

History 642: Graduate Seminar in Labor History

Western Kentucky University

Spring 2024

Web class

Dr. Dorothea Browder

dorothea.browder@wku.edu

Zoom office: <https://wku.zoom.us/j/7623498331>

office hours by appointment

Introduction

This course introduces graduate students to important recent scholarship in the history of labor in the United States. It includes major developments in paid and unpaid labor, interrogates how definitions and valuations of labor have intersected with other major historical developments, and explores working people's strategies to improve their plight.

Course goals

skills

- Writing short and mid-length analyses of historical scholarship
- Making effective historical arguments based on evidence
- Placing works of historical scholarship in conversation and assessing their contributions
- Contributing to a scholarly community by raising questions that prompt insightful discussion and responding effectively to classmates' discussion points
- Drawing on current scholarship to raise new questions for future research

content/themes

- Waged and unwaged, enslaved and free labor
- Change and continuity in valuation of various types of labor
- Ordinary working people's experiences
- Social movements around labor
- The state and labor

Required texts

If you are not using Big Red Backpack, or if your order has not arrived yet, many of these texts are available digitally at WKU Libraries. To purchase, I recommend bookshop.org, and publisher sites, which often have big sales (up to half off).

Books

[Alexandra Finley, *An Intimate Economy Enslaved Women, Work, and America's Domestic Slave Trade* \(UNC Press, 2020\) 978-1-4696-6135-3](#)

[Seth Rockman, *Scraping By: Wage Labor, Slavery, and Survival in Early Baltimore* \(Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009\) 978-0-801-89007-9](#)

[Heath Carter, *Union Made: Working People and the Rise of Social Christianity in Chicago* \(University of Illinois Press, 2019\) 978-019-084737-1](#)

[Lara Vapnek, *Breadwinners: Working Women and Economic Independence, 1865-1920* \(University of Illinois Press, 2009\) 978-0-252-03471-8](#)

[Tobias Higbie, *Labor's Mind: A History of Working-Class Intellectual Life* \(University of Illinois Press, 2019\)](#)

[Daniel Katz, *All Together Different: Yiddish Socialists, Garment Workers, and the Labor Roots of Multiculturalism* \(NYU Press, 2011\) 9781479873258](#)

[Premilla Nadasen, *Household Workers Unite: The Untold Story of African American Women Who Built a Movement* \(Beacon Press, 2015\) 978-080701450-9](#)

[Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* \(New Press, 2012\)](#)

[Lane Windham, *Knocking on Labor's Door Union Organizing in the 1970s and the Roots of a New Economic Divide* \(UNC Press, 2017\)](#)

Articles and book chapters

- Articles, book chapters, and other materials not listed above usually will be available through WKU Libraries databases. You may need to be logged into the databases to make use of the links in the weekly modules, but access should be straightforward. Links will appear in the weekly Content folder.

Course policies and structure

This is an online class. You will have to master the technology of Blackboard, including Blackboard discussion boards. You are expected to manage your time and to participate—extensively—in online discussions related to the readings. Each week, you will read a monograph or several articles. This means you will need to be ready to take good notes and sometimes pull together several scholars' arguments. You will write for this class frequently *besides* in discussion board posts. Be prepared for at *least* 200 pages of reading per week, regular writing assignments, and weekly thoughtful participation in discussions.

Discussion

Discussion is the heart of every graduate seminar. Participation is essential and constitutes a major part of your grade.

Basic mechanics: Discussion takes place over several days. My working plan is to open Wednesday and close Saturday by midnight; I will poll the class at the start of the semester and adjust if most prefer a different rhythm.

Each week, I post questions to begin discussion. Intermittently, pairs of students will take responsibility as discussion leaders. You may, if you wish, add your own thread on which you raise an additional point you wish to explore with classmates, even if not discussion leader.

Requirements: Minimum discussion participation includes posting at least once before midnight on Wednesday and at least twice more by midnight Saturday. Posts must be

substantive (“I agree” does not count unless you further extend the point with new evidence and point toward further lines of inquiry) and should point classmates toward page numbers and/or chapters you are discussing. Do not do all your posting at once; allow classmates to respond. Total weekly count should be at least 500 words. Say something substantial and engage with each reading by end of week. Ideally, each post ends with a question to prompt further discussion.

Life happens: You may miss one week of discussion without penalty, but I hope you won’t.

Rotating leadership: You will each take responsibility for reading especially deeply and facilitating discussion for a week of your choice; the default is that you do this in pairs, but an individual student may lead if they have a strong interest in a week in which two do not sign up. I will post a sign-up sheet ahead of time.

Papers and short assignments are designed to help you take careful notes on readings that you can use later (for major assignments in this course and for your later comps preparation), and to build on your insights and practice historiographic writing.

Abstracts: for at least six weeks of your choice, write an abstract of at least 350 words that includes the work’s main thesis (or if multiple readings, theses), summarizes findings and evidence, and assesses major contributions and relation to other course readings. You may replace a low grade on an abstract by submitting an additional abstract.

Paper 1: Midterm assignment. Details will be on Bb.

Paper 2: Due finals week. Details will be on Bb.

A note on due dates: We are in a global pandemic, a period of major economic and political turmoil, and an era of accelerating climate emergency (“now tell us the bad news, Dr. Browder!”). The point being, I’m expecting the unexpected, I understand we are all under strains of various kinds, and I just want you to achieve the learning goals here. Discussion needs to be timely for your classmates’ sake. You may miss one week of discussion without any impact on your grade. Other due dates are target dates and I am flexible.

Grades

Discussion: 3 points per week=42 points (45 if you discuss all 14 weeks)

Abstracts: 3 points each=18 points (6 abstracts)

essay 1: 20 points

essay 2: 20 points

Total possible: 100 points

A: 90 and up; B 80-89; C 70-79; D: 60-69; F=Below 60

A full schedule will be posted to Blackboard.