

Oberlin College  
Department of Politics



**Politics 413: The Politics of Work and Organized Labor 3.0**

Spring 2025

Professors Marc Blecher and Steve Crowley

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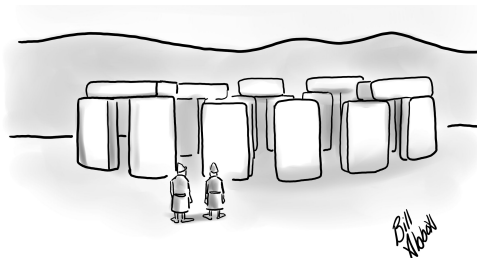
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Class meets in AJLC 102A,

Tuesdays 1:00-2:50

[Course Blackboard site](#)



*"This is what you get when you don't use union labor."*

**Introduction**

Within predominantly Western capitalist societies, the world of work has undergone a remarkable transformation over the past four decades or so. The workplace has seen the erosion of assembly line mass production by full-time "blue-collar" workers, and its replacement with "white-collar" and service sector jobs, and "flexible" production and gig work, performed by an increasingly insecure part-time and temporary workforce. Workers today are much less likely to be male and white, as women, minority workers and immigrants have entered the paid workforce in much larger numbers. Trade unions, which were the primary class organizations representing and defending workers in the 20th century, have gone into eclipse almost everywhere.

Politics 413 course explores the transformation of work, workers, and trade unions since the advent of industrial capitalism with a particular focus upon the period since the 1980s. Given the scope of the subject-matter, this course is something of a sampler, offering an introduction to a large range of topics, with some left out, and many more only briefly covered. The first third of the semester is broadly theoretical. We begin with a discussion of the nature of work, class and identity, power relations in the workplace, and the potential for collective action. Another third of the semester involves an examination of comparative industrial relations. We look at cases in North America, Western and Eastern Europe, and East Asia to see the differences in the way in which workers are organized, the relative success workers and unions have achieved, the different role played by the state, and to understand why particular national models of industrial relations evolve as they do. We also ask if national industrial relations are converging under the pressures of liberalization. In the final part of the semester, we examine the main changes in the economic environment – globalization, flexibility, platforms, automation, employer hostility – which now face workers, and we look forward, asking how workers are responding to the challenges facing them and the future of work under capitalism.

### **Course Format, Reading and Blogging**

The class will run as a seminar. We will not lecture. But we will distribute summaries of your blogs (see below) to provide a framework for discussion. All the more important, then, that you complete the readings on the subject for the day. The blog questions for each week will alert you to what we think are the main questions we'd like the reading to help you grasp.

Read social science differently than other kinds of material. Don't be a mindless reader — *i.e.*, don't let the author (including us) lead you around by the nose.

- ♦ Don't start with the first word and continue to the last word. Try to figure out the overall argument before you begin reading, by looking for summaries and phrases such as "the main argument is" at the beginning or end of each section or chapter. These aren't detective novels, so it's better to know the conclusion before you set out.
- ♦ Have questions in mind whose answers you are seeking out. The blog questions will help you in this respect, though you should of course add your own.
- ♦ Don't get bogged down. Once you know what you're looking for, it'll be easier to choose which paragraphs and sections to read carefully and which you can skim.
- ♦ Yes, skim. And if there's material you can't apprehend after a serious try, jot down your question to ask in class, put it the blog, or send us an e-mail. And then move on.

Each year Americans spend five times as much on dog food as on college books. Politics 413 is doing its part to help us get our priorities right. Please purchase the following books, which are available at the Oberlin Bookstore *inter alia*:

Manfred Elfstrom, *Workers and Change in China*

Jane McAlevey, *No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age*

William Strunk and E. B. White, *Elements of Style*

We will distribute copies of Les Leopold (Oberlin Class of 1969), *Wall Street's War on Workers*, courtesy of Les (who will co-lead our discussion of it). All other readings are on Blackboard.

Blogging is essential to Politics 413.

- ♦ To encourage reflective reading, help you retain what you have read, and help us calibrate what we do in class, once each week we expect you to write a short response to questions we will have posed about the works we are confronting. You're also welcome to comment there at any time on what others in the class have written. Start a debate! You may also use the blog to raise questions on which you would like help.
- ♦ You can find the blogs linked from Blackboard.
- ♦ We use the blogs to promote your learning, not to evaluate it. We want you to think and write your blogs freely and creatively, and to take risks. Therefore, we do not grade them. But because we view them as very important for your learning, we do factor heavily into your final grade simply whether you have done them seriously and regularly. If you do 13 of them (which is an average of one per week), you've got an "A" for 40% of the course. (But see page 4 on grading.)
- ♦ We also use the blogs to fine-tune our classes.
- ♦ Please **post your blog by 8:00 AM each Tuesday morning before each class**, so we can prepare the outline for that day's class.
- ♦ The blogs are a process, not a product; the whole point is to help you learn by doing them week-in, week-out, not at the end of the term in order to meet a requirement. That's why we close them weekly (though they remain visible). Put differently, it defeats their purpose to make them up at the end of the term. So please keep current with them on a weekly basis. If you fall a bit behind, just double up in a subsequent week to catch up. But **do not plan on making them up at the end of the term.**
- ♦ Just before class, please prepare by taking a few moments to read what everyone has written. Students have found that this really helps them grasp the material (and feel more secure about their own grasp of it).

## Essays

You will also write two open-book, take-home essays of approximately 1,250 words ( $\approx$  5 pages) each. That may sound short, but remember Pascal's apology to a correspondent: "*Je n'ai fait celle-ci plus longue que parce que je n'ai pas eu le loisir de la faire plus courte.*" ("I would have written a shorter letter, but I didn't have the time.") The papers will challenge you to grapple with and comment critically and creatively on the materials covered and issues raised in the course. We will be happy to review drafts before you finalize them. If you are not happy with the outcome of your first paper, you are welcome to rewrite it any time during the rest of the semester. The paper schedule appears on the course outline below.

## Grading

We object to grading on principle, since it is just one more pernicious, hidden way to commodify human beings in bourgeois society. That is, grades are just a price tag to indicate what you are worth on the graduate school or labor markets. We wish everyone would take all their courses pass/fail. But since we are all stuck with capitalism for the foreseeable future, we will hold our noses and grade your work according to the following weightings:

Blogs	40%
Papers	30% each
Active listening and quality (not quantity) of participation in class	A "fudge factor"

Please take careful note of these proportions. The heavy weighting of the blogs reflects our conviction that the weekly process of the course is as important to your learning as the two papers you will write. If you assume that the papers are your only significant responsibilities for the course, you will be unpleasantly surprised at the end of the semester, and we will be sad to surprise you.

## Course Objectives

The same "reform" movement that is ruining primary and secondary education is now taking aim at us, requiring faculty to list "learning goals" for all courses. These are being used to measure what we're doing, all the better to encourage still further the growing hegemony of market forces in education. Thus, we are obliged to tell you that the goal of *The Politics of Work and Organized Labor* is for you to learn about the politics of work and organized labor, to ask some very big questions, to prepare for your internships, and to get some instruction and practice in reading, writing and thinking systematically.

## Schedule of Classes, Topics and Assignments

### February 4: Work Under Capitalism

Chris Tilly and Charles Tilly, *Work Under Capitalism*, chapters 1-4 (pp. 1-95).

### February 11: Power at Work

Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, chapters 1, 4, 5 & 20 (pp. 31-40, 59-95 & 294-310).

Michael Burawoy, "Thirty Years of Making Out," (pp. 190-209) in Pahl, ed., *On Work*.

Andy Friedman, "Responsible Autonomy Versus Direct Control Over the Labour Process," (pp. 43-57) in *Capital & Class* [1977].

Rob Lucas, "Dreaming in Code" (pp. 125-132) in *New Left Review* [2010].

### February 18: Industrial Relations, Trade Unions and Collective Action

Screen [Final Offer](#)

Richard Freeman and James Medoff, *What Do Unions Do?* chapter 1 (pp. 3-19).

Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action*, chapter 3 (pp. 66-97).

Claus Offe, *Disorganized Capitalism*, chapter 7 (pp. 170-220).

Bjarke Refslund & Jens Arnholtz, "Power Resource Theory Revisited: The Perils and Promises for Understanding Contemporary Labour Politics" (pp. 1958-1979) in *Economic and Industrial Democracy* [November 2022].

Kim Voss, "Democratic Dilemmas: Union Democracy and Union Renewal" (pp. 369-382) in *Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research* [2010].

### February 25: Western Europe

Richard Hyman, *Understanding European Trade Unionism*, chapters 1-4 (pp. 1-65).

Leo Panitch, *Working Class Politics in Crisis*, chapter 5 (pp. 132-159).

Chris Howell, "The Conversion of Corporatism: Re-engineering Swedish Industrial Relations for a Neo-Liberal Era" (pp. 143-171), Baccaro and Howell, *European Industrial Relations: Trajectories of Neoliberal Transformation* [2017].

Mark Vail, Sara Watson & Daniel Driscoll, "Representation and Displacement: Labor Disembedding and Contested Neoliberalism in France" (pp. 377-400) in *Comparative Politics* [April 2023].

Tobias Schulze-Cleven, "German Labor Relations in International Perspective: A Model Reconsidered" (pp. 46-76) in *German Politics and Society* [2017].

## March 4: The US

Eric Loomis, "The Flint Sit-Down Strike and the New Deal," in *A History of America in Ten Strikes* (pp. 113-133).

Alexander Hertel-Fernandez, "Collective Action, Law, and the Fragmented Development of the American Labor Movement" (pp. 103-129) in Hacker, Hertel-Fernandez, Pierson & Thelen, eds. *The American Political Economy: Politics, Markets and Power* [2022].

Loic Wacquant, "From Slavery to Mass Incarceration" (pp. 41-60), in *New Left Review* [2002].

Eric Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal* (chapters 7 & 8).

Gabriel Winant, "The Making of the Springfield Working Class," *The New York Review of Books*, September 30, 2024.

## March 6: First paper topics distributed

## March 11: The New Political Economy of Work

Sabina Avdagic and Lucio Baccaro, "The Future of Employment Relations in Advanced Capitalism: Inexorable Decline?" (pp. 701-725) in *Oxford Handbook of Employment Relations* [2013].

Chris Howell, "The Neoliberal Low Point" (pp. 1-18) in Gregor Gall, ed., *The Handbook of the Past, Present and Future of Labour Unions*

David Weil, *The Fissured Workplace*, chapter 1 (pp. 7-27).

Thomas Adams, "Making the New Shop Floor" (pp. 213-229) in Nelson Lichtenstein, ed., *Wal-Mart: The Face of Twenty-First Century Capitalism*.

Steven Hill, *Raw Deal: How the "Uber Economy" and Runaway Capitalism Are Screwing American Workers*, chapters 3 (pp. 70-100).

Stephen Vallas, "Platform Capitalism: What's at Stake for Workers?" (pp. 48-59) in *New Labor Forum* [2019].

Barbara Ehrenreich, "Maid to Order" (pp. 85-103) in Ehrenreich and Hochschild, eds., *Global Woman* [2003].

Arlie Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*, chapters 1 and 6 (pp. 3-23 & 89-136).

*Screen Out at Work* and *Shift Change* (on Blackboard films tab)

## March 18: Planning for internships; first paper due

## April 1: China

Manfred Elfstrom, *Workers and Change in China*

## April 8: Russia

Roman Laba, "Worker Roots of Solidarity," *Problems of Communism*, July-August 1986.

Stephen Crowley, "Coal Miners and the Transformation of the USSR," *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 13:2, 1997.

David Ost, *The Defeat of Solidarity*, chapter 1 (pp. 1-7)

Guglielmo Meardi, *Social Failures of EU Enlargement : A Case of Workers Voting with Their Feet*, chapter 2 (pp. 1-21)

Stephen Crowley and Miroslav Stanojevic, "Varieties of Capitalism, Power Resources, and Historical Legacies: Explaining the Slovenian Exception," *Politics & Society*, 39:2, 2011

Crowley, "Russian Labor: Between Stability and Stagnation," in Susanne A. Wengle, ed., *Russian Politics Today*, 2023 (pp. 318-339).

## April 15: Mass Layoffs

Les Leopold, *Wall Street's War on Workers*

## April 22: Business and Labour Strategies

Screen Fedex, Target and Lowes employee training videos (on Blackboard films tab)

Screen *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, "Union-busting", November 14, 2021 (on Blackboard films tab)

Lowell Turner & Richard Hurd, "Building Social Movement Unionism" (pp. 9-26) in Lowell Turner, Harry Katz and Richard Hurd, eds., *Rekindling the Movement*.

Gabriel Winant, "Who Works for the Workers?" in N+1 [2016]. <https://www.nplusonemag.com/issue-26/essays/who-works-for-the-workers/>

Christian Ibsen and Maite Tapia, "Trade Union Revitalization: Where are we now? Where to next?" (pp. 170-191) in *Journal of Industrial Relations* [2017].

Charmaine Chua & Spencer Cox, "Battling the Behemoth: Amazon and the Rise of America's New Working Class" (pp. 120-140) in *Socialist Register* [2023].

Eric Blanc, "How Digitized Strategy Impacts Movement Outcomes: Social Media, Mobilizing, and Organizing in the 2018 Teachers' Strikes" (pp. 485-518) in *Politics & Society* [September 2022].

Maurizio Atzeni, "Workers' Organizations and the Fetishism of the Trade Union Form: Towards New Pathways for Research on the Labour Movement?" (pp. 1349-1362) in *Globalizations* [2021].

## April 29: The Future of Work and Labor

Bob Black, "The Abolition of Work" (pp. 1-11), unpublished manuscript.

Alex Gourevitch, "Post-Work Socialism?" (pp. 9-48) in *Catalyst* [Summer 2022].

May 6: "Don't Mourn, Organize"

Jane McAlevey, *No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age*

May 8: Second paper topics distributed

May 17, 11 AM: Second paper due