

Political Science 210  
U.S. Workers in the New World Economy

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Readings:

C. Sackrey et al., *Introduction to Political Economy* (Cambridge: Dollars & Sense, 2006)  
Correspondents of *The New York Times*, *Class Matters* (NY: Holt, 2005)  
R. Fantasia and Kim Voss, *Hard Work* (Berkeley, UC, 2004)  
Paul Buhle and Nicole Schulman, *Wobblies!* (London: Verso, 2005)

Videos (as time allows):

1877: The Grand Army of Starvation  
The Wobblies  
Union Maids  
With Babies and Banners  
Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price  
Roger & Me  
Mondragon

Objectives and Discussion Topics:

As a recent editorial in *Monthly Review* notes, “There is no disputing that these are tough times for the working class and its allies.” The minimum wage remains frozen at \$5.15; some forty-five million Americans lack health care; union density has slipped under 14 percent and within the private sector under 10 percent; U.S. workers actually work more hours per year than twenty years ago and more than in any other industrialized country; existing unions are under relentless attack; CEOs receive 245 times the pay of U.S. production workers; working people remain without a party to represent their interests; American workers have yet to come to terms with the issues of race, ethnicity and gender; and class consciousness among U.S. workers remains the lowest among all industrialized nations. And yet, arguably, because of the key role of the United States within global capitalism, the organization and future direction, our working class may well determine the fate of the rest of the world’s people. While the outcome clearly remains in doubt, there is no doubt about the absolutely critical nature of this issue for people here and abroad. Privatization, deregulation, and the state’s retreat from providing social services—the hallmarks of neo-liberalism—have become the norm around the globe, from South Africa and China to Russia and the United States. This rapidly accelerating process has left ordinary women and men more vulnerable than ever to the vicissitudes of the market. The traditional (at least theoretically) ally for working people, the labor movement, is the subject matter for this course.

As we approach these matters, I don’t assume any specialized knowledge of history, economics, or policies on your part. I do assume a willingness to adopt a posture of skepticism toward much of what you’ve previously accepted as facts. That is, students dependent upon mainstream high school texts (and most college ones) will be ignorant and confused about both labor history and labor’s role in current national and international system. Part of this course will respond to Jeremy Brecher’s call for a rat’s eye view of history—the perspective of the

women and men who built the country. In the process we will encounter some genuine U.S. 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 developed to each topic.

Introduction: Value questions and statements for small group discussion (3 periods)

Theoretical Approach to Capitalism: How does it work?

- A. Feudalism and the transition to capitalism
- B. The rise of the working class

Labor and Surplus Value (simulation game)

- A. Is Marx still relevant?
- B. The labor process
- C. The matter of alienation

The Working Class in America: Most of us

- A. Some labor history in lieu of a formal class
- B. Class: Can we use the word in polite conversation today?
- C. Class consciousness: Why so little of it in the U.S.?"

Who Rules America?

- A. The evolution of the modern corporation
- B. 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 Co-opted?
- C. Labor and the State: Behind every corporation is a capitalist state
- D. The Prospects for Social Movement Unionism
- E. Should We Party? The need for U.S. Labor Party and Beyond

## **Examinations, Expectations and Grading**

- A. There will be midterm exams and final.
- B. At this point, I foresee a paper on one of the books.
- C. 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.

APPENDIX A

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? BYZANIUM 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 BELLOWED FOR THEIR SLAVES.

YOUNG ALEXANDER CONQUERED INDIA.  
HE ALONE?  
CAESAR BEAT THE GAULS.  
WAS THERE NOT EVEN A BOOK 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.