President’s Report

President’s Report:

Since the beginning of the new year, the WCSA has been involved with some exciting new developments.

- The new Journal of Working-Class Studies is now available online along with the call for papers for the upcoming June issue, “Popular Revolt and the Global Working Class.” Many thanks to the editorial leadership of Sarah Attfield and Liz Giuffre and the support of Sara Appel, Commissioning Editor, as well as members of the Communications Committee for their work.

- Our membership drive is underway. Please consider joining or renewing your WCSA membership. As a reminder, membership is now required for conference participants, and it runs from May 31—June 30 to follow our conference cycle. Visit our website at https://wcstudiesassociation.wordpress.com/membership/ for electronic payment or to download a form to return with your check.

- Now that this will be our last publication of Working-Class Notes, all content of the newsletter will shift to website. Thanks to Christie Launius for overseeing this publication! We are a large (and growing) community of scholars, teachers, artists, and activists and the WCSA invites its members to submit news items and content to the website. Tell us what you’re doing in the classroom, studio, and on the streets to promote working-class studies. If you have any accomplishments or projects underway, please forward that information to c4king@bridgew.edu.

As we look toward the upcoming conference in June at the University of Indiana at Bloomington, please note the following events:

- Our annual “Meet & Greet” will kick off the conference on Wednesday evening at 5:30 pm and is open to all conference participants. This is a great way to meet new and returning members, and also enjoy some good conversation, food, and music!

- Be sure to stop by and visit the WCSA’s first undergraduate and graduate students’ poster session to support the next generation of working-class scholars and activists.

- Two action gatherings sessions hosted by members of the WCSA Steering Committee will be held on the first and last day of the conference to allow space to reflect on growing the field of working-class studies. Everyone is welcome to take part in these sessions and we’re looking forward to hearing your ideas.

- “The Exchange”—a place for all artists (poets, filmmakers, activists, visual artists, and musicians) to share work and works in progress—will be available at various times during the conference.

- A presidential plenary session led by Past-Presidents Tim Strangleman and Christie Launius, President-elect Terry Easton, and myself has been scheduled to facilitate a discussion on future directions of the WCSA.

- Please be aware travel grant awards are available for conference participants. For more information, visit the travel grant awards page of our website.
I’m also happy to announce that plans are already underway for the WCSA 2019 conference, which will be held at SUNY-Stony Brook on June 7-9, 2018. We’ll have a full report along with updates from our officers at the WCSA business meeting in June. All are welcome to attend.

Looking forward to seeing everyone in Bloomington!

Michele Fazio

From Christie Launius, editor of Working Class Notes

As editor of Working Class Notes since taking over the position from Sherry Linkon back in 2010, it is with both sadness and excitement that I announce that the spring 2017 issue will be our last in this iteration. The forerunner of this newsletter dates back to the 1990s, when the Center for Working Class Studies mailed out a hard copy newsletter to its subscribers. I remember how excited I was to read it, and how honored I was to write a book review for it when I was a graduate student almost 20 years ago.

The book reviews that have been a highlight of the newsletter will now appear in our newly-launched journal, the Journal of Working-Class Studies. The member news section has already migrated onto the newsfeed of our website. Other newsletter features, including the president’s letter, officer reports, reports from centers, and the Book Notes, will now be posted directly to the website as separate pages.

The change, then, reflects how technology has changed over the last decades, but more significantly, it reflects the ways that the field has grown sufficiently to be able to launch its own journal, thanks to the vision (and dogged persistence) of Sarah Attfield and Liz Giuffre, with substantial help along the way from Sara Appel, and support and assistance from Michele Fazio, Courtney Maloney, and myself.

Please continue to send member news to Colby King <colby.king@bridgew.edu>, who has stepped in to help run the WCSA website. And in my new role as Book Review editor for the Journal of Working-Class Studies, I encourage people to volunteer to review books and/or to suggest books for review. More info can be found here.

Treasurer’s Report

Treasurer’s Report
Ken Estey

The Working Class Studies Association (WCSA) has a combined balance of $29,512.16 in our two checking accounts and in our PayPal account.

Our membership stands at 90 members. When I last reported our membership numbers, we had 135 members but we are in the “new” year and await your membership renewal. At our membership meeting at the How Class Works 2016 conference at Stony Brook, NY last June, the Steering Committee announced that it would like to double the WCSA membership (then at 113) in the coming year. We have a goal to reach 226 members by June 2017. We have a big climb now, but we can do it!
A total of 230-250 members is the minimum level necessary to fully fund the operating costs of the WCSA (and the Working Class Academics section), conference expenses, as well as various scholarships and awards that support our collective research and writing.

Additional expenses associated with the publication of *The Journal of Working-Class Studies* have occurred. I think of our expenses as investments in our organization. You join this excellent work with your membership renewal!

I am happy to announce that we have gained 3 additional lifetime members since my last report to you in October. Our new lifetime members, at $1000.00 each, have shown a deep and abiding commitment to the WCSA. Our times require extraordinary acts and each time I open the mail or email to see such gifts, I am reassured of our work and our ability to persevere.

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 this 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.

My contact information:

Ken Estey, WCSA, 71 Joseph Lane, Newfane, Vermont 05345

You may also reach me at kenestey@yahoo.com and call me on my landline: 802-365-9499

**Secretary’s Report**

**WCSA Secretary’s Report February 2017**

**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 new *Journal of Working-Class Studies* has published its December 2016 issue. The journal will publish two issues in 2017, one in June and one in December. The June 2017 issue will be a special issue: “Popular Revolt and the Global Working Class.” The CFP has been circulated and the deadline for submissions is March 31. The Communications Committee of the WCSA has been working to create the CFP for the June issue, publicize the journal, and clarify the publication and peer review processes of the journal.

Conference Matters:

This year’s conference: Joe Varga is organizing the 2017 WCSA conference at Indiana University Bloomington. It will occur May 31-June 3. The conference theme is “Class Struggle: Race, Gender and Revolution.” The deadline for proposals was February 20. From February 9 through February 20th, the WCSA ran an ad on *The Nation* to promote the conference.

Respectfully submitted by Courtney Maloney

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**Election News**

**WCSA 2017-18 Elections**

The nominations process is now open for the WCSA elections in June. Though we will have blast-email calls for nominations in April and May, it is not too early to submit nominations, including self-nominations. Simply email your nominee to Elections Committee Chair Lisa Kirby at LKirby@collin.edu. If you are nominating somebody besides yourself, please seek their permission before nominating and simply copy them on your email nomination to Lisa. No biographical rationale is necessary at this point.

The open positions for 2017-18 are: President-Elect, Treasurer, Secretary, two at-large members of the Steering Committee (one graduate student and one independent scholar), and one member of the Elections Committee. In addition, former members of the Association of Working-Class Academics need to nominate and elect a Chair-Elect for the new WCSA "Working-Class Academics Section."
Center Reports

Our Daily Work/Our Daily Lives, Michigan State University

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.

Enthusiasm continues to grow for the great line-up of programming this Spring under the ODW/ODL banner. We recently opened the new exhibit we are co-sponsoring at the Michigan State University College of Law featuring three linked Pittsburgh-based installations of photography by Charlee Brodsky and poetry by Jim Daniels. The photographs by Brodsky were the inspiration for the poems by former Detroit autoworker Daniels; together, they have done a number of books including Milltown to Malltown, which is one of the featured collections in the exhibit that looks at the transformation of the iconic Homestead mill area. We continue with our expanded schedule of brown bags from January to April, including an exploration of the Kent State student protest as a working class movement, children's conceptions of work, Africans working on the railroad and in the movie houses, boat-building in Michigan, and a musical tribute to the foremost folklore collector of the songs of sailors and lumbermen, Alan Lomax (with the Jayme Stone Lomax Project).

We continue to work in multiple ways on one of the chief focal points of our programming this year, the 80th anniversary of the Lansing Labor Holiday; the Holiday is arguably one of the greatest unsung struggles of labor in the 20th Century. The Holiday was a successful, non-violent one-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). 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 continues for a number of museum exhibits and community presentations, a showing of the Humphrey Bogart film *The Black Legion*, a new state of Michigan historical marker to commemorate the event, and a rally and 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.

In March, given the current surreal, political moment, we are happy to ground ourselves by welcoming Mother Jones herself (in the person of West Virginia performer Karen Vuranch) to mid-Michigan; once dubbed "the most dangerous woman in America," Mother Jones will help us put the current economic and political order in historical perspective with appearances both on campus and in the local labor community.

**Texas Center for Working-Class Studies, Collin College**

The Texas Center for Working-Class Studies held its third annual conference on Thursday, February 23, at Collin College's Spring Creek Campus. The conference featured keynote speaker Dr. David Roediger of the University of Kansas, who presented "The Middle Class and Misery, Past and Present." The conference also included presentations by faculty and students, round tables, and poster presentations. For more information about the conference and the center, please go to [http://iws.collin.edu/lkirby/](http://iws.collin.edu/lkirby/)
Book Notes

Bronx Migrations (Cherry Castle Publishing), Michelle Tokarczyk

Former president of the Working-Class Studies Association Michelle Tokarczyk remembers her childhood and youth in the Bronx in this “rich, autobiographical collection that tells the story of a neighborhood’s transition and the complications of race and class that influence her family’s struggles.” Jim Daniels, in his recent review in The Journal of Working-Class Studies, says, “The voice in these poems is direct, accessible, and strong . . . . What I admire about this collection is Tokarczyk’s awareness of her own biases and preoccupations. She complicates situations like our best poetry does rather than oversimplify them.” Jeanne Bryner says of Bronx Migrations: “Here, where hope and pain and hunger lean out of apartment windows, children are wise beyond their years. This gifted poet takes us by the hand through dark alleys to the church of memory.”

Civic Labors: Scholar Activism and Working-Class Studies (U. of Illinois Press), Dennis Deslippe, Eric Fure-Slocum, John W. McKerley, editors.

This anthology brings together labor studies scholars and working-class historians who have “long worked at the crossroads of academia and activism.” Essays include accounts of graduate student and faculty organizing, scholars participating in labor and community coalitions, teaching in union halls, and initiating public history events around working-class struggles, as well as historical essays on how “engaged scholarship” figured in important worker-led campaigns of the past. The authors discuss “how participation in current labor and social struggles guides their campus and community organizing, public history initiatives, teaching, mentoring and other activities.” Contributors include former WCSA president Peter Rachleff, Joe McCartin of Georgetown’s Kalmanovitz Initiative, and numerous others who have helped build Working-Class Studies as a field.

White Working Class (Harvard Business Review Press), Joan C. Williams

Two days after Donald Trump was elected U.S. President based, in part, on a large swing in non-college-educated white voters from Obama in 2008 to Trump in 2016, Joan C. Williams wrote a widely-circulated article on “What So Many People Don’t Get About the U.S. Working Class.” This book, due out in April 2017, elaborates on that article. The publisher promises the book will explain “why so much of the elite’s analysis of the white working class is misguided” and will provide “a blunt, bracing narrative that sketches a nuanced portrait of millions of people throughout the world who have proven to be a potent political force . . . in populist, nationalist movements.” According to the publisher, Williams argues that “the working class” is actually “the elusive, purportedly disappearing middle class,” which “often resents both the poor and the professionals”: “Their dream is not to join the upper middle class, with its different culture, but to stay true to their own values in their own communities – just with more money.”
Rowing Inland (Wayne State University Press), Jim Daniels

Rowing Inland, Jim Daniels’s fifteenth book of poetry, is a time machine that takes the reader back to the Metro Detroit of his youth and then accelerates toward the future. With humor and empathy, the author looks at his own family’s challenges and those of the surrounding community where the legacy handed down from generation to generation is one of survival. The economic hits this community has had to endure create both an uncertainty about its future and a determined tenacity. Terry Blackhawk, Kresge Literary Fellow, writes of Daniels’ book: “With scarcely a wasted word, the speaker’s examination of his past is excruciatingly objective and pitiless. I value these poems for their precision and honesty, and I appreciate Daniels’s wit, dryness of tone, and penchant for the surreal.”

Refinery Town: Big Oil, Big Money, and the Remaking of an American City (Beacon Press), Steve Early

Richmond, California, is a working-class city of about 100,000 people in the San Francisco Bay area. Once a classic company town of oil giant Chevron, its largely nonwhite population suffered from high unemployment and homicide rates, poverty, pollution and poorly funded public services. But Refinery Town by veteran labor journalist Steve Early chronicles 15 years of “successful community organizing that raised the local minimum wage, defeated a casino development project, challenged home foreclosures and evictions, and sought fair taxation of Big Oil.” Mike Davis hails the Richmond Progressive Alliance as “deeply rooted in local traditions of labor and black-liberation activism,” and says it “exemplifies what a grassroots ‘political revolution’ actually looks like.” Jacobin Magazine says Early, who moved to Richmond in 2012, “has a natural feel for the flow of grassroots political movements and the forces shaping working-class life.”

A Fight for the Soul of Public Education: The Story of the Chicago Teachers Strike (Cornell ILR Press), Steven K. Ashby and Robert Bruno

The Chicago Teachers’ strike shut down Chicago’s public schools for only seven days in 2012, but they utterly transformed the national perception of what so-called “education reform” was doing to our children. Steve Ashby and Bob Bruno were present before, during and after the strike chronicling the rise of a grassroots movement within the Teachers Union and rank-and-file teachers organizing with parents and students to resist deteriorating school services and narrowing curriculums. When the teachers struck, they filled downtown streets with tens of thousands of teachers, parents, students and other supporters, and held community forums in or near schools throughout the city. A Fight for the Soul of Public Education tells the story of the way the union first transformed itself and then made an effective fight for a clearly articulated vision of what public education could and should be. The book places this story within both “the role of state and national politics in imposing educational governance changes on public schools” and “a detailed account of the actual bargaining process revealing the mundane and the transcendental strategies of both school board and union representatives.” Bruce Nissen says the book is “riveting,” the “narrative and analysis are extraordinary.”
Scratching Out a Living: Latinos, Race, and Work in the Deep South (U. of California Press), Angela Stuesse

Anthropologist Angela Stuesse focuses on Mississippi’s chicken processing plants and the communities around them to study the impact of large numbers of Latin American immigrants who were recruited in the mid-1990s to work alongside the established African-American workforce in “some of the most dangerous and lowest-paid jobs in the country.” According to the publisher, Scratching Out a Living seeks to answer the questions: “How has Latino immigration transformed the South? In what ways is the presence of these newcomers complicating efforts to organize for workplace justice?” Ruth Milkman calls it a “richly textured ethnography” and “an exemplary work of politically engaged scholarship” that “vividly documents the history of the industry, its restructuring over recent decades, the abuses workers experience daily in the plants, and the labor-organizing efforts that she participated in and observed.”

Brick and Mortar (Blue Cubicle Press), Anna Silverstein

Overtime is a series of one-story chapbooks that showcase stories too long for Blue Cubicle Press's Workers Write! Series. Brick and Mortar, a recent addition, is the story of June, recently home from a two-year stint in the Peace Corps, as she resettles into life with her father, a bricklayer, and adjusts to her mother’s fight with Alzheimer’s disease. It’s a story of culture shock of multiple kinds. From the story: “The Peace Corps had a name for this experience: reverse culture shock. June had read about it in the handbook they’d given her at the start of service. The handbook . . . noted that some people found reverse culture shock even more disturbing than plain old culture shock: One expected to feel disoriented and off-kilter in a new country, but not back on one’s home turf.”


Scott Walker, governor of Wisconsin, has won popular acclaim by dismantling public-sector unions, attacking the state’s vaunted university system, and reducing government services across the board. To explain this phenomenon Katherine Cramer studied “rural political consciousness and [its] resentment of the ‘liberal elite’.” According to the publisher, the resulting book “illuminates the contours of rural consciousness, showing how place-based identities profoundly influence how people understand politics, regardless of whether urban politicians and their supporters really do shortchange or look down on those living in the country.” Cramer argues that “rural resentment, no less than partisanship, race, or class, plays a major role in dividing America against itself.” Theda Skocpol calls the book “a breath of fresh air in the study of American public opinion,” and Larry Bartels, “the smartest, richest, and most humane work of political science I have read in a very long time.”
Those Who Work, Those Who Don’t: Poverty, Morality, and Family in Rural America (U. of Minnesota Press), Jennifer Sherman

Focused on a remote logging town in Northern California that was devastated economically by a 1990 ruling listing the northern spotted owl as a threatened species, this book seeks to explain why “the rural poor prioritize issues such as the right to bear arms and disapprove of welfare despite their economic concerns.” Based on community research and intimate interviews during a year when she lived among them, Jennifer Sherman “looks at how members of the community coped with downward mobility caused by the loss of timber industry jobs and examines a wide range of reactions” – including fluctuating struggles with substance abuse, domestic violence, and changing gender roles. She concludes that “the growing cultural significance of moral values is a reasonable and inevitable response to economic collapse and political powerlessness.”

Across the Cimarron (Mongrel Empire Press), Jerry Wilson

Across the Cimarron is historical fiction centered on Western Oklahoma. Its historical borders, according to the author, are “the 1864 Sand Creek Massacre” and “the great Cimarron flood of 1957.” It’s the story of Ruth and Reuben Westerfield, homesteaders who in the course of a long marriage and life on the land face hardships of both the human-made and natural-world variety. Reuben and Ruth’s tale is intertwined with those of the Cheyenne and the Arapaho, who first inhabited the land, and those of Black settlers whose settlement experience was made even more difficult by segregation and racial discrimination. Davis D. Joyce, author of Alternative Oklahoma, writes: “Good historical fiction requires both knowledge of history and writing ability. Jerry Wilson has both. His knowledge of history comes at least in part from his and his family’s history in Oklahoma, which includes memoirs written by two of his grandmothers. As Reuben says, Oklahoma has also been ‘tainted by money and blood. There is little we can do to change the past, but we must acknowledge our debt and repay it as we can.”

Hope in Hard Times: Norvelt and the Struggle for Community During the Great Depression (Penn State U. Press), Timothy Kelly, Margaret Power, and Michael Cary

Norvelt is a small town in western Pennsylvania named for EleaNOR RooseVELT because it was one of nearly 100 new towns established as part of the New Deal during the depths of the Great Depression. The idea was to move destitute families from desperate urban industrial spaces into Jeffersonian cooperative communities. Hope in Hard Times traces the history of Norvelt from its founding as a New Deal experiment through its success as “a middle-class community that [was] an exemplar of the success of such programs” up to the present day. Paradoxically, according to the publisher, “many current residents of Norvelt – the children and grandchildren of the first inhabitants – oppose government intervention and support political candidates who advocate scrutinizing and even eliminating public programs.”
**The Filth of Progress: Immigrants, Americans, and the Building of Canals and Railroads in the West** (U. of California Press), Ryan Dearinger

The building of canals and railroads in the 19th century U.S. is generally seen as a series of technological and engineering marvels shepherded by capitalists and far-seeing politicians. *The Filth of Progress* instead tells the story of the people who actually built those marvels – “the suffering and survival . . . of canal and railroad construction workers in the tumultuous years of American expansion from the completion of the Erie Canal in 1825 to the joining of the Central Pacific and Union Pacific railroads in 1869.” According to the publisher, it is “the story of the immigrants and Americans – the Irish, Chinese, Mormons, and native-born citizens – whose labor created the West’s infrastructure.”

**Arachnid Verve** (Mongrel Empire Press), Shauna Osborn

A book of poetry focused on the multicultural, multilingual nature of life in the American Southwest, *Arachnid Verve* reworks the themes of labor and struggle from many angles, from the constant rebuilding of spiders to the reproductive labor of women. From the poem “Truss”: “The spider clings to its mark/persistent & intractable, / this black baby/that rebuilds its web/each time the north wind wails/ or I open the screen door.” Both human and creature are forced to be resilient, to rebuild, to survive. Allison Hedge Coke, author of *Streaming*, writes: “Osborn delivers succinct vignettes offering the test of life and the gist within it. Limit testing is litmus in this book, so hold on, we are in for a ride—just right—.”

**Showdown! Making Modern Unions** (Between the Lines), Rob Kristofferson and Simon Orpana

Last year was the 70th anniversary of the biggest and probably the most significant strike waves in U.S. and Canadian history. At one point more than a million U.S. workers – auto, steel, meatpacking, and electrical workers – were on strike at the same time. In Canada workers struck rubber and logging industries, a newspaper chain, central ports, and the national steel industry. Based on interviews and archival materials, *Showdown!* Is a graphic history of one of the key strike battlefields in Canada – Hamilton, Ontario, where strikes at electrical, rubber, and steel companies rallied friends and neighbors into a “community-wide struggle for decency, respect, and security.”

**Drawn to Change: Graphic Histories of Working-Class Struggle** (Between the Lines), Graphic History Collective with Paul Buhle

Using the slogan “Illustrate! Educate! Organize!” the Graphic History Collective has created a series of nine short comics on some of the key moments in Canadian labor and working-class history. Each of the graphic histories, accompanied by informative prefaces, “showcases the inspiring efforts and determination of working people who banded together with others to fight to change the world.”
The Dead Singing (Mongrel Empire Press), Michael Henson

In his fifth collection of poems, Michael Henson writes poems of bitterness and rage, love and forgiveness. These are poems of place and of prophecy, street scenes and visions, protests and elegies. The poet’s vision roams across the American continent with a detailed eye for the natural world and a perceptive ear for the drama of human living. Fred Whitehead, editor of John Brown Press, writes, “In the deep, urgent tradition of Ezekiel, Blake and Vallejo, Michael Henson traverses the American valley of dry bones, summoning them back into existence. Read this book if you want to live.”

Tales from the Construction Site (Blue Cubicle Press), Ed. David LaBounty

This collection of poetry and short stories is part of Blue Cubicle’s Workers Write! Series. Editor David LaBounty introduces the collection: “This issue is filled with stories and poems of craftsmen (and women), people who can measure and hammer and nail and saw and paint […] the people, who at the end of a long, hard—oftentimes sweaty—day can stand back and say, ‘I built that.’ And if they are lucky, what they’ve put together will be around for many years.”

The Life Project: The Extraordinary Story of Our Ordinary Lives (Allen Lane), Helen Pearson

This book is about “birth cohort studies” that began in Great Britain when the lives of every child born in one week in 1946 were subsequently followed over their lifetimes. Science journalist and former editor of Nature Helen Pearson tracks both the various efforts of social scientists to keep these expensive longitudinal studies going and the conclusions that have been drawn from this long-term look at how ordinary lives develop within specific historical circumstances. The Economist says these studies helped shape public policy in the UK and calls Pearson’s account of them “a jewel in the crown of British social science.”

Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City (Crown), Matthew Desmond

This award-winning book from 2016 focuses on renters in Milwaukee and examines why they get evicted and what happens to them afterwards. Telling the stories of eight families who are “spending almost everything they have on rent,” Matthew Desmond shows how eviction, once rare has now become ordinary, especially for single mothers. According to the publisher: “In vivid, intimate prose, Desmond provides a ground-level view of one of the most urgent issues facing America today. As we see families forced into shelters, squalid apartments, or more dangerous neighborhoods, we bear witness to the human cost of America’s vast inequality – and to people’s determination and intelligence in the face of hardship.” Barbara Ehrenreich calls the book “astonishing” in setting a “new standard for reporting on poverty.”
The Assistants (G.P. Putnam’s Sons), Camille Perri

The Assistants is the story of Tina Fontana, a 30-year old executive assistant to the CEO of an international corporation, struggling to make ends meet. She faces an ethical dilemma when a technical error with her boss’s expense report puts within her reach a sum of money that would pay off not only her own student loan debt but that of several co-workers (willing accomplices) as well. From Booklist: “The characters’ millennial concerns—overwhelming student loan debt, underemployment, loneliness in a world of hyperconnectivity—ring true.” The publisher calls it “a rallying cry for the leagues of overeducated and underpaid women who are asking themselves, How is it that after all these years, we are still assistants?”


Just after the Civil War the state of Georgia expanded its prison population and made prisoners available for hire by private businesses in a “convict leasing system” (popularly known as “chain gangs”) that lasted into the 20th century. Chained in Silence tells the complex stories of African-American women caught in this system. Even as these women “struggled to resist physical and sexual exploitation and to preserve their human dignity within a hostile climate of terror,” Talitha LeFlouria argues that their presence in labor camps and factories “helped modernize the South by creating a new and dynamic set of skills for black women.” The first chapter of the book is titled, “Only Woman Blacksmith in America is a Convict.” LeFlouria opens the book with a poignant remembrance of her grandmother, who grew up near one of the worst prisons in Georgia and one of whose primary goals in life was to avoid ever being entrapped in that system of terror.

Blue Star (Press 53), Barbara Presnell

A collection of poetry, Blue Star “is a story of war and its effect on family. The poems weave history, census and military records, letters, journals, and other documents to tell the 100-year story of one Southern family. The title refers to the stars family members hang from banners in their windows when a son or daughter is in service (now noted in our Blue Star Memorial highways and elsewhere). Interspersed with poems of war are accounts of a mother and her son as he grows from a child into a young man starting a family of his own.” John Beck, co-director of Our Daily Work/Our Daily Lives at Michigan State University, writes: “The powerful and poignant poems of Blue Star weave together the voices and life stories of men and women across generations of a North Carolina family as they face the realities and aftermaths of war on both the battlefront and the home front.”
The Art of Work (Noemi Press), Jen Fitzgerald

This poetry collection centers around United Food and Commercial Workers Local 342 in New York. Of her own work, the author says: “I will not pretend that these poems were born in a vacuum. Everything in this collection is lived experience: mine, my family’s, members of UFCW Local 342, and the undocumented agricultural workers unable to organize. The poems of my working class and my family’s working class histories were born of difficulty. I worked to honestly render these experiences into art, to elevate them to the level at which they deserved to be lifted.” Dr. Elaine Bernard, Executive Director of the Labor and Worklife Program at Harvard University, writes of Fitzgerald’s work that “Amongst the workers, […] there is story telling which brings you into a world which is tumultuous in images and emotions. The workplace which separates families by long hours, the banality, the seldom appreciated skill, the glimpse of friendship, the ongoing struggle to maintain dignity, the solidarity when it exists presents worklife at its toughest.”

A Class by Herself: Protective Laws for Women Workers, 1890s-1990s (Princeton U. Press), Nancy Woloch

This long-view history traces both the rise and fall of protective legislation for American women workers across a century when both workers’ rights and women’s rights were transformed. Women-only state protective laws early in the century – establishing maximum hours and minimum wages and restricting certain kinds of work – shielded women from some of the worst aspects of industrial labor and eventually led to the New Deal’s Fair Labor Standards Act which applied to both men and women. But with the rise of feminism in the 1960s and ‘70s, it became clear that these laws “also sustained a tradition of gendered law that abridged citizenship and impeded equality.” According to the publisher: “Drawing on decades of scholarship, institutional and legal records, and personal accounts, A Class by Herself sets forth a new narrative about the tensions inherent in women-only protective labor laws and their consequences.”

A People’s History of Modern Europe (Pluto Press), William A. Pelz

From the peasant wars of the late Middle Ages through the bourgeois revolutions of the 18th century and the rise of the industrial working class in the 19th to the European working classes up to today, William Pelz’s People’s History of Modern Europe “sweeps away the tired platitudes of the privileged and provides an opportunity to understand the story of Europe from the ground up.” Modeled on Howard Zinn’s People’s History of the United States, the book is “lively and engaging” and “will be appreciated by students and activists alike,” according to one reviewer, and “a fascinating journey across centuries towards the world as we experience today,” according to another.