Readings:


Videos (as time allows)

*With Babies and Banners*
*Union Maids*
*Roger & Me*
*The Corporation*
*Bread & Roses*
*Mondragon*

Objectives and Discussion Topics:

This course does not presuppose any specialized knowledge of history, economics or political science. It assumes a willingness on your part to adopt a posture of skepticism toward much of what you’ve accepted as “fact” about these and related subjects. As labor historians, R. Boyer and H. Morais have noted, “labor’s story is the story of the American people,” and yet a student dependent upon orthodox high school textbooks (and too many college courses) would remain ignorant of this truth. We’ve been exposed to ample coverage of Presidents, Robber Barons, and Generals but of the ordinary men and women who in fact built the country, there is very little. Part of the course will attempt to respond to Jeremy Brecher’s call for a “rat’s eye view of history.” In the process (especially in the films) we will encounter some genuine folk heroes.

One of the assumptions of this course is that human behavior is significantly shaped by its relationship to the prevailing economic system, in this case, global capitalism. The nature of the work experience, especially who controls that process, may tell us how people develop a self-conception and a world view. There is much to ponder in Edward Hyman’s observation that “capitalism turns men and women into economic cannibals, and having done so, mistakes economic cannibalism for human nature.” It follows that we will be interested in political consciousness and why it remains at an abysmally low level in the United States. Given the cynicism about positive social change so prevalent among today’s college students, this awareness might further an appreciation of what is possible, both here and abroad.
Note: Some of you might find the course “one-sided.” But if we need to “hear all sides and not just one,” then there is good reason to hear a “side” that is invariably ignored or distorted. The elite perspective is virtually ubiquitous. I make no apologies for attempting to offer some “balance” to prevailing opinion and massive prior conditioning.

Discussion Topics:

The following outline of topics is intended to give some structure to our discussion. It is not intended as a rigid demarcation of the amount of time to be devoted to each topic.

Introduction: Questions & Statements for Group Discussion. (3 periods)

A Theoretical Approach to Capitalism: How Does It Work?

A. Feudalism and Transition to Capitalism

B. The Rise of the Working Class

The Working Class in America: Most of Us

A. Historical Development of Labor: Early Struggles, especially female workers (two films)

B. Class: A Useful Term in Today's World?

C. Class Consciousness: Why So Little of It?

The Capitalist Mode of Production (simulated game)

A. Labor and Value

B. The Labor Process

C. The Matter of Alienation

Who Rules America?

A. The Evolution of the Modern Corporation (film: Corporation)

B. Some Thoughts on the Media: Just Another Large Business?

C. The American Upper Class: Why They Aren't Like the Rest of Us
The Division of Labor

A. Technology and the Labor Process

B. Some Effects of “Scientific” Management: What Do Bosses Do?

C. Comparative Perspectives on Self-Management: Mondragon in Spain

D. What Do Workers Want?

Choosing an Effective Response for Labor as it Confronts the Global Mobility of Capital

A. Why no Socialism in America?

B. Non-Reformist Reforms: Always Coopted?

C. Labor and the State

D. Prospects for Global Unionism

E. Should We Party? The Rise of a U.S. Labor Party and Beyond

Examinations, Expectations and Grading

A. There will be a midterm exam, at least.

B. A final exam will provide an opportunity to test yourself in terms of comprehensive understanding of the material.

C. At this point, I foresee a paper on Triangle.

D. Class participation is essential in this course and is a factor in your final grade. You will be called upon to offer your opinions on readings, lecture, and comments by other participants. I expect you to attend every class meeting. No exceptions.

Academic Honesty Policy

Please see relevant sections in the Student Handbook.
A WORKER READS HISTORY
--Bertolt Brecht

WHO BUILT THE SEVEN GATES OF THEBES?
THE BOOKS ARE FILLED WITH NAMES OF KINGS.
WAS IT KINGS WHO HAULED THE Craggy BLOCKS OF STONE?
AND BABYLON, SO MANY TIMES DESTROYED.
WHO BUILT THE CITY UP EACH TIME? IN WHICH OF LIMA'S
HOUSES,
THAT CITY GLITTERING WITH GOLD, LIVED THOSE WHO BUILT IT?
IN THE EVENING WHEN THE CHINESE WALL WAS FINISHED
WHERE DID THE MASONS GO? IMPERIAL ROME
IS FULL OF ARCS OF TRIUMPH. WHO READED THEM UP? OVER
WHOM
DID THE CAESARS TRIUMPH? BYZANTIUM LIVES IN SONG,
WERE ALL HER SWELLINGS PALACES? AND EVEN IN ATLANTIS OF
THE LEGEND THE NIGHT THE SEA RUSHED IN,
THE DROWNING MEN STILL BELLOWS FOR THEIR SLAVES.

YOUNG ALEXANDER CONQUERED INDIA.
HE ALONE?
CAESAR BEAT THE GAULS.
WAS THERE NOT EVEN A COOK IN HIS ARMY?
PHILIP OF SPAIN WEPT AS HIS FLEET
WAS SUNK AND DESTROYED. WERE THERE NO OTHER TEARS?
FREDERICK THE GREAT TRIUMPHED IN THE SEVEN YEARS WAR.
WHO TRIUMPHED WITH HIM?

EACH PAGE A VICTORY,
AT WHOSE EXPENSE THE VICTORY BALL?
EVERY TEN YEARS A GREAT MAN,
WHO PAID THE PIPER?

SO MANY PARTICULARS.
SO MANY QUESTIONS.