

**Politics 315:
THE FUTURE OF ORGANIZED LABOR**

Chris Howell
Spring 2002

Class: King 121, Wednesday 8.00-10.00 p.m.

Office: Rice 226

Office telephone: 775-8649

Office hours: Monday 1.30-3.00 p.m. & Thursday 10.30 a.m.- noon, or by appointment

E-mail: chris.howell@oberlin.edu

Web: www.oberlin.edu/~chowell

Introduction

This course asks a straightforward question: what is the future of organized labor? Or, perhaps more apocalyptically: does organized labor have a future? Its concern is with *organized labor* rather than simply workers because historically it is when workers have been able to act collectively that they have made economic, social and political gains. The course examines the ways in which the form, strategy and practice of workers' organizations, primarily trade unions, are evolving in response to a variety of economic, social, and political challenges. Its focus is the labor movement in the United States, though there will be some discussion of developments within Western European trade unions.

Labor today is faced with a range of serious challenges: the changing nature of work, the changing composition of the workforce, greater workplace flexibility, international economic integration, political hostility, and so on. All of these pose a threat to the organizational structures, strategies, and tactics employed by labor in the past. The result has been a decline in the strength and influence of organized labor, especially profound in the United States, but not limited to that region, that has raised questions about the continued survival of collective forms of labor organization and industrial action. This course grapples with the question of whether there are new structures, strategies, and tactics which will enable labor to mount an effective defense of its interests. Topics include collective action and internal union democracy, union responses to globalization and "flexible" production, new organizing strategies, and the effectiveness of strike action.

Engaging in a significant research project is a major aim of this research seminar. Part of the semester will be taken up with discussion of student research papers, as students present their papers, and other students and the instructor offer comments and constructive criticism.

Requirements

This is a seminar and so the primary requirement is that students do the assigned reading (about 200 pages a week) on time and be prepared to discuss it in class. Each student must write comments (anywhere from a paragraph or two to a page or two) on the readings each week. The purpose of the comments is to identify the main issues, questions and criticisms so that we can incorporate them into class discussion. The comments are due at my office by 3.00pm every Tuesday. A description of

what I expect from these comments is available on my web site (above) and as a handout. These comments, plus class participation, will be worth one third of the grade. Students will often make oral presentations of the readings in class. The other two thirds of the grade will come from a long (roughly 20-25 page) research paper on a topic chosen by the student, due Thursday May 16th. In addition, each student must hand in a prospectus for their research paper (the topic plus a preliminary bibliography) by Monday April 1st. The April 3rd class period will be devoted to a discussion of those proposals. Students will act as discussants for each research paper proposal. For the last two weeks of the semester, class periods will be devoted to discussion of draft research papers (also using student discussants).

Finally, there will inevitably be some changes to the course as the semester progresses – changes in the readings, additional details of assignments, questions for the weekly comments, and so on – which are not included on this syllabus. I will provide weekly updates in the “announcements” section of the *Blackboard* web site for this course: <http://bb.oberlin.edu/> along with a syllabus and other materials. We will also use *Blackboard* for posting drafts of research papers and proposals. Much of this information is also available at the relevant section of my personal web site [see URL above] dealing with this course. Check the *Blackboard* site at least once a week. In the unlikely event that you miss a class, you should always check the web site in case I have announced something of importance. Instructions for the use of *Blackboard* are provided in a handout.

Course readings

The following books have been ordered at the Oberlin Bookstore. and I strongly recommend that you buy them because you will be expected to read all, or almost all, of each book. For the other readings we will be using the *ERes* (Electronic Reserve) system. More details will be made available in class, but, essentially, the course readings are scanned into Adobe Acrobat and can then be accessed with a password from any computer on the campus network with a web browser. You can then read and print this material. Check page numbers carefully, so that you read the correct section of each reading at the correct time. Additionally, one copy of all the readings is available in the reserve room. To use both *ERes* and *Blackboard* you will need the free Adobe Reader. It is installed on all public machines; if you want it on your own computer, download it for free from www.adobe.com/products/acrobat/readstep.html

Kim Moody, *Workers in a Lean World*

Peter Rachleff, *Hard-Pressed in the Heartland*

Kate Bronfenbrenner et al. eds., *Organizing to Win*

Ray Tillman and Michael Cummings, eds., *The Transformation of U.S. Unions*

Lowell Turner, Harry Katz and Richard Hurd, eds., *Rekindling the Movement*

Andrew Martin and George Ross, eds., *The Brave New World of European Labor*

CLASS SCHEDULE:

February 6 Introduction

No reading. Showing of *Final Offer*.

February 13 Collective Action and Union Politics

John Kelly, *Trade Unions and Socialist Politics*, chapters 1-4 (pages 9-82).

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

Claus Offe and Helmut Wiesenthal, "Two Logics of Collective Action," in Claus Offe, *Disorganized Capitalism*, chapter 7 (pages 170-220).

Steve Fraser, "Is Democracy Good for Unions?" (and replies from Stanley Aronowitz, Herman Benson and Gordon Haskell) in *Dissent*.

February 20 Are Strikes Rational?

Richard Hyman, *Strikes*, chapters 3-5 (pages 52-140 in the 1977 edition, and 55-144 in the 1989 edition).

Miriam Golden, *Heroic Defeats*, chapter 1 (pages 1-27).

Peter Rachleff, *Hard-Pressed in the Heartland*, all (pages 3-112).

Showing of the documentary *American Dream*, by Barbara Kopple (98 minutes).

February 27 Comparative Industrial Relations

Germany: Wolfgang Streeck, *Social Institutions and Economic Performance*, chapter 5 (pages 137-168).

Sweden: John Stephens, *The Transition From Capitalism to Socialism*, part of chapter 5 and all of chapter 6 (pages 129-140 & 177-194).

France: Chris Howell, "French Socialism and the Transformation of Industrial Relations Since 1981" (pages 141-160), and Guy Groux and René Mouriaux, "The Dilemma of Unions Without Members" (pages 172-185), in Anthony Daley, ed., *The Mitterrand Era*.

Japan: T. J. Pempel, *Policy and Politics in Japan*, chapter 3 (pages 90-109).

April 3

Discussion of Paper Proposals

Proposals due at my office by noon on Monday April 1st.

April 10 & 17

The “New” AFL-CIO: the Organizing Imperative

Kate Bronfenbrenner et al., eds., *Organizing to Win*, introduction and chapters 1, 2, 5, 6, 16 & 17 (pages 1-53, 87-119, 261-296).

Lowell Turner, Harry Katz and Richard Hurd, eds., *Rekindling the Movement*, chapters 1, 2, 4, 5, & 7-9 (pages 9-58, 82-128 & 155-237).

Ray Tillman and Michael Cummings, eds., *The Transformation of U.S. Unions*, chapters 1-8 (pages 9-166).

“Labor Comes Out,” special section of *New Labor Forum* (Spring/Summer 2001)

John Hoerr, "Solidaritas at Harvard: Organizing in a Different Voice" in *The American Prospect* [1993]. Also available <http://www.prospect.org/print/V4/14/hoerr-j.html>

April 24

The European Experience

George Ross and Andrew Martin, eds., *The Brave New World of European Labor: European Trade Unions At The Millennium*, chapters to be assigned.

May 1 & 8

Discussion of Research Paper Drafts & Conclusion

Copies of paper draft for each class member due at my office by 4.00pm each Monday.

Weekly Reading Comments

This assignment is not complicated, but it is easy to misunderstand. The purpose of these sets of comments is threefold. First, I want to know that you have read the assigned material ahead of class so that I can structure the class on the assumption that we have a shared starting point, and so that we can set about discussing the reading rather than having me simply lecture on it. This class is reading-driven because I am trying to expose you to a wide range of different viewpoints and approaches to political economy, and that requires that I do everything I can to encourage you to do the reading. Second, I need to know ahead of time if some part of the reading was consistently misunderstood so that I can concentrate on going over that material in class. It is often the case that one author or piece of reading is open to multiple interpretations, and if several students interpret it differently for me, we will need to discuss that. I may be expecting you to get something from the reading when you in fact take away something quite different. There may also be language and concepts that you don't understand, so the written comments are an opportunity to let me know what you would like me to explain in class. Third, your reaction to the reading plays a central role in helping me decide how to organize class discussion. I am particularly interested in which readings resonated with you, and why, and which readings you found weak, irritating, ignorant, or whatever, and why. The critiques of the readings are the best place to start a class discussion – and it means I can call on you to explain your reaction.

What does this mean for the comments you write? It means that, at a minimum, I want the comments to demonstrate that you did the reading. That means a brief summary of the main themes and arguments presented in the reading. You can do this by writing a paragraph on each reading, or by drawing out some themes and using your comments to illustrate how each reading addressed those themes. You do not need to summarize/discuss every reading if you do not want to. I want a sense that you have done all the reading, but if you found some of the reading particularly insightful or heinous, then, by all means, focus on them in your comments. Beyond your summaries, I would like you to identify terms, concepts or words that you did not understand (even after using a dictionary!), or would like me to go over in class. Finally, along with your summary and questions, please offer comments, critiques and reactions to the readings. Again, you might do this for every reading, or just for a few; you might organize your comments around a generalized critique of the readings for that week, or point to surprising similarities or differences among the readings.

The “product” should be written comments ranging from a couple of paragraphs to a couple of pages. These can be e-mailed to me or placed in the box outside my door. Here is how I grade the comments. I DO NOT make comments on them and hand them back to you, unless you request them ahead of an exam or something similar. If you hand in comments that demonstrate that you have done the reading, or the great bulk of it, regardless of the quality of those comments, you get a tick. If I receive no written comments, or your comments appear to be about reading for another class, you do not get a tick. On rare occasions your comments may be so insightful that I give you a double tick. This only happens for comments that go beyond summary and questioning to offer reaction and critique. So, in grading terms, not handing in written comments is not a good idea because the main determinant of the grade is handing them in regularly rather than their quality.