

What is Labor Day to me? Reflections on my trip to the American Labor Museum

By: Marc Lorenc, PhD

“Factory”

*Early in the morning factory whistle blows
Man rises from bed and puts on his clothes
Man takes his lunch, walks out in the morning light
It's the working, the working, just the working life*

*Through the mansions of fear, through the mansions of pain
I see my daddy walking through them factory gates in the rain
Factory takes his hearing, factory gives him life
The working, the working, just the working life*

*End of the day, factory whistle cries
Men walk through these gates with death in their eyes
And you just better believe, boy
Somebody's gonna get hurt tonight
It's the working, the working, just the working life
'Cause it's the working, the working, just the working life*

-Bruce Springsteen

I grew up a first generation hyphenated American in Garfield, NJ. My parents were farmers who came from Poland and settled in northern New Jersey in the 1980s. They were immigrants coming to America to make a better life for themselves and their children. It's a story we have all heard before, the proverbial American Dream as attainable by hard work and making your own opportunity. There is one in a sea of stories surrounding the migration and movement of people throughout history. Bouncing around the various pharmaceutical companies in the state, my mom picked up overtime shifts on the quality control line and moonlighted as a waitress on weekends to make ends meet. She would work the day shift while my dad picked up second shift. It was their way of mitigating childcare costs. My mom was not part of a labor union. She hopped around between companies because they would close and move when a better deal came around. Deindustrialization¹ and global outsourcing became the norm at

¹ When industrial jobs that provide a country or region's main source of income shut down or move away. An example can be the shift away from coal mining or the shut down of factories that are now outsourced to other countries. Such occurrences have an effect on the local economy and everyday lives of people.

the time my parents came to the USA. Neoliberalism² was in full force and their hopes of achieving the American Dream would have many more stops and gaps.

That's the thing about experiencing the economy. You are too busy trying to make ends meet, too exhausted to think about anything else. You come home from work exhausted, trying to keep it all together, running errands, taking care of the kids, helping them study, feeding, bathing, and clothing them. It's a lot on your plate and there is no guarantee that your job will be there tomorrow. All of this is a blur from the perspective of a child. All I knew was that my parents worked a lot, that they picked up overtime shifts, and that there was no money for the toy I wanted. Priorities are different when you see the world through what you don't have rather than what you do. After all, I was more concerned about what cartoon was on the tv, getting to play the new video game, and having time to play outside with my friends. Kids being kids. Even with this backdrop, I do remember my parents struggling. It's hard not to notice the rug being pulled out underneath your parents when their job moved away or when an economic downturn led to lay-offs. People become a resource and unemployment has a way of reminding you how precarious the term "middle class" is.

It would take a number of years for me to realize that the only consistent employment in the family was my father's job. My father worked a union job at a pipe making factory. He worked evenings while growing up, waking up early to take us to school. He often worked Saturdays, making overtime that was difficult to resist. Time and a half made the hot, dangerous work palatable. Growing up, I knew he had a union job, but I did not what that meant until much later in my life. All I knew was that he had a steady, predictable schedule. Something that was rarely interrupted. When it was, I took note. I remember one winter when my mom packed my siblings and me into a car and drove to the factory where my dad worked. It was snowing and the union was on strike. I remember seeing the picket signs and lines of workers standing outside. To a kid it looked like they were playing outside. The reality of course was different. They were asking for better wages and conditions, walking in the cold and withholding their labor to make their demands heard. Everyone was on their feet with a sign around their neck or attached to a stick. There was real solidarity between the workers (a term that I will return to later). My role in this strike? Well, it was bringing my dad a cup of hot coffee of course. My mom told us that they would be outside until midnight so what else could we do.

Looking back on my childhood it is easy now to see how much the labor movement affected my upbringing. Between the guaranteed hours and income, health benefits, and sense of purpose that a union job instilled in my father, my family was able to save a modicum of money to achieve the proverbial American Dream. It took my parents 30 years, but they were finally able to pay off their mortgage. Their kids went to college (albeit with the additional weight that is student loans) and they were able to create a comfortable living as a lower middle-class family in the suburbs of New Jersey. My parents are still working in factories to this day, living in the same home they purchased when I was born. Some things never change.

² A policy model and ideology that transfers the control of economic considerations from the public sector to the private sector. Neoliberal policies have several commonalities according to David Harvey, some of which are: they support privatization of public services and goods, deregulation of business and finance, and lower tax rates for the wealthy.



*Figure 1: The American Labor Museum
(Housed in the 1908 Botto House National
Landmark)*

So why this trip down memory lane? A couple of weeks ago I had the privilege of visiting the American Labor Museum in Haledon, NJ. Seeing the 1908 Botto House National Landmark in person on a hot 90-degree day stirred in me a lot of reflection about labor history and Labor Day more broadly. The great thing about visiting the site is the sense of connection you make with the struggles of past immigrants and your own life. In the banal arrangement of the house, I saw the everyday story of a family making ends meet. I felt the desperation to find work so that you can feed your kids and pay the bills. I saw and heard how the house was split up to fit three families under one roof in an attempt to make things easier. I immediately became entranced with the shared experience I was seeing, empathizing with the Botto family through the lens of my own childhood. The American Labor Museum achieves such retrospection by portraying the everyday life of a working class, immigrant family in relation to the larger, socio-economic conditions shaping labor relations. This is a potent combination that has the visitor considering both the domestic and public spheres, bringing the idea of a strike to life.

Framed with how precarious everyday life is for a typical worker, a general strike as seen in the 1913 Paterson Silk strike is unfathomable to imagine. Think about how much you are risking by striking as a worker. You can lose your job, be potentially blacklisted, and even be hurt or lose your life due to strikebreakers. Such considerations were real. Many

bosses used these fears and everyday concerns to scare workers into obedience. It took a lot of organizing to ensure that everyone stayed together even in the face of scabs (outside workers bought in to do the work of those on strike) and agitation in the form of agent provocateurs, police, and even the National Guard. Holding out on a strike meant a balancing act between self-preservation, providing for your family, and negotiating workplace demands.

Seen in this way, labor is an important lens to view the past and present through. It opens up different avenues of inquiry that highlight how power and ideology shift on the ground experiences. It calls attention to how and why decisions are made, who is included, who benefits, and how it is rationalized to be just and equitable. Business owners often feel entitled to the fruits of their employees' labors, seeing their investment in time and assumption of financial risk as a justification for why thankful workers should happily play by the rules. In this perspective, a labor strike seems like a crazy idea. Why would workers forgo wages and risk losing their jobs for the alternative of not getting paid at all? They should be grateful for employment especially in times of economic downfall. In their eyes, they are the job creators, the movers and shakers of the world. The workers are replaceable cogs in the system, resources to be used.

While this caricature may seem extreme, it is this very thinking that undergirds much of labor history both in the past and present. This ideology is so rooted in our way of thinking as Americans that you probably found yourself agreeing with some of the rationale outlined above concerning a boss's entitlement. Part of this is because of a concentrated media campaign that has been carried out since the industrial revolution (see Noam Chomsky's [Requiem for an American Dream](#)). This campaign portrays a rosy picture of capitalist innovation, heralding the big business owners of the late 19th and early 20th century as titans of innovation. The constant celebration of such individuals has led to a particular ideology that was and is still internalized by the public (see our current fascination with leaders in the technology sector). As we all know, the story is much more complex than this. Labor history reminds us that there is a whole larger consideration that needs to take place.

There are a number of words that labor history forces us to contend with, but perhaps the ones that most resonate, when considering why it is such a useful lens to explore our past and present, are: class consciousness and solidarity. Let's return to our early rationalization for why business owners feel entitled to their profits. Using labor theory (see David Graber's *Debt: The First 5000 Years*), we understand that such positioning is meant to create and maintain a power imbalance, to shift attention away from what a worker brings to the table. It minimizes the notion of risk as a two-way street in favor of focusing solely on the boss's narrative and considerations. While owners do in fact risk their money and livelihood in a business endeavor, they have certain legal protections guaranteed to them by bankruptcy courts and laws that can minimize the effects of poor business decisions. Workers on the other hand have to risk their own livelihood and stability on the word and behavior of an owner. They have to trust that the company will stick around (workers are often left out of any long term company planning and decision making) and that their job will still be there (workers often don't get a 2 weeks notice when they are fired or laid off), all while their health insurance and benefits are tied to being employed (the latter of which is a tool that ensures further complacency with poor labor deals). There are no guarantees, especially when employment is at will. Risk therefore cannot be solely claimed by the owner themselves especially when they have the benefit of legal and financial maneuvering that is not available to workers. To treat both parties as if they are on the same footing is short sighted and willfully blind to the lived realities of people on the ground.

This conversation rarely occurs outside of labor circles. Since the 1970s, there has been a radical downfall in labor unions in the country. This shift in ideology towards neoliberal policies (See David Harvey's [A Brief History of Neoliberalism](#)) has created new forms of union busting that accompanied the traditional methods of employing scabs and physical intimidation. The battleground is and always was ideological, but in the current political climate of misinformation and disinformation, corporations increasingly rely on anti-union PR campaigns both internally and externally to prevent unionization to occur at the workplace. Nationally, state laws such as "Right to Work" affect a union's membership and ability to collect dues, sowing division between pro and anti-union workers that severely hampers the collective bargaining strength of unions. Further complicating all of this, the shift to a "gig economy" has transferred even more risk to the worker, placing them in the precarious position of being independent contractors whose wages are garnished by the service they work for without the benefits typically associated with employment. This movement towards an increase of part-time workers (also seen in the adjunctification of faculty at universities), allows for organizations to cut costs at the expense of a worker's standard of living. Without a strong union, there is little recourse that can be taken to challenge for better wages and conditions. Some things never change.

There will always be apologists for such disparities between employer and employee. As an anthropologist I know that in part this is because each party is seeing the picture through their own world view and considerations. A business owner must weigh the costs of labor, material, and overhead in a manner that allows them to be competitive in an economic market. For them, the bottom line must be a consideration for how to run an effective business. This is weighed against their profit margin. It's just business. As discussed earlier, the sense of entitlement to this profit varies greatly based on the employer (see the social media account of business owner [Dan Price](#)). Books such as "[Take Back the Economy](#)" and documentaries like "[Inequality for All](#)" demonstrate how profit can be used by companies to better raise the conditions of everyone rather than a select few. From the worker's perspective, this is monumental to consider. It is foolish to think that workers should be happy with what they have currently. If the pandemic reminds us of anything, it's that machines, ideas, and experiences need labor for them to move and produce. Without labor, the machines stand still, the ideas go stagnant, and the experiences cannot be made. Here is the power and crux of a labor theory lens. It calls attention to why things work from a ground up approach. It highlights how everyday people make the engines turn and focuses on the power they have. It instills a knowledge of how the economic system works, what rules are in place, and who ultimately benefits from it.

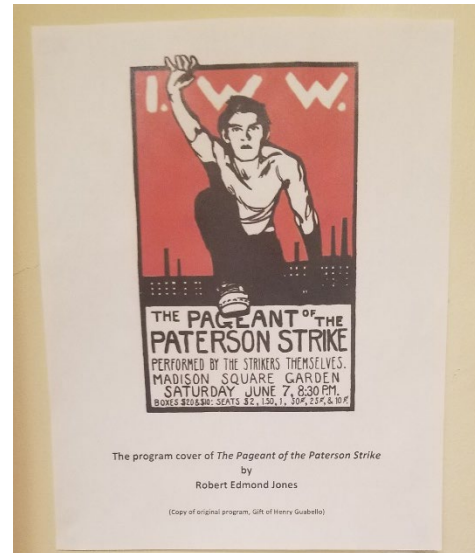


Figure 2: Program Cover for *The Pageant of the Paterson Strike*, an event held to raise awareness and money for the workers on strike.

I often think back to my schooling, wondering why I was rarely taught labor history and what affect this had on my own historical consciousness. I was lucky enough to have a history teacher who put Eugene V. Debs on my radar late in high school. I was fascinated by this historic figure and the work he was doing. Reading some of his speeches today, you get a sense of shock and disbelief in how little things have changed when it comes to beliefs and ideologies that motivate owners and workers alike. The story keeps playing on loop, partially because the history of the labor movement is obfuscated in our education system and public discourse. We know the power of history, specifically how it can make sense of the present and give us the context and tools to understand where we have been and where we are going. Labor history is important to understand now more than ever because it gives us an accounting of the very struggles that occurred in our own backyards. It demonstrates how the protests and strikes of the past 150 years shaped our current expectations around a 40-hour work week, minimum wage, vacation, and benefits. It reminds us that these were not gifts or entitlements given to us, but were rather rights fought for by everyday people. To forget about labor history is to do a disservice to the people in both our past and present who continue the fight for better wages and conditions.

Pulling up to the American Labor Museum, one gets the overwhelming sense that happens with historic sites residing in the middle of a larger community. There is something about visiting a place in person that you cannot compare to online galleries or digitized landscapes. Perhaps it's the ghosts of the past or the ethereal feeling you get when the weight of history exerts itself on you, walking through an environment that engages all your senses. Toni Morrison talked about "rememory" as a concept that brought memories long forgotten back into consciousness, a distinct feeling where the lines of history, experience, and memory blur, in a moment of remembering and knowing. I could not help but feel this staring out of the balcony where 20,000 workers gathered below during the 1913 Paterson Silk Strike. Walking through the rooms of the museum and seeing the everyday life of an immigrant family stirred in



Figure 3: Pietro Botto's Naturalization Papers

me my own experiences with labor history. And this is the crux of it. Labor history isn't just about past strikes. It is about the present. It is about the struggles people continue to face and the historical legacies they come out of. While talking to the Education director at the American Labor Museum, Evelyn Hershey, she relayed a beautiful story about a Colombian immigrant from Elizabeth, NJ who looked at Peter Botto's naturalization papers and began comparing them to their own. She felt a connection to this history and saw in her journey today the reflection and continuation of the past. Separated by more than a hundred years, the immigrant worker story is still experienced by people today. While the country of origin may differ, the common historic thread resonates with visitors far and wide. Returning to our two Labor Day words: class

consciousness and solidarity, it is important to remember that we have more in common with each other as workers than we do in our differences. Labor history calls attention to this by showing how multi-racial and ethnic coalitions have in the past and continue in the present to bring people together to achieve great things. After all, this is the hallmark of solidarity, the understanding that differences will always be there and that in order to make any gains we must learn to live with them while working together towards the same goal. It's this very class consciousness and solidarity that we commemorate on this Labor Day.

Further Reading

[Pages From a Black Radical's Notebook: A James Boggs Reader](#)

[Darkwater: Voices From Within the Veil](#)

[Si, Ella Puede!: The Rhetorical Legacy of Dolores Huerta and the United Farm Workers](#)

[Eugene V. Debs: A Graphic Biography](#)

[Women Have Always Worked: A Concise History \(Second Edition\)](#)

[Jailbird](#)

[Why is There No Labor Party in the United States](#)

[A History of American in Ten Strikes](#)

[Organized Labor & the Black Worker](#)

[We Shall be All: A History of the Industrial Workers of the World](#)

[State of the Union: A Century of American Labor](#)

[Women, Work, and Protest: A Century of Women's Labor History](#)

[Profit Over People: Neoliberalism and Global Order](#)

[Monopsony Capitalism: Power and Production the Twilight of the Sweatshop Age](#)

[A Brief History of Neoliberalism](#)

New Jersey Based Resources

<https://nj.gov/state/historical/his-topical-labor-strikes.shtml>

<https://njafclcio.org/history/>

<https://www.newjerseyalmanac.com/labor-movement-history.html>

https://libguides.rutgers.edu/scua_labor_consumerrights/laborrights

Labor Day Playlists

<https://folkways.si.edu/classic-labor-songs-from-folkways/american-folk-struggle-protest/music/album/smithsonian>

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/5jRZcZVAXg6iUKaq3ubPFp>

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/6ECcDpGVHdSOCz9M75EXGd?si=SKMOFBCFROGfyH7W8xK8Fg&nd=1>

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/0Qf5kDnbWY5wVAi9WJgIkj?si=CmHXZr7AST2HrPWrJExPnQ&nd=1>