

Workers, the Nation-State, and Beyond: An Introduction to the Newberry Conference

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This special issue derives from an extraordinary meeting at Chicago's Newberry Library in September 2008, where one hundred scholars gathered for "Workers, the Nation-State, and Beyond: The Newberry Conference on Labor History across the Americas." In keeping with *Labor's* editorial mandate, the conference sought to further catalyze research and understanding across national boundaries. We hope that the result will serve as an important way station in the field, projecting labor history to the forefront of "transnational" approaches within historical studies more generally. Mixing senior practitioners with new scholars, the conference identified a dozen themes that resonated in historical significance across the hemisphere: in turn each thematic panel sought to include topics or perspectives from U.S., Canadian, and Latin American / Caribbean specialists. In this special issue, we have selected four outstanding essays that reflect both the geographic and the intellectual range of the Newberry Conference. A further selection of conference essays—highlighting projects transnational in method—will be published in 2010 as *Workers across the Americas: The Transnational Turn in Labor History*.

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In Mesoamerica and the Andes, the Spanish conquerors and their estate-owner descendants found various ways to draft indigenous village men into short-term labor turns on their plantations. Yet by the late eighteenth century, as Catherine Komisaruk documents in the case of colonial Guatemala, such tributary systems had evolved into a “voluntary” system of extended family labor, with both women and children enlisted in often desperate attempts to earn wages to pay their required cash “tributes.” Moreover, widows and daughters increasingly drifted to the new colonial capital of Guatemala City to work as domestics. While creating great distress within traditional communities, the elaborate process of migration, group labor, and tribute collection—effecting a general “Hispanicization” of the native labor force—ultimately also offered some means of resistance for the urban migrants. As such, Komisaruk is able to rely on an extensive archive of court cases—brought by Indian officials (intermediaries in the system), local priests, and, in time, Indian commoners themselves—against Spanish landlords and household overseers for the violation of labor and social norms and individual property rights. Overall, the legal record reveals a system of almost unceasing exaction on families increasingly separated in space, wherein escape from one’s “Indian-ness” was sometimes the only route to survival.

On both economic and moral grounds, nineteenth-century penal ideology across the Western world emphasized a regime of “productive labor” for the inmate. But what to do about prisoners who could not work, because of physical or mental incapacity, and thus might fatally undermine the disciplinary unity of the entire institution? Ted McCoy takes up this question in his study of labor and medicine in late-nineteenth-century Canadian penitentiaries. He suggests that “medical dis-

course” stepped into the breach to arrange a way of both understanding and limiting the corrosive effects of “idleness” within prison walls. McCoy notes that the problem of work and “curability” (or the chances of returning an ailing individual to the routines of prison labor) was exacerbated by the large numbers (especially in the western provinces) of mentally ill dumped into prisons for want of other state facilities. He explains that, increasingly, incapacity to work came to be the very definition of “feble-mindedness.”

Focusing on the organization of household workers in post-World War II Chile, Elizabeth Quay Hutchison examines the distinct but shifting role of the Catholic Church as an agent in working-class social life. Beginning in 1947, Young Catholic Worker activists, part of the larger Catholic Action movement, organized a “federation of *empleadas*” to improve the lives and welfare of live-in domestic servants—generally excluded from Chilean labor codes—in Santiago and other Chilean cities. Hutchison emphasizes the special approach taken toward *empleadas* as distinct from industrial workers (*obreros/obreras*) and the increasing politicization of the movement following Vatican II (1962–65), the rise of liberation theology, and empowerment of Chile’s Christian Democratic Party in the same period. Drawing on archival sources and rich oral interviews with church leaders and activists, Hutchison tracks a movement that shifted over time from “protection” of women workers (both from employer abuse and communist infiltration) to a coalition with Socialists and legislative demand for an eight-hour day.

As Michael J. Murphy demonstrates, the United Automobile Workers (UAW) experimented with forms of “developmentalism” in both urban ghettos and Third World countries as a perceived social-democratic alternative to upheaval at home and

revolution abroad. Support for “community unionism” in both Watts and East Los Angles linked a vision of employment and job training hatched in the early sixties by Victor Reuther of the union’s International Affairs Department (an alternative to the hard-line anticommunism of the American Federation of Labor’s [AFL] foreign policy guru Jay Lovestone) to the plight of “developing communities” in the United States. Just as the UAW pushed public health and housing as well as strike support and organizing drives in Latin America, Turkey, and the Philippines, it also embraced—and effectively directed through longtime activist Jack Conway—the Community Action Program of President Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty. As Murphy argues, international development work, local community unionism, and early support for Students for a Democratic Society’s (SDS) Economic Research and Action Project (ERAP) were all part of an expansive, if all-too-short-lived, period during which the autoworkers’ union sought to break out of a defensive and bureaucratic mold that otherwise limited U.S. labor unionism to the social circumference of collective bargaining.

Denver A. Brunsman’s exhibit review on the UAW’s extended antiapartheid campaign suggests that even after the union’s heyday as an agent of domestic social reform, it still contributed to an internationally progressive political agenda. Owen Bieber, in a union presidency (1983–95) otherwise marked by market-share loss to foreign competition, plant closures, and the defection of his Canadian affiliate, placed the autoworkers in the forefront of the Shell Oil boycott and other antiapartheid protests—a commitment warmly acknowledged by Nelson Mandela during his U.S. Freedom Tour in 1990.

In keeping with the issue’s theme, the new works treated in the reviews section take us “all over the map.” The reviewers suggest that, among a rich lot, several

titles command attention for their utter originality and explanatory breadth. For example, Vincent Brown treats beliefs about death as a powerful force affecting New World slaves and their masters alike, and Lisa Yun has remarkably reconstructed from the testimony of Chinese coolies their slavlike treatment in the Caribbean. Jeffrey L. Gould points us to a new work that explains the long-laid historical scaffolding behind the political ascendancy of Evo Morales in Bolivia, even as David McCreery alerts us to a sophisticated examination of perhaps the most arresting *testimonio* of Central American violence and resistance prior to the work of Rigoberta Menchu. On other fronts, Eileen Boris points to Gay W. Seidman's analysis of three recent transnational labor rights campaigns as "historical sociology at its best," and John D. French recommends a book that he assures us offers something new about Brazil's ABC metalworkers—"the best-studied group of laborers in world history."

We are pleased to present Linda Lee Crosfield's immigration poem and honored to share Joshua Brown's cartoon prowess with a particularly pointed cover illustration. ■

