President’s Report

Dear fellow members of the Working Class Studies Association,

I could not have imagined when I first began attending the conferences at Youngstown in 1997 that I would one day be elected as President of the WCSA, and I am honored to hold this position during such an exciting time in the organization’s history. Several major developments are underway to fortify membership and sustain the field of working-class studies, and I’d like to mention a few initiatives that underscore the focus of my platform this year: mentoring new members and bridging communities devoted to the study of class.

Increasing Social Media:
The WCSA now has a fuller online presence. Our website contains links to both our Facebook and Twitter accounts, and will soon be populated with resources and other vital archival information such as Steering Committee and Business Meeting minutes, past conference programs, financial reports, and syllabi. I would like to echo Courtney Maloney’s recent email request to invite members to write short blog entries about their latest research, teaching, or activist initiatives. This effort may serve us well in attracting new members and forging alliances with other individuals and groups doing similar work. Please send your blog entries to Courtney at maloney.courtney@gmail.com. Beginning in November, Colby King will assume posting member news and events on the website and will also manage our Twitter page. Please forward these announcements to him at c4king@bridgew.edu.

Building Membership:
Since the Stony Brook conference, our membership numbers have been increasing. A special thanks to Ken Estey and Tim Strangleman for their recent efforts in this area! Recruiting, however, remains a significant priority that every member of the WCSA can contribute to in order to ensure our sustainability. Invite students and colleagues to attend the conference, offer WCSA-sponsored panels at other conferences and events, like our FaceBook page and Twitter feeds, follow our WordPress website, and help spread the word about what we’re doing. Our membership drive will soon be underway so look for an upcoming email reminding lapsed members to renew, and please note: membership is now required for all conference presenters beginning in May 2017.

Broadening Outreach:
Once again, Michael Zweig and members of the conference committee put on another outstanding conference at SUNY-Stony Brook. The annual “Meet & Greet” event attracted new faces from across the U.S. and internationally, offering many the chance to socialize and network before the panels and plenaries began. Be sure to read an update regarding the transition of the Center for the Study of Working Class Life to the Stony Brook Center for Study of Inequality and Social Justice by Christopher Sellers.

The call for papers for our upcoming conference at Indiana University in Bloomington from May 31 - June 3, 2017 is available on our website. The deadline is Feb. 1st. Please distribute the call widely to other organizations and listservs. This year, to encourage mentorship of new members and create dialogue about future directions in the field, members of the Steering Committee will host two workshop sessions for intellectual field-building to be held on the first and last day of the conference. These action gatherings, held at the same time as concurrent sessions, will frame conference discussions to facilitate strategic vision planning and networking. Another important addition to the program is the creation of a poster session—the first of it’s kind for the WCSA. This will allow a space to display the work of undergraduate and graduate students as well as artists, scholars, and
activists while sessions are taking place. We will offer a scheduled time so people can filter through and interact with presenters. If you’re interested in showcasing your work or organizing a group, please contact Deborah Warnock at deborah.warnock@cortland.edu so we can track the number of participants for room reservations.

Promoting the Field:
It gives me great pleasure to report to you that the *Journal of the Working-Class Studies* is now a reality under the editorial leadership of Sarah Attfield and Liz Giuffre. Sara Appel will be serving as Commissioning Editor and other members of the Steering Committee will assist in developing a companion website and marketing campaign. The inaugural issue, which will feature several essays and book reviews, will be published online in December. We will continue to issue email updates as we move closer to the date and we thank you for your patience in this long-term endeavor.

In closing, I encourage you to read through officers’ reports to learn more about what’s been accomplished since the Steering Committee last met in June. It’s been a productive summer and fall so far, and the remaining months promise to be equally effective in moving the WCSA forward. Please contact me if you’re interested in volunteering on any of our standing committees or have any questions about the coming year.

All the best,

Michele Fazio
michele.fazio@uncp.edu

**Treasurer’s Report**

WCSA has a combined balance of $28,143.48 in our two checking accounts and in our PayPal account.

Our membership numbers are improving. In my last report in these pages on March 4, I noted that we had 83 members. Now we have 135 members—a 63% increase. Thank you for your memberships and your renewals! As encouraging as this dramatic increase is, our membership in mid-2015 stood at 192. At our membership meeting at the How Class Works 2016 conference at Stony Brook, NY in June, the Steering Committee announced that we would like to double our membership (then at 113) in the coming year. We have a goal to reach 226 members by June 2017.

226 members reflects the minimum level necessary to fully fund the operating costs of the WCSA, conference expenses as well as various scholarships and awards that support our collective research and writing. Later this year, additional expenses associated with the publication of the *Journal in Working-Class Studies* will occur. Your membership renewal is essential to this work!

We know that you have been eager to renew, so by all means, go ahead and mail in your renewal or visit PayPal. Membership enables you to fully participate in the conference planned for next June at Indiana University Bloomington.

Donations to the Travel Grant Fund support successful applicants to attend our annual conference. You may donate $10.00 through PayPal. You may donate more if you mail a check directly to my address below and earmark it for the Travel Grant Fund for the 2017 conference at Indiana University Bloomington. Funds are also used for our Young Scholars and Activists Fellowship that supports conference attendance for scholars, activists, and organizers early in their careers whose work has the potential for advancing working class studies as a field.

Please note my new contact information:
Ken Estey, WCSA, 71 Joseph Lane, Newfane, Vermont 05345
You may also contact me at kenestey@yahoo.com and call me at my landline: 802-365-9499
Secretary’s Report

Current Officers:

Steering Committee

President:
Michele Fazio, U. of North Carolina at Pembroke

Past President:
Tim Strangleman, U. of Kent, UK

President-Elect:
Terry Easton, University of North Georgia

Secretary:
Courtney Maloney, Milwaukee Inst. of Art & Design

Treasurer:
Ken Estey, Brooklyn College

Working-Class Academics Chair:
Allison Hurst, Oregon State University

At-large members:
Sara Appel, Independent Scholar
Scott Henkel, University of Wyoming
Katherine Kidd, University of Pittsburgh
Colby King, Bridgewater State University

The Journal of Working-Class Studies:

Beginning in late fall of 2016, WCSA will have its own online, open-access journal publishing three issues a year. An editorial collective has been formed to review articles, and the journal will be hosted by the Texas Center for Working-Class Studies at Collin College; ISSN registration is in process but will not delay the first issue.

Conference Matters:

- Next year’s conference: Joe Varga has announced that the 2017 WCSA conference will be May 31-June 3 at Indiana University Bloomington. He distributed the Call for Papers at the business meeting in June, which announces the conference theme as “Class Struggle: Race, Gender and Revolution.” Joe asks WCSA members and the Steering Committee for help in reaching out to international networks and email lists.

- 2018 How Class Works conference: with Michael Zweig’s impending retirement, the Center for the Study of Working Class Life at SUNY Stony Brook will be reconstituted by a new group of Stony Brook faculty. During the transition, the reconstituted Center will not be able to hold a “How Class Works” conference as in the past, but Michael hopes that Stony Brook might host the WCSA conference then with WCSA assistance, especially with developing the program, as we have done for other host centers. He will keep us informed, and is very hopeful that the full How Class Works conference can be resumed in 2020.

- The Steering Committee has decided that henceforth WCSA membership will be required for anybody presenting at WCSA conferences.
Website and Outreach:

- Our new website went live in June and Michele Fazio has been actively posting news of WCSA members’ and various groups’ activities. Members are urged to send updates about their own work and about anything they think may be of interest to Working-Class Studies scholars, artists and activists. It is also hoped that long-time members who have material relevant to WCSA’s history send that material to Courtney Maloney, chair of the communications committee, for inclusion in the WCSA archive we are developing.

- In June, the Steering Committee proposed that the name of the Young Scholars and Activists Initiative be changed to “Young Scholars and Activists Fellowships.” The proposal passed by a hand vote of the members attending the business meeting at How Class Works.

- A new Outreach sub-committee of the Steering Committee has been established. Goals for next year include increasing our presence on social media and doubling our membership.

- Travel Grants: This year there were 22 eligible applicants for our WCSA Travel Grants, but we only had money enough to award 10 grants.

Working-Class Academics Section

- The WCSA Constitution has been amended to reflect the merger of the Association of Working-Class Academics into WCSA last year. As approved by the Steering Committee, Section IV-A, which sets out the membership of the Steering Committee, will now include a sentence reading: “The Chair of the Working-Class Academics Section, elected separately by Section members, will also serve on the Steering Committee.” The Amendment passed by hand vote of the members attending the business meeting in June, as required by the Constitution.

- With the merger of the Association of Working-Class Academics into WCSA last year, the new Working-Class Academics Section included all existing members of the association during the 2016 calendar year. They have been WCSA members and have been receiving all WCSA communications since last summer. These former association members will elect a Section Chair and Co-Chair (and eventually a Past-Chair) to conduct the business of the Section. Any WCSA member can choose to join the Section and a portion of their WCSA dues will be allocated to the WCA Section, as per the merger agreement. Former association members who are not also WCSA members will have to decide whether to renew their WCSA membership in 2017 and pay dues. Section Chair Allison Hurst reported that she expects as many as 100 people will become dues-paying members of WCSA in the coming year.

Respectfully submitted by Courtney Maloney
Center Reports

Report from the Center for Working Class Studies at Youngstown State University
Tim Francisco, Director

Youngstown State University’s Center for Working Class Studies will re-launch its speaker series November 7, with Justin Gest, who will discuss his new book, The New Minority: White Working Class Politics in an Age of Immigration and Inequality. Gest is Assistant Professor of Public Policy at George Mason University and the book includes research and interviews conducted in Youngstown. The CWCS will then host Lou Martin, for a discussion of his work, Smokestacks in the Hills: Rural Industrial Workers in West Virginia. Martin is Assistant Professor of History at Chatham University. The series will conclude with Elizabeth and Ken Fones-Wolf, and their book, White Evangelical Protestants and Operation Dixie, which explores the intersections of southern religious culture and the labor movement. The two are History Professors at West Virginia University. Dates forthcoming on http://cwcs.ysu.edu/

Reaction to the Center’s revitalization has been overwhelmingly positive, and I’m grateful for the support that founders Sherry Linkon and John Russo have provided. Courses that were part of the interdisciplinary Working Class Studies curriculum have been running at YSU, but center affiliates are committed to bringing back a regular, cohesive curricular component. The center affiliates are planning to revive and refocus the interdisciplinary curriculum in addition to adding new community based learning experiences. For example, in Fall of 2017, I will teach a course on Storytelling and Social Change, and plan to partner with social justice groups to explore the ways in which the tools of participatory media and creative non-fiction can spark meaningful community awareness.

In addition, the CWCS will re-engage its partnerships with Africana Studies, Women’s and Gender Studies, American Studies, and Judaic and Holocaust Studies, for programming, community engagement projects and curricular offerings. Affiliates plan to aggressively pursue external funding for individual programs and the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences at YSU, now under new leadership, is committed to helping revive the center.

The Center for Working Class Studies at YSU was the foundation for the field of Working Class Studies and the “Youngstown Conference” as it was known, sparked an international conversation about work, class and inequity. Now more than ever, as the gap between haves and have-nots widens at unprecedented levels, and as class dominates our social, political, economic, and educational realities, the many interested faculty and community affiliates in Youngstown recognize the urgency and the opportunity to re-engage the scholarly and social justice missions of the CWCS.

Report from Our Daily Work/Our Daily Lives at Michigan State University
John Beck, Director

Our Daily Work/Our Daily Lives is a joint program at Michigan State University drawing on the mutual interest at the MSU Museum and in the MSU Labor Education Program in workers culture, labor history and working class life. This collaboration has promoted the preservation, promotion and presentation of workers culture
through a variety of activities including film showings, fiction and poetry readings, museum exhibits, and the ODW/ODL brown bag series, which entered its 21st year in September.

We are set for a great group of brown bags this year including musical tributes to Joe Hill and other IWW songwriters (with Charlie King, Magpie and George Mann) and to the foremost folklore collector of the songs of sailors and lumbermen, Alan Lomax (with the Jayme Stone Lomax Project). We will have other brown bags across a wide range of topics including the Battles of Blair Mountain past and present; railroad builders in Africa and China; the Farmworker grape boycott; metalworkers’ struggles in Chile; a critical look back at the “golden era” of autoworker lives in Detroit in the 1950s; children’s conceptions of work; and nearly a century and a half of Michigan boatbuilding among others.

One of the chief focal points of our programming will be the 80th anniversary of the Lansing Labor Holiday, arguably one of the greatest unsung struggles of labor in the 20th Century. The Holiday was a three-day general strike called in June of 1937 over the jailing of strike leaders and the labor organizer’s wife (they couldn’t find him at home so they arrested her). After three days, the strikers returned victoriously to work with everyone released from jail and a new contract at the workplace whose small strike had sparked the citywide labor action. Planning has just commenced, but tentative plans call for a number of museum exhibits and community presentations, a new state of Michigan historical marker to commemorate the event, and a re-enactment of the strike action which included the use of cars and trucks to block the entire downtown area near city hall and the state Capitol building. The programming will stretch over a three to four month period, kicking off with a visit by Mother Jones herself with appearances both on campus and in the local labor community.

Report from the Texas Center for Working-Class Studies at Collin College
Lisa Kirby, Director

The Texas Center for Working-Class Studies at Collin College hosted its annual Labor Day kick-off event on Thursday, September 8. Professors Lupita Murillo Tinnen and Byrd Williams, both fine arts faculty at Collin and professional photographers, presented "Photographs and the Integrity of Authorship," a thought-provoking presentation that considered the intersections of photography, race, and class.

The Center is also gearing up for its third annual conference, which will take place on Thursday, February 23, 2017, at Collin College’s Spring Creek Campus. The conference will feature keynote speaker Dr. David Roediger, Foundation Professor of American Studies and History at The University of Kansas. Dr. Roediger’s recent books include Seizing Freedom: Slave Emancipation and Liberty for All, How Race Survived U.S. History, The Production of Difference (with Elizabeth Esch), and The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class. In addition to Dr. Roediger, the conference will also feature scholarly presentations, roundtables, and workshops. We invite scholars to submit proposals by December 1, 2016, to Dr. Lisa Kirby, Director of The Texas Center for Working-Class Studies (LKirby@collin.edu). Please see the attached Call for Papers.

The Center also continues its support of students through Working-Class Heroes, a student organization at Collin College, as well as sponsoring an annual student essay contest for Collin College students. For more information about the Center, please visit our website (http://iws.collin.edu/lkirby/) or "Like" us on Facebook (Collin College Texas Center for Working-Class Studies).
Working Class Academics Section
Allison Hurst, Oregon State University

As you may remember, the WCSA officially formed its first section, of Working-Class Academics. At our last election, I was elected Chair of the section and Mara Fridell (University of Manitoba) was elected Chair-elect. All past members of the Association of Working-Class Academics were granted current membership into WCSA, substantially increasing the size and reach of our organization. One program we are now pursuing is making connections between WCSA and working-class college students. Michele Fazio has created a new tab on our website called “Class on Campus,” where you can follow links to programs and organizations around the world mobilizing around class issues on campus and first-generation college students. Please let us know if you have more organizations or programs to share! We are also interested in hearing stories from our section members for the next newsletter. If you have news you would like to share, contact me at hursta@oregonstate.edu. And if you are interested in becoming a member of the WCA Section, you can add section membership (with an additional $5 in dues) when you are renewing your WCSA dues, or contact Maria Dokes at workingclassstudies@gmail.com.

Stony Brook Center for Study of Inequality and Social Justice
Christopher Sellers, Director

Anticipating the retirement of Michael Zweig this summer, the Center for the Study of Working Class Life (CSWCL) he founded at Stony Brook in 1999 has been undergoing a transition. The change-over of leadership started with the formation of an interdisciplinary steering committee a couple of years ago. It culminated this summer with me taking over as Center director, and Robert Chase and Lori Flores as Deputy Directors, also with a switch in its official departmental location from Economics to History (all three of us are historians).

In the interest of stirring broader interest and engagement among faculty, we’ve also recast the Center’s title and mission, orienting these around the “study of inequality and social justice.” While working class studies and labor-related questions remain at the heart of the Center’s agenda, we feel this change captures the growing richness of scholarly as well activist thought on display at the 2016 WCSA meeting. Our hope is also to widen scholarly as well administrative support for the Center, in order to sustain its work. By highlighting inequality and social justice more generally, we aim to turn the Center into a prominent regional and national forum for an expanding array of related interdisciplinary and community-engaged projects led by Stony Brook faculty.

One commitment of the rechristened Center is intellectual: to a class-minded but also intersectional understanding of inequality. We seek to situate longer traditions of analyzing class relations alongside newer emphases on income inequality and the skewed distribution of wealth. More generally, we aim to illuminate interlocking relationships between class and other multiple systems of oppression and domination defined by gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, ability, and geography. The Center’s second keystone commitment is to social justice, and not just in the abstract or in the classroom but beyond the academy, in communities and causes on Long Island, Greater New York, and beyond.

We have laid our five thematic clusters that capture the interests and expertise of participating faculty—in Labor and Class Studies, Carceral Studies, Environmental Justice Studies, Immigration and Mobility Studies, and Race and
Social Justice Studies. After an initial year or so of set-up, our current idea is to rotate Center focus and emphasis between these themes, so that leadership also switches between different clusters of faculty. Every two to three years, the Center will provide a vibrant agenda of activities addressing each of the themes, both on campus and in the surrounding community. We plan to remain open, as well, to further clusters of themes and projects faculty may propose (e.g., LGBTQ studies; Native American/First Nation Studies).

--Labor and Class Studies: these themes, so well-developed during Michael’s years of leadership, will remain a bedrock focus of Center activities. Scholarly projects and collaborations in this area will unite the interests and insights of labor economists (though Michael will be missed, we do still have a couple of faculty) and historians concentrating on work and workers (including myself and Lori Flores) along with other interested Stony Brook faculty. I myself am especially interested to foster discussions about the relationships between newer scholarship and findings on income and wealth inequality and other more established literatures on the making and experiences of class. We hope to continue our sponsorship of the WCSA conference along with outreach efforts on Long Island with labor unions and other civic groups. One CSWCL event modeling the kind of outreach we’re hoping to continue was a well-attended visit in 2015 of Rev. William J. Barber, North Carolina NAACP president and founder of the Moral Monday Movement. We hope the lines of communication thereby established with many Long Island activist communities will provide a springboard for future activities exploring and highlighting and economic inequalities in the region and their ties to other inequities.

--Carceral Studies: One modern mode of inequality that scholars have only recently begun to consider as central to social and racial inequalities is mass incarceration. Its class and labor dimensions stand out starkly, from the “jobs” jail provides to the stigma it brings once you get out of it. Mass incarceration not only warehouses the poor and working-classes, but prisons are also sites of labor exploitation for both the state and private corporations where prisoners receive little to no pay but where both the state and private corporations relying on extremely low paid/unpaid prison labor greatly profit. Stony Brook already claims a constellation of faculty across multiple departments who have the research skills needed to understand this phenomenon better, whom we hope to involve here, led by historians Rob Chase and Nancy Tomes. In October 2015, Chase and Zebulon Miletsky hosted a first conference devoted to the topic. The next goals will be to begin coordinating a broader, scholarly lens on this and related issues, from the “Black Lives Matter” movement to the war on drugs and mental health, while also developing means for educating and engaging the university and the surrounding community, including local medical and law enforcement officials.

--Environmental Justice Studies: Another less explored way inequalities endure in our global society is through environmental inequities. Under the rubric “environmental justice,” the unequal distribution of environmental dangers as well as amenities has become a major theme in environmental studies, little engaged as yet by scholars of other kinds of inequality. Here as well class analysis is vital, as so many of the worst environmental conditions are shared by working class and minority communities, also by those in poorer nations. Here as well, Stony Brook has many faculty with related interests and expertise, including myself and Heidi Hutner, director of Stony Brook’s relatively new but thriving Sustainability Studies Program. The theme also offers many avenues for outreach into Long Island and other communities; ours will become
the first Center dedicated to environmental justice in the Greater New York area.

--Immigration and Mobility Studies: With New York and Long Island continuing to be immigration hotspots, the Center is committed to probing the intersectional dimensions of the immigrant experience, including how immigrant communities (local and global) confront inequality and fight for social justice. Again, analytics of work and class are essential for understanding what immigrant may face and endure. Through leadership of Lori Flores and Nancy Hiemstra, the Center hopes to become a vehicle for intellectual exchange and collaboration on these topics among Stony Brook and other scholars, while also seeking to connect with and support to communities of immigrants on Long Island, and the organizations that work with them. One inspiration precedent is the CSWCL project “Unseen America,” which furnished immigrant Latino workers with cameras and professional photographic guidance to enable them to tell their own stories, which were then disseminated widely. Building on CSWCL ties to the National Domestic Workers Alliance, faculty working on other areas of migration and labor (Tracey Walters along with Daniela Fleshner) will strengthen our relationship with this organization and others who work on behalf of Caribbean, Asian, and Latina immigrant workers.

--Race and Social Justice Studies: As our nation continues to wrestle with the racial tensions brought on by conflicts between communities of color and law enforcement, the Center aims to provide a forum and channel for a variety of faculty initiatives better to understand and engage this activism and the underlying issues involved. On the scholarly plane, they provide an important avenue for exploring how analytics of race and class may best be intertwined. In close alliance with our carceral studies initiative, faculty involved with the Center such as Tracey Walters and Zebulon Miletsky have already joined with other SBU faculty such as Abena Asare and Kathleen Wilson to support social activist organizations such as Black Lives Matter and NAACP that mobilize communities and engage in activism targeted toward police brutality and prison reform, at Stony Brook and beyond. As the Center seeks to nourish and build on this outreach, we also aim to foster development and awareness of curricular innovations tackling these issues, such as the new major concentration on Social Justice and Human Rights in Africana Studies. Throughout, the Center aims toward honest and open conversations about racial disparities, student activism, and social consciousness, including the ways class has figured, and can or should figure, into all these.

Our rechristened center has thereby set a big agenda for itself in the years to come, but we plan to move into it gradually, step by step. Our first step this year is going to be a brown-bag workshop, in which faculty and graduate students working on issues of class, inequality and social justice read and discuss each other’s work-in-progress. As we develop along these many lines, I hope it is also clear that we remain deeply interested in sustaining ties with the Working Class Studies Association: its scholars and activists, its questions, and its commitment to exploring and highlighting the many experiences, dimensions, and dilemmas of class across our world.

Report from the Center for Study of Working Class Life at SUNY Stony Brook

Michael Zweig
michaelzweig1942@gmail.com

Center Director Michael Zweig is now emeritus professor at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, having retired as of August 31, 2016 after 50 years teaching, 49 at Stony Brook.
Happily, the Center will continue with new leadership, and a new name - The Center for Study of Inequality and Social Justice. Elsewhere in this Newsletter you will find a report from Stony Brook history professor Christopher Sellers, the new Center’s director.

The Center for Study of Working Class Life, founded in 1999, developed work along a wide range of initiatives. The Center’s Website <www.stonybrook.edu/workingclass> will continue to be available as an archive for much of that history. Because of severe budget cuts and resulting staff shortages, final updates of the Website to make available the video and text of presentations at the How Class Works – 2016 conference, and post other recent material, will have to wait until January 2017. Archival material documenting the Center’s development, and the founding and growth of the Working Class Studies Association, will be housed at the Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archive at New York University in Manhattan.

Following is the written report from the How Class Works – 2016 conference.

**How Class Works – 2016 Conference Report**  
**SUNY Stony Brook June 9-11, 2016**

About 250 people from around the world gathered to participate in the How Class Works – 2016 conference at the State University of New York at Stony Brook June 9-11, sponsored by the Center for Study of Working Class Life. This eighth in the series of bi-annual How Class Works conferences was the largest and most international yet.

Among the nearly two hundred presenters, the Conference welcomed forty-five people from eighteen countries outside the United States: Albania, Australia, Austria, Canada, China, England, Finland, France, Germany, India, Israel, Italy, Nepal, Norway, Philippines, Switzerland, Turkey, and Venezuela, as well as from across the United States. Twenty-eight graduate students presented work, joining senior academic scholars, community and union activists, artists and independent scholars in the rich and diverse community of working class studies. The conference also had the largest number of non-presenter participants in the history of the series.

In response to the original call for proposals, we received nearly three hundred submissions. The peer-review program committee (Robert Chase; Lori Flores; Fred Gardaphe; Courtney Maloney; Zebulon Miletzky; Jack Metzgar; Christopher Sellers; Michelle Tokarczyk; and Michael Zweig) accepted just under seventy percent of them, making this the most selective conference yet in the series. The resulting 54 sessions over three days engaged participants in a wide range of issues involved in working class studies, in economics, ethnography, history, literature, music, pedagogy, politics, religion, sociology, and more. The complete program is on the conference Website:  

We again video-recorded all conference sessions. By fall 2016 [now postponed to January 2017] we will link each session in the conference program to its video record (taking care to exclude those few presenters who, for various reasons, asked that their presentations not be made public). We will also link to individual presentations in their written form where panelists have submitted them for posting.
The opening conference plenary session, part of the Provost Lecture Series, featured Sam Pizzigati, author of *The Rich Don’t Always Win: The Forgotten Triumph over Plutocracy that Created the American Middle Class, 1900-1970*, speaking on “Plutocrats: Understanding the 0.1%.” Other plenary sessions addressed “Race, Class, and Environmental Justice” and “The African-American Experience of Class.”

During the Friday evening banquet, the Center for Study of Working Class Life presented its Award for Lifetime Contributions to Social Justice for Working People to Michael Eisenscher, 50-year veteran of labor and peace organizing, and to long-time labor and community leader Minerva Solla. We were honored to have Roger Clayman, executive director of the Long Island Federation of Labor, present at the banquet with a delegation from the L.I. Fed., as well as Steve Kramer, executive vice-president of Local 1199SEIU and a delegation from 1199. The Award presentations and remarks by recipients will be available online, linked from the conference program.

At the banquet, the Working Class Studies Association presented its annual awards for dissertation and other creative works of 2015. The WCSA and the Center presented a joint award to Frances Benson “for farsighted intellectual leadership in bringing the field of working class studies into being through her work as editor of ILR Press.”

The conference was able to continue its tradition of financial aid, making it possible for twenty-four people to come to the conference who otherwise would not have been able to attend. Almost all were graduate students or people coming from abroad.

Fourteen Stony Brook faculty and staff from ten departments and programs* helped host the conference by chairing sessions in their areas of interest. The campus bookstore once again set up a highly successful and much appreciated store in the midst of the conference session meeting rooms on the third floor of the Student Activities Center, featuring books by presenters and other titles addressing the broad interests of those attending.

Campus support for the conference came from President Samuel Stanley, Provost Dennis Assanis, Vice-President for Student Affairs Peter Baigent, Graduate School Dean Chuck Taber, Humanities Institute Director Kathleen Wilson, and the department of economics. Special thanks go to the staff at the University’s Office of Conferences and Special Events. Adrienne Unger, program director at the Humanities Institute, and Domenica Tafuro, in the economics department, provided invaluable logistical assistance.

External support came from: anonymous contributors; Communications Workers of America (CWA) District One; CWA Local 1180; Cornell University Press; First Baptist Church of Riverhead; Long Island Federation of Labor, AFL-CIO; New York Council on Humanities; New York State United Teachers; United University Professions; U.S. Labor Against the War; the Working Class Studies Association; and Vockley-Lang Communications.

We have already reserved space for the How Class Works – 2018 conference, scheduled for the Stony Brook campus June 7-9, 2018 [subject of course to adequate resources]. We hope to secure continuing campus support that will allow
us to distribute a call for presentations in spring 2017. We hope once again to host an international conference that will unite the campus and the community, academic inquiry and social engagement, across all the disciplines of working class studies, in a relaxed but intellectually challenging environment.

* Africana studies, cultural analysis and theory, economics, facilities management and design, health technology and management, history, marine sciences, philosophy, physics/astronomy, political science.

On a personal note, I would like to thank all the members of the growing community of working class studies for your support of the How Class Works conferences since the first one in 2002, and for all the creative intellectual and artistic work that has brought our field into existence. I am glad to turn over leadership of the Center to Chris Sellers as director, Lori Flores and Rob Chase as deputy directors, and Nancy Hiemstra, Zebulon Miletsky, and Tracey Walters, confident that they will enrich the field and continue to make Stony Brook a vibrant center for working class studies. Meanwhile, I will continue to do what I can, and look forward to being with you in many ways and many venues in years to come.

**Book Notes**

*Both Shoes Off: Poems (Bottom Dog Press), Jeanne Bryner*

In this collection, Jeanne Bryner focuses on the daily, the lived, in the rural geography she inhabits. Marc Harshman, poet laureate of West Virginia, writes that “Bryner’s grasp of the harsh demands and simple satisfactions of rural life make for truly compelling poetry. Her honest and well-crafted testimonies remind us of what it takes to get through life, the kind of quieter life in which many Americans still live and work, a life far removed from the more sensational reality of sound bites and headlines. It is a privilege to have been let inside so many tender moments of everyday domesticity as are revealed in these finely measured poems.”

*Equality on Trial: Gender and Rights in the Modern American Workplace (U. of Pennsylvania), Katherine Turk*

A lot of organizing and movement politics go into getting social justice legislation passed, and historians tend to pay more attention to that process than to what happens on the ground after a path-breaking law is passed. This book details the struggles in workplaces, courts and administrative agencies to determine what Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 would mean for women in the workplace. Title VII required equality of the sexes at work, but what “equality” would legally mean was contested. A narrow definition that allowed businesses to comply without transforming basic workplace structures was challenged by a more expansive view championed by
workers and activists envisioning “a broad class politics” in a “pivotal battle over the terms of democracy and the role of the state in all labor relationships.” According to the publisher, Katherine Turk argues that these contests “ultimately laid the legal and cultural foundation for the neoliberal work regimes that enable some women to break the glass ceiling as employers lowered the floor for everyone else.” Dorothy Sue Cobble calls Equality on Trial “an eye-opening new account of the last half century of U.S. history that puts the struggle over gender and economic justice at its center.”

Class and Campus Life: Managing and Experiencing Inequality at an Elite College (Cornell), Elizabeth M. Lee

This book is based on 140 interviews with first-generation students as well as faculty, administrators and alumnae at an unnamed “elite liberal arts college for women in the Northeast.” Rather than just focusing on first-gen students, Elizabeth Lee seeks to shed light on how college practices and students interact, and she finds “underlying moral judgments [in the] cultural connotations of merit, hard work by individuals, and making it on your own that permeate American higher education.” According to the publisher: “Using students’ own descriptions and understandings of their experiences to illustrate the complexity of these issues, Lee shows how the lived experience of socioeconomic difference is often defined in moral, as well as economic, terms, and that tensions, often unspoken, undermine students’ sense of belonging.”

Woman Missing: A Mill Town Mystery (Hardball Press), Linda Nordquist

The central characters in Linda Nordquist’s debut novel are steelworker Ginny Johnson, and her daughter, Cory. Ginny mysteriously disappeared during a shift at the steel mill in Braddock, Pennsylvania, after raising the ire of the company during contract negotiations and planned mill closings. Twenty years later Ginny’s daughter, Cory, returns to Braddock to investigate the circumstances of her mother’s disappearance. The author is a former steelworker, having worked in the 1980s in the Basic Oxygen Processing shop at US Steel’s Edgar Thomson Works in Braddock. She dedicates the book to “the steelworkers who helped build this country, only to be rendered obsolete by widespread plant closures and offshoring in the corporate drive for profits.”

Flawed System/Flawed Self: Job Searching and Unemployment Experiences (U. of Chicago), Ofer Sharone

By comparing the experience of unemployment in the U.S. and Israel, while referencing employment systems in European countries as well, Ofer Sharone explores “the world of job searching and unemployment across class and nation.” Labor-market institutions in Israel, for example, are generally what Sharone calls “spec games” focused on presenting one’s skills in relation to the job on offer. In the U.S., on the other hand, “chemistry games” are more common, where job seekers concentrate on “presenting the person behind the resume.” Sharone argues that these two different kinds of job search “connect objective social structures and subjective experiences” in ways that lead to very different experiences of unemployment, with the U.S. way much more likely to lead to self-blame rather than system-blame.
Secrets of a Successful Organizer (Labor Notes), Alexandra Bradbury, Mark Brenner, and Jane Slaughter

This new Labor Notes book is built around 47 “secrets distilled from the insights and know-how of generations of organizers” and is illustrated with stories from workers who have organized workmates in a wide variety of workplaces. The “secrets” include how to identify organizing issues, map your workplace, build campaigns large or small, and inspire your co-workers to action. They also include how to anticipate “management’s tricks and traps” as well as taking advantage of their foibles. Patricia Eakin, president of the Pennsylvania Association of Staff Nurses, says it “is so well-written and the information so comprehensive that any novice or expert will learn how to be a great organizer. By using real-life examples with stories from real workers, you can see right away how the process can be applied at every workplace, from hospitals to fast food restaurants to factories.”

Nobody’s Jackknife (West End Press), Ellen McGrath Smith

Ellen McGrath Smith teaches at the University of Pittsburgh and Carlow University, having published award-winning writing in multiple genres. Of McGrath Smith’s debut book of poetry, Lynn Emanuel, author of Then Suddenly and Noose & Hook, writes: “Nobody’s Jackknife is a work of intelligence, verve, and assertiveness. It is a spacious work, one able to encompass poetry, essay, and prose poetry, and able to address manifold concerns, from spiritual explorations of the poses in yoga, to autobiographical poems of drinking, sex, and work. What a tough-minded, far-reaching, and beautiful debut this is.”

Parenting to a Degree: How Family Matters for College Women’s Success (U. of Chicago), Laura T. Hamilton

This book examines the lives of young women and their families to determine “what role parents play during the crucial college years.” According to the publisher, Laura Hamilton found four different parenting styles. Common among middle-class parents are professional helicopter parents who help their daughters develop the skills and credentials that will advance their careers and pink helicopter parents who emphasize “appearance, charm, and social ties in the hopes that women will secure a wealthy mate.” Working-class daughters are more likely to have bystander parents who are “relegated to the sidelines of their daughter’s lives” because they are “limited by economic concerns.” The fourth parenting style originates from a variety of class backgrounds, and Hamilton calls them paramedic parents who are ready to intervene in emergencies but otherwise value self-sufficiency above all. Hamilton argues that today “successfully navigating many colleges and universities without involved parents is nearly impossible, and that schools themselves are increasingly dependent on active parents for a wide array of tasks, with intended and unintended consequences.”
Forked: A New Standard for American Dining (Oxford U.), Saru Jayaraman
The publisher’s note for Forked includes a set of provocative questions Saru Jayaraman thinks we should be asking when “eating out”: “Is the line cook working through a case of stomach flu because he doesn’t get paid sick days? Is the busser not being promoted because he speaks with an accent? Is the server tolerating sexual harassment because tips are her only income?” Jayaraman is the co-founder of the Restaurant Opportunities Centers United, a labor organization that organizes and advocates for restaurant workers; her previous book, Behind the Kitchen Door (with Eric Schlosser) documented the deplorable wages and conditions in the industry. This book surveys the best, the worst and the not-there-yet restaurants at every level from fast food to fine dining, and it illustrates how workers can be paid and treated much better in ways that benefit workers and customers and even employers in the long run. Using the concept of sustainability in a new way, Jayaraman argues that consistent, long-term employer concern with “worker sustainability” improves the chances for restaurants to prosper and stay in business. Marion Nestle, a professor of public health at New York University, says: “This book should inspire all restaurant owners to take the "high road," and all of us restaurant customers to demand that they do.”

Honey from the Lion (Lookout Books), Matthew Neill Null
The narrative of Honey from the Lion centers on Cur Greathouse and his fellow workers in the Cheat River Paper & Pulp Company’s Blackpine work camp. Set at the turn of the century, the book tells the story of dangerous work, company greed, strike planning, and betrayal. Jayne Anne Phillips, National Book Award Finalist for Lark and Termite, writes of Null’s novel that it is “one of the most assured debuts of the year… Null’s compressed lyrical prose penetrates every darkness and wheels through time like a soaring bird.” And Laura Van Den Berg, author of The Isle of Youth and Find Me, writes, “Honey from the Lion is provocative in its exploration of transgression and redemption and exhilarating in its lyric evocation of this rugged American landscape. Matthew Neill Null establishes himself as a perceptive seer of haunted souls and as an astonishing stylist.”

No More Milk (Sundress Press), Karen Craigo
Karen Craigo’s first book collection of poetry delves into the work of motherhood—the physical and emotional work, including both the physical process of feeding and the worry-work of making sure the bills are paid and one’s family is fed (their bellies as well as hearts and souls). Heidi Czerwiec, author of Self-Portrait as Bettie Page, writes: “Despite the seeming refusal implied by No More Milk, there’s vast generosity in these poems, a sense of holiness in even the smallest of gestures. Holy, but not numinous: these are embodied prayers, ‘in praise of what’s left/ and all the hands it has known,’ the kind that makes you ‘bow beneath the burden of words.’”
**Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right (New Press), Arlie Russell Hochschild**

Famed Berkeley sociologist Arlie Hochschild spent five years studying poor and working-class whites in Louisiana, and especially those who were Tea Party activists. *Strangers in Their Own Land* is the result. According to the publisher: “Hochschild draws on her expert knowledge of the sociology of emotion to help us understand what it feels like to live in “red” America. Along the way she finds answers to one of the crucial questions of contemporary American politics: why do the people who would seem to benefit most from ‘liberal’ government intervention abhor the very idea?” The book is enthusiastically endorsed by Barbara Ehrenreich: “With the clear-headed empathy she is famous for, she explored the central paradox of these political activists in the heart of ‘cancer alley’: they understand that the chemical and oil companies have destroyed their environment and sometimes their lives, but they remain ardent defenders of free market capitalism. Hochschild spent many hours—at church services, picnics and kitchen tables—probing the ways they struggle to reconcile their conflicting interests and loyalties. There could not be a more important topic in current American politics, nor a better person to dissect it. Every page—every story and individual—is fascinating, and the emerging analysis is revelatory.”

**Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis (HarperCollins), J. D. Vance**

J.D. Vance’s coming-of-age memoir is a vivid, heart rending account of growing up in an extended family of Appalachian migrants from Kentucky to Middletown, Ohio. A certifiable “success,” Vance dishes out politically conservative shibboleths about “personal responsibility” that have been catnip to conservative pundits and politicians. *The New York Times* best-seller list describes the book thus: “A Yale Law School graduate looks at the struggles of America’s white working class through his own childhood in the Rust Belt.” The book is actually much narrower than that, critiquing a “hillbilly culture” that Vance does little to locate within the 105 million adult Americans who are commonly defined as “white working class.” But this is a political book only at the margins. Most of it is intensely focused on Vance’s drug-and-alcohol-addicted mother, her string of husbands and boyfriends who were Vance’s stepfathers-in-residence, and the rough but loving grandparents who did the bulk of Vance’s rearing. These and other character portraits are richly and complexly developed across the three decades of Vance’s life, and these warts-and-all accounts are not nearly as negative and simplistic as the political sloganeering with which the book has now become associated.

**The New Minority: White Working Class Politics in an Age of Immigration and Inequality (Oxford U.), Justin Gest**

This book is unique in doing a comparative study of working-class whites in industrial towns in the U.S. and the United Kingdom—Youngstown, Ohio, and Dagenham, east of London. According to the publisher, public policy professor Justin Gest “makes the case that tension between the vestiges of white working-class power and its perceived loss have produced the unique phenomenon of white working-class [right-wing] radicalization” in both towns on different
continents. Bill Greider of The Nation praises it: “With both sympathy and objectivity, Justin Gest explains the tragedy beneath the anger of the white working class. They have not only lost good jobs and incomes, but also their middle class social status and the respect-and gratitude-of the larger society.” Sociologist Monica McDermott says the book “transcends the usual arguments about the defensiveness and disaffection of the working class to develop a schema for understanding multiple forms of white working class political expression.”

In This Season of Rage and Melancholy Such Irrevocable Acts as These (Mongrel Empire Press), Kat Meads

The latest installment in Kat Meads’ Mawatuck County series focuses on the distinct ugliness of the 1970s South—political, social, and economic turbulence, the dying of the family farm, the particular twistedness of viewing it all through Pentecostal religion—and the after effects all of these forces leave on the main characters. Allison Amend writes that with this novel, Meads “cements her place in the pantheon of Great Southern Writers. With a spare, spot-on, laugh-out-loud funny, exacting style that draws the characters and their struggles (poverty, old wounds, religion’s vestiges, alcoholism) into sharp relief, Meads captures the essence of a time and place as only a native daughter can.”

The Making of Working-Class Religion (U. of Illinois), Matthew Pehl

Robert Orsi hails this book as a “signal contribution to the resurgence of historical interest in the religious worlds of working class men and women.” It is focused on Detroit from 1910 to 1969 and traces the changes in religious consciousness among working-class Catholics, African-American Protestants, and southern-born white evangelicals and Pentecostals. Mathew Pehl sees a sharp break in the New Deal era from “beliefs characterized by emotional expressiveness, alliance with supernatural forces, and incorporation of mass culture’s secular diversions into the sacred” to “more pragmatic class-conscious religion cultures of the New Deal era and, from the late Thirties on, a quilt of secular working-class cultures that coexisted in competitive, though creative, tension.” According to the publisher, Pehl then shows that “the ideology of race eclipsed class in the 1950s and 1960s, and in so doing replaced the class-conscious with the race-conscious in religious cultures.”

Running the Rails: Capital and Labor in the Philadelphia Transit Industry (Cornell), James Wolfinger

This book takes a long view of the Philadelphia transit system from the 1880s to the 1960s, tracing nearly a century’s worth of labor-management conflict in a highly-public workplace upon which everybody in a city depends, whether directly or not. James Wolfinger shows how workers reacted to waves of technological innovation, as well as raw violence, welfare capitalism, race-baiting, and smear campaigns against unions.
According to the publisher, “The benefits and decent wages Philadelphia public transit workers secured . . . came as a result of fighting for decades against their exploitation. Given capital’s great power in American society and management’s enduring quest to control its workforce, it is remarkable to see how much Philadelphia’s transit workers achieved.”

**On Gender, Labor, and Inequality (U. of Illinois), Ruth Milkman**

This collection of essays by Ruth Milkman gathers together 11 of Milkman’s path-breaking articles in women’s labor history, including “Union Responses to Workforce Feminization in the United States” and “Two Worlds of Unionism: Women and the Twenty-First Century Labor Movement.” The collection is capped by a new essay, “Women’s Work and Economic Crisis Revisited: Comparing the Great Recession and the Great Depression,” which argues that the “dramatic decline in gender inequality” of the last 50 years has devolved into “growing class imbalances [with] greater-than-ever disparity among women.”

**Working Class Boy (HarperCollins), Jimmy Barnes**

Jimmy Barnes is a rock star in Australia. A prolific songwriter, lead vocalist in the legendary band Cold Chisel, and a solo performer, Barnes’ has more #1 albums in Australia than the Beatles. But before “Jimmy Barnes,” he was James Swan, a child in an immigrant family that had moved from Scotland in 1962 to the working-class suburbs of Adelaide. *Working Class Boy* is a memoir of that childhood during a time when “dwindling money, too much alcohol and fraying tempers gave way to violence and despair” and the collapse of Jimmy’s family. One reviewer calls the memoir: “visceral, brave, honest . . . like *Angela’s Ashes* meets *Trainspotting* – only more brutal. A deep, guttural howl of a book, it speaks of the pain and hurt that haunt so many men.”

**Fatherhood and the British Working Class, 1865-1914 (Cambridge U.), Julie-Marie Strange**

According to the publisher, this book “explodes the myth that working-class interiorities are inaccessible or unrecoverable” as it locates life stories from a variety of sources, including working-class autobiographies, social surveys, visual culture and popular fiction. Further, it challenges “dominant assumptions about absent or ‘feckless’ fathers.” Focusing on material culture, everyday practice, obligation, duty and comedy as “sites for the development and expression of complex emotional lives,” Julie-Marie Strange explores “how emotional ties were formed between fathers and their children, the models of fatherhood available to working-class men, and the ways in which fathers interacted with children inside and outside the home.”
Workers and Thieves: Labor Movements and Popular Uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, (Stanford Briefs), Joel Beinin

The Arab Spring of 2011 is typically seen as simply the result of protest by an emerging urban middle class, aided by especially large contingents of college students from that class. Joel Beinin looks closely at two of the most important “battlefields” of 2011 and finds a much more complicated class picture. Tracing the history of workers’ movements in Egypt and Tunisia since the 1970s, Beinin argues that “the 2011 uprisings in these countries – and, importantly, their vastly different outcomes – are best understood within the context of the repeated mobilizations of workers and the unemployed over recent decades.” Egyptian workers, for example, had already formed “one of the largest oppositional movements to authoritarian rule” years before the protests in Tahrir Square. And in Tunisia the unemployed had sparked waves of rebellion with their chant, “A job is a right, you pack of thieves!” The title of the book is taken from that chant.

Book Reviews

Unified We Are a Force: How Faith and Labor Can Overcome America’s Inequalities, Joerg Rieger and Rosemarie Henkel-Rieger (Chalice Press)

by Ken Estey, Studies in Religion, Brooklyn College

When the field of working-class studies considers the labor movement, it should also account for the religious outlooks of working people. But the crossroads at which labor and faith meet has been fraught with suspicion about each other’s commitments. The authors of Unified We Are a Force urge that faith communities and labor unify to meet the profound crisis caused by the gap between the 99 percent and the 1 percent. Chapters 1 and 2 outline the consequences of this gap in the workplace. Deep solidarity is necessary to counter the challenges caused by inequality in the United States. The authors’ re-description of labor’s touchstone, described in chapter 3, moves beyond mere advocacy to birth a new activism. Deep solidarity is the basis for a broad-based movement sustained over the long haul, emphasizing that “your struggle and your liberation is part of ours and vice versa” (p. 128). For instance, faith communities could begin to “understand that they are mostly made up of working people” (p. 60). Unions and their supporters have their differences from faith communities, but deep solidarity “helps us overcome roadblocks, including the divide and conquer efforts of the system” (p. 70). The awareness that “we are all working people now – including the underemployed and the unemployed” is the foundation for a deep solidarity that values differences on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and age (p. 71, 76). The differences can be used productively to achieve a common good by rooting out hidden privileges even within communities otherwise committed to seeking justice.

The practice of deep solidarity means that labor can radicalize religion (chapter 4) and religion can radicalize labor (chapter 5). Labor helps religion radicalize (or reclaim its roots) by grounding religion in the
issues of real life. When religion is informed by labor, then religion can no longer merely concern itself with private or otherworldly matters. For instance, Christianity is enabled to regain neglected traditions that emphasize moralities that value human work and concern for both human and non-human communities.

In turn, religion can radicalize labor by identifying resources that clarify the significance of work. Abrahamic perspectives on labor view the outlooks of working people as central to their own traditions. Careful study of the origins of Passover, Christmas and Ramadan shows God’s presence to the forgotten and repressed. In Judaism and Christianity, God is a worker who actually takes sides and challenges oppression. For all three traditions, “God is never on the side of those who refuse to contribute to the common good and who exploit others...” (p. 120). Labor should take note of these traditions when tempted to accommodate management.

Decades of activism and involvement in both faith and labor communities in the Dallas area is the basis for chapter 6. Joerg is a theologian and ordained United Methodist clergy, and Rosemarie, a full-time organizer for Jobs with Justice and Dallas AFL-CIO community engagement coordinator. Building power by organizing people, they describe actions and events to bring together communities of faith and communities of labor to support worker rights.

A handbook for practitioners and a scholarly work with substantial endnotes, this jointly authored work should gain a wide audience. Look for the union bug on the copyright page and the back cover. The efforts of the authors and this Christian publisher to ensure this book was produced in a union shop reflect the practices the authors urge on its readership.

*China on Strike: Narratives of Workers’ Resistance*, edited by Hao Ren, Eli Friedman and Zhongjin Li (Haymarket Books)

*by Joshua Freeman, History, Queens College*

One of the great strike waves of recent history, now taking place in China, has not received much attention from scholars or the public elsewhere. The Hong Kong-based *China Labour Bulletin’s* strike map includes over three thousand strikes that took place between June 2015 and June 2016. It estimates that these constitute only ten to fifteen percent of the incidents that occurred. In Guangdong Province -- still the main center for foreign-owned, export-oriented factories -- on average more than one strike a day took place, involving not only manufacturing workers but also construction workers, retail workers, taxicab drivers, teachers, and even golf caddies.

Chinese strikes are typically unlike those in North America and Europe. Most last a day or two at most. Some involve demands for improved wages or, more rarely, better benefits, but very frequently they are protesting unpaid wages owed to workers; companies cheating on overtime pay; the failure of shuttering companies to make severance payments; and benefit reductions or speedup accompanying government-mandated increases in the minimum wage. Many strikes are small, but a few have involved tens of thousands of workers. Often the protests are aimed as much at government officials as company managers, demanding that they intervene to enforce labor laws or pressure employers to make
concessions. Many of the protests arise with little or no prior organization, no union involvement, and no clear leaders. Sometimes lower-level supervisors join in or even lead them. Tactics, beyond stopping work, include threatened suicides, blocking local roads, and marches on government offices. With many strikers living in company dormitories, stoppages often become de facto occupations or sit-downs.

The recently-published China on Strike: Narratives of Workers’ Resistance provides fascinating, first-hand accounts of the strike wave in the Pearl River Delta in Guangdong. Rich in texture and detail, along with excellent explanatory material, the book gives voice to young migrant workers whose experiences with labor action and ideas about it remain largely unknown inside China as well as outside. The book is an exercise in what its English editors call “public sociology”; the interviews were conducted by a network of young, left-wing Chinese college graduates working in factories, who sought to understand the causes and consequences of strikes. Very unusually, the informants include not only workers who helped lead strikes but also some who were not much more than bystanders, joining in because it seemed to be the thing everyone was doing, uninformed about the issues and dynamics at play. To have the experiences and ideas of such workers explored is a rarity, even in places where labor action has received extensive journalistic and scholarly attention.

For the worker-scholars who put together China on Strike, the effort was meant to be more than simply an investigation into industrial relations and workers’ lives. They also sought to present something of a how-to-do for potential strikers, drawing lessons from the incidents recounted. Given the close control over information about labor activity in the Chinese media, the narratives assembled here provide an important resource for Chinese activists. For the rest of us, they offer unusual insight into the vast Chinese working class, whose actions and ideas will no doubt help shape not only the future of their country but, given its economic and political importance, the future of all of us.

White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America Nancy Isenberg Viking, 2016
Review by Karen Gaffney, Raritan Valley Community College

In White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America, historian Nancy Isenberg focuses on the concept of “white trash” as a way to debunk the myth of classlessness in the US. She reveals how a powerful class structure was much more significant to our history than we like to think, especially considering that a desire for profit fueled European exploration of the Americas, and that didn’t stop when British colonies were established in what is now the US. However, while Isenberg makes several insightful points, her book prompts more questions than it provides answers.

The Epilogue is perhaps the strongest articulation of the book’s main ideas; in it, Isenberg writes, “Ironically, given the American Revolutionaries’ hatred for Old World aristocracies, Americans transfer wealth today in the fashion of those older societies, while modern European nations provide considerably more social services to their populations” (317). In other words, the myth of the American Dream tells us that the US is unique in the opportunity of upward mobility, that success only depends on hard work.
However, the uniqueness is not that we have a society with fluid class lines, but that we pretend to, when in fact we have just the opposite. As she explains, American colonists eager to leave England sought independence from England’s overt power structure, which they found tyrannical and unfair, all represented in the monarchy. However, as Isenberg shows, there were many examples of American colonists or early American presidents who gained power because of their elite family status. They might not have been called a “king” but the power structure associated with family and inheritance wasn’t all that different. The irony, then, is that we pretend that we’re so different from royal England, but we’re actually more aristocratic than England herself, especially when it comes to the link between upward mobility and family wealth.

Isenberg also insightfully highlights the ways that the principles of land, property, home, and breeding intersect with class in the American colonies and in the US, from its founding to the present. She shares a detailed history of language used to describe poor whites, language that often related to the land itself, especially mud, dirt, and waste. She also effectively highlights how pseudo-science and the eugenics movement gave credibility to perceptions of poor whites as biologically distinct and inferior, credibility that went all the way to the highest levels of government.

There is no doubt that class divisions are an extremely serious problem in the US, that they get ignored through the incessantly popular myth of the American Dream, and that examining the category of “white trash” can reveal those divisions in significant ways. However, given that this appears to be Isenberg’s main argument, it’s not clear who or what Isenberg is responding to. She is not the first to make these claims. While her meticulous footnotes reveal careful attention to a wealth of primary historical sources from various periods, an alphabetical bibliography of secondary sources would have been very helpful in order to get a better sense of the other types of sources being cited (or not cited). Plenty of writers today are examining class divisions, and for years, a smaller group of them has been exploring the category of white trash as a way to better understand class. (See, for example, Newitz and Wray’s White Trash: Race and Class in America) While we can credit Isenberg with this exact chronology and detailed history, her motivation and purpose are not clear. The Epilogue does start to present an argument, but that’s not a place to begin an argument in a book that’s more than three hundred pages (four hundred if you count the footnotes). Why did she choose the specific historical examples and details she did? What exactly are we supposed to do with all of this historical evidence? Who is she writing for, and what exactly is she hoping to accomplish? Her subtitle indicates this is an “untold history,” and certainly this precise history is untold, but the bigger picture has been raised before. Isenberg tends to engage much more with original historical material than with other scholars, so it’s not that clear whether she thinks other scholars missed something or if they’ve been analyzing it wrong.

If a society has class boundaries that are very difficult to cross but pretends they are permeable, how does the category white trash serve that purpose? And how is that situation different from a society that acknowledges its class boundaries more overtly? How does white trash relate to capitalism, and how does it relate especially to today’s hyper-capitalism?

Finally, how does the poverty of poor whites relate to people of color? While Isenberg briefly touches upon non-whites at various moments in history, a more sustained analysis of white trash requires examining class and race simultaneously. Moreover, Isenberg seems to take the “white” of “white trash” for granted, examining “trash” without examining the racialization of poor whites, white privilege, and the invention of whiteness. What does it mean to “trash” whiteness?
Isenberg certainly gives us some food for thought, especially the way in which profit was the motive for European exploration of the Americas from the beginning. In other words, European colonization of the Americas was always about class, profit, and exploitation. This book serves as a valuable reminder that even though we like to think otherwise, a rigid class structure that consolidated land, power, and money in the hands of a few permeated the original thirteen American colonies, the US at its founding, and our country today.

Voices from the Appalachian Coalfields
Mike Yarrow and Ruth Yarrow. Photographs by Douglas Yarrow. (Bottom Dog Press 2015)
Review by Sandee Gertz, Cumberland University

What’s love got to do with coal mining you might ask—a dangerous, relic-of-a-job that offered workers little in status, only sporadic security, and at times more suffering and heartbreak than many could bear? But spend some time listening to the Voices from the Appalachian Coalfields, a book of found poems gleaned from a series of interviews with hundreds of miners and their families during the 1970’s and 80’s, and the listener hears a chorus of spell-weaving narratives that sing of a complicated love story and its deep mark made on the heart.

You are working where no man has been before./ You can see evolution right there in front of you,/ the big fossil record of the earth./ It’s fascinating.”
Everybody Knows It’s Dangerous, by “Miner Ken.”

Verses in this book sing of the obvious love for the mines—men and women drawn to the powerful challenge and mystique of a job that, if one could endure it, held such promise of a good living wage (many times far better than average) but which could steal your heart with sudden lay-offs, serious injury, and rough management/union fights. It was a “rollercoaster” affair that could buy your wife three years at home with a new baby:

“You are working where no man has been before./ You can see evolution right there in front of you,/ the big fossil record of the earth./ It’s fascinating.”
Everybody Knows It’s Dangerous, by “Miner Ken.”

Or, find yourself “selling your things out of the house to exist” when the miners went on strike, as Zelda describes in this same poem:

“I was selling silverware./ I remember being pregnant and/ saying, “My God! Being an American and being pregnant/ and not having enough to eat.”/” You think, “Is this really happening?” But it was.

These are no second-hand emotions as Tina Turner sang of in 1984: the last decade where lunch pails were still opened under the earth in “dinner holes” and the time clocks still jumped. No, the poems in this
collection speak the language of the miners and loved ones themselves who were immersed in the culture of coal. Much of the stark, raw beauty of these poems is in the authenticity of the words and diction of the speakers that is unchanged from the interviews that Mike Yarrow completed before his death in 2014. In the hands of his wife, Ruth Yarrow, who assisted in the interviews, and many years later, curated the works as a “love letter” to her late husband, one can see evidence of great care and a passion for the miners’ stories going on record.

In a book where the origins and catalyst were such pure motivations, the reader also sees the “between the lines” evidence of love stories in the miner’s marriages and families. It’s a book where when a man goes on strike or is laid off, the wife often reverses roles and becomes the bread winner; it’s where a couple—when neither partner has a job—suffers together.

These poems do not fall to chauvinistic views of male-only mineworkers. A good part of the book is devoted to the first females in mining: “Connie” is only 4’11” but “could pick up a refrigerator” until her 40’s. She worked in roof-bolting, known as one of the most strenuous jobs in the mines. She’s the kind of woman who can get a guy in a neck hold in a floor fight for going down her shirt, but also the one who bandaged the men up when they were hurt, or listened to their marriage problems when they wanted to talk, as depicted in “Me and the Guys, Woman Miner, “Connie.”

Eventually, Connie became so close with the men on her crew that she cooked them all a Christmas meal: “had the dinner hole fixed up nice for them, table cloth, Christmas stockings hung, a tape player.” But it wasn’t always that way for the petite powerhouse, and for many women when they first entered the work site:

*When I first went in there,/ I didn’t really know what I was supposed to do./ They’d tell you, “You guys are going to move power tonight,”/ and that was it. The guys, they really didn’t talk to me/ if they didn’t have to./ To them, I was taking a job from a man. “Just Something that You Learn” Woman Miner “Connie”*

“Miners take care not to shine their light in others’ eyes,” is a mining truth that is mentioned in the introduction by Yarrow, but in *Voices of the Appalachian Coalfields*, light is shown directly into a place the general public would normally never see. The intense highs of the work, the bitter battles waged with management for safety and sanity, and the wins and losses of the unions as they attempted to gain a foothold are all depicted, as well as the often poignant losses of the self due to the harsh conditions.

*People are being really messed over./ Somebody’s fired for no reason. So it changes you. It makes you hotter.*

“Everybody Knows It’s Dangerous,” Miner “Ken”

So, who needs a heart when a heart can be broken, one might ask, of this love letter to a husband, a love song to an industry, a time that is now a documented record of the past, and all the more rich for these haunting and resonant poems?

West Virginia certainly did. Eastern Kentucky did, as well as Southwest Virginia, along with the people of these places rich in a rock that lies deep in the layers of the earth, containing an organic energy that fed generations with its bounty. Later in “Connie’s” poem, “Me and the Guys,” she writes of a time when she was sick and off work for two or three days in a row, and how “one of the guys” came by and brought her one single rose. “Voices of the Appalachian Coalfields” is not unlike that rose; a record of respect and dignity for the culture of coal: which love has a lot to do with.

Review by Jack Metzgar, Roosevelt University

Tamara Draut is Vice President of Policy and Research at Demos, a progressive advocacy organization that describes itself as “working for an America where we all have an equal say in our democracy and an equal chance in our economy.” But she grew up the daughter of a steelworker in Middletown, Ohio, and she weaves her personal story into this compelling portrait of the loss of a fairly prosperous “old working class” and the emergence of a new low-wage one she argues is a sleeping giant that is slowly but determinedly awakening.

Draut focuses on the one-third of workers in the largest occupational categories, the vast majority of whom would make less than $30,000 a year if they had full-time, full-year employment, which so many of them don’t. With very few exceptions, these are the worst jobs in our economy, but the middle-third of jobs ain’t what they used to be either. Using a mountain of solid scholarly research but presenting it in ways that are poignantly accessible for general readers, Draut carefully documents the conditions these workers face on the job and off. She focuses on this bottom third not merely to show how they are victimized by our “bargain-basement economy,” but because that’s where the action is – that’s where the sleeping giant is most clearly beginning to awaken.

Her primary evidence for this awakening is the Fight for $15, but she also presents an impressive account of non-traditional local labor organizing from around the country, some of which has coalesced into national networks or formal organizations. Organizations like the Day Laborers Organizing Network, the Domestic Workers Alliance, the Guestworker Alliance, the Taxi Workers Alliance, and the Restaurant Opportunities Center United. There are also more traditional union organizing campaigns with a wider range of innovative tactics and strategies than in the past.

This new organizing working class is not dominated by white men, as the old one was. White guys are part of it too, but the leadership and the most active elements are women and people of color. And Draut cites political organizing based in working-class communities among the awakening – groups like Black Lives Matter, the Working Families Party, North Carolina’s Moral Mondays, and the New Virginia Majority.

Given the powerful, well-monied forces arrayed against the sleeping giant’s awakening, there are good reasons for skepticism about Draut’s prognosis. But her brief profiles of organizers and activists in many of these groups inspire considerable hope. Their strong characters and rooted determination, for one thing, but there have always been people like them in working-class movements. More important, I think, is the way so many of them combine various organizing traditions that used to be ignorant of each other when they weren’t actually antagonistic. Likewise, large swaths of traditional movement institutions – the labor, civil rights, women, LGBT, immigrant rights, and environmental justice movements – are open to an often sloppy but spontaneous amalgamation, as younger generations of organizers move effortlessly from one movement to another to ply their skills.

*Sleeping Giant* will be justifiably criticized for its sunny optimism, but its fact-based combination of good social science and engaged journalism made me want to find new ways to help that giant awaken and start a new day. If it has that effect on other readers, that will make it an exceptionally successful book. And that is clearly Tamara Draut’s intention.
In Jeanetta Calhoun Mish’s book of poetry What I Learned at the War, the war is everyday life for those at the edge, at the bottom, on the fringe, those at risk—women, children (particularly female children), the poor, the mentally ill, the addicted. The battles are the daily battles of survival, and in this collection Mish delves deep into the experiences of the wounded and memories of those lost.

The book opens with a quote from Marx, familiar lines about people making their own history, but not under circumstances of their own making; instead, it’s made under circumstances handed down. This collection of poems is about the history handed down by culture, by blood, by family life, the manifestation of the past in the lives of the present. These poems are artifacts and expressions of exactly that, the trauma of past lives handed down, as deeply as in our very genes.

Many of us already know the lessons of this particular war and carry them in our own bodies; the difficult beauty of this book is that even if you don’t, you will know them and feel them after you read it; the poetry is unflinching, and the reading at times can be excruciating.

And even though the poetry can be excruciating, you cannot put it down, even when in the most difficult moments you might wish to. Pierre Bourdieu, in Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste, writes of the privilege of the elite whereby they can distance themselves from the ugly, the difficult, and withdraw far enough from it to find it “beautiful” or “artful.” This collection of poetry reminds the reader line by line and page by page that this distance is not afforded to those less privileged, who experience the difficult and ugly close up and personal, and carry it in and on their bodies, their minds, their spirits. The author affords the reader no safe aesthetic distance.

The “war” of the title is multi-layered. It’s the war on Native Americans, women, at-risk children, the mentally ill, the war on workers. These war lessons stick and stay, and some teach the skills of survival even as they sometimes must be overcome. In “Literacy Autobiography 1961-1991: #1 Body Language,” the narrator speaks of learning “not to confuse an arm reaching out in comfort with one poised to choke; so as not to confuse a body hovering over me in ecstasy with one preparing to suffocate.” That is, surviving means remembering well the lesson learned, but also learning to distinguish when its reflex and application is necessary.

Lest one think the collection is wholly dark and difficult, it must be pointed out that it is particularly poignant in how it presents hope and help, particularly the communal way those most endangered band together to survive. In “Sometimes there was an armistice,” the narrator—facing a formal dinner she feels ill-prepared for—is cared for head-to-heart by four gay men who share her residential hotel:
Four men, knowing I was terrified of a formal dinner I had to attend, (having never had much experience with fancy events), sat me down in the lobby of the Habana Inn where we lived, uncase their makeup tools, teased me about being their token breeder...

They dress her, help her choose jewelry, tenderly apply her makeup, paint her nails; they care for her:

Their manicured hands twisted my thick brown hair into a French braid, accented by loose tendrils curled with an iron. Iced and calmed what was left of my most-recent black eye. I went to the ball and, as I remember it, managed to always use the right fork and to not say fuck out loud, not even once.

Some are lost in the war. Others survive physically but remain—mentally, psychically—lost. Still others survive and struggle to rise, even DO rise, but never leave behind the lessons learned at the war. The most glorious of these survive to share the lessons learned the way Mish does in this collection, and they bear gripping witness to those left behind.