terrific opportunity to connect the students' interests with our interests," Prof. Sonnenstuhl says.

Four of the five Smithers Fellows are seniors. Galia Porat is working on an honors thesis that examines the alcohol and substance abuse interventions undertaken at Cornell and on other college campuses. Helen Yoon is combing academic journals for research findings about the link between alcoholism and the stresses women face in balancing work life and home life. Ryan McGarry is looking into union-based programs to deal with alcoholism in the workplace. Lindsey Plotnick is pulling together the literature that deals with the relationship between alcoholism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

The lone freshman in the group, Mollie Schiek, is reading through newspaper articles about firefighters and alcoholism to learn how the media's presentation of the issue has changed over time.

Although the students doubt these particular projects will develop into long-term careers, they readily point to other beneficial outcomes. "This has given me a great advantage over the typical Cornell student," Ms. Porat says. "It has helped me learn to gather data, do interviews, and reason analytically. I know what's pertinent and can be a more persuasive writer. These are all skills I expect to use in the future." ■

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Keeping Women in Line

continued from page 2

unwittingly may have done the women a service by enabling them to begin finding their collective voice in the nascent American labor movement.

Gender proved to be a powerful calling card as the AFL unions sought to recruit members. Organizers by and large skipped over racial and ethnic distinctions, Prof. DeVault says, and reached out to “men as men.” At a time when unions were pushing to build a national movement, this approach had more universal appeal, was less inflammatory than sectarian entreaties, and minimized the possibility of antagonizing any particular group. On the local level, however, race and ethnicity sometimes trumped gender as a recruiting technique. “Particularly in the South,” Prof. DeVault notes, “the quickest way to bring men and women together was by making a racial claim.”

Ten years of research and writing went into the making of *United Apart*. And while Prof. DeVault

is not quite ready to jump into another massive undertaking, she is mulling over several ideas that emerged from this work. She is intrigued, for example, by the way weather seems to have affected the timing and duration of strikes. She was also struck by the dissonance between the widely accepted view that most early female factory workers were young and single and her perception that many female workers were married and/or mothers. Prof. DeVault is eager to uncover what work meant to these female workers and how unions fit into their lives. She laughingly concedes this could be the beginning of another book-length project. Stay tuned.

Prof. DeVault can be reached at iad1@cornell.edu. ■

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