

Editor's Introduction

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The articles in this issue bring a fresh angle, as well as strong interpretive judgment, to bear on topics of workers' relation to technology, policing, and the labor market itself. First, however, we take note of the significance of the loss of Martin Luther King Jr. forty years ago, for its bearing not only on the course of a great social movement but also for the subsequent understanding of that movement. For the occasion, we are reproducing a presentation by Rev. James Lawson to the LAWCHA annual meeting in 2005 (introduced by current LAWCHA president, Mike Honey), where Lawson looks back on the evolving logic of mass action that, in his view, has been too narrowly circumscribed by a "civil rights" label.

That "technology is a social relationship rather than an independent force of history" has long been established. Yet, the classic case of the decline of child labor has eluded the larger logic. In particular, previous studies of the rise of the Owens automatic bottle (or glassblowing) machine, which roughly coincided with the decline of children's employment within the glass industry in the early twentieth century, have given technology the role of *primus inter pares*. In reexamining the evidence, however, Timothy Messer-Kruse shatters the conventional wisdom. The growing scarcity of

child labor and, in particular, the application of child labor codes, he suggests, proved the stimulus for technological innovation, thus reversing the historical argument.

As Jennifer Luff explains, technology of a more modest kind—the streetcar fare box—did indeed play an important role in one significant labor-management imbroglio. Beginning in the 1850s, undercover agents called spotters regularly posed as passengers on railroads in order to check on conductor theft of passenger fares. The struggle of conductor unions (who, with engineers, enjoyed a kind of aristocratic status among the trades) versus management’s Pinkerton spotters constituted part of the epic battle over workplace control in industrializing America. As disputes over surveillance spilled out from contract negotiations to courtrooms to conflicting labor-management appeals to the railroad and streetcar-riding consumer, the unions had to cope with one embarrassing reality: massive conductor theft was an undeniable problem. In such circumstances, technology loomed as a relatively neutral, face-saving arbiter.

Police spies, of course, have long represented a more official form of worker surveillance. In Brazil, between 1924 and 1982, the notorious Political Police (or DOPS by its native acronym) meticulously collected information on labor political parties, clubs, and individuals. Ironically, as Antonio Luigi Negro and Paulo Fontes report, the exertions of these repressive agents have produced a virtual gold mine for labor and radical historians. Tracking the DOPS archives, divided between the directives of police masterminds and bureaucratic agents on the one hand and the reports of labor defectors and informers on the other, the authors suggest that the nefarious labors of the “information community”—if used wisely—offer a latter-day generation a chance to create what Carlo Ginzburg called a “prosopography from below.”

In the twentieth century, temporary help companies became the biggest employers in America. After surveying the historical rise of temp work and flexible labor more generally in the modern-day economy, David Van Arsdale reports on the “feel” of such jobs based on ethnographic fieldwork in Syracuse, New York. What Van Arsdale finds is akin to the casualization of the docks in the nineteenth century: “waiting for work is a process involving the hope of transcending social and economic despair while reproducing that despair.”

The reviews section offers eloquent testimony to the unprecedented reach of the latest scholarship as well as the relevance of several new films. Among senior reviewers, we find Alice Kessler-Harris assaying a new sociological take on women's entry into the paid labor force, James Green on German anarchists in New York, Elizabeth Jameson on an anthology of North American migration, and Lawrence Glickman and John French, respectively, evaluating new films on Ralph Nader and Brazil's Lula. Other works explored here connect labor and environmental history, labor and diplomatic history, labor and American Indian history as well as labor and immigration history.

Finally, as we approach our print deadline, we are saddened to learn of the untimely death of Roy Rosenzweig, a most innovative and humane presence in historical circles, whose life and scholarship touched many of our readers. We thank Steve Brier and Josh Brown for preparing a tribute at short notice.

