

# Organizing the Curriculum

## Perspectives on Teaching the US Labor Movement

Rob Linné, Leigh Benin  
and Adrienne Sosin (Eds.)



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# Organizing the Curriculum

# TRANSGRESSIONS: CULTURAL STUDIES AND EDUCATION

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## *Scope*

Cultural studies provides an analytical toolbox for both making sense of educational practice and extending the insights of educational professionals into their labors. In this context *Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education* provides a collection of books in the domain that specify this assertion. Crafted for an audience of teachers, teacher educators, scholars and students of cultural studies and others interested in cultural studies and pedagogy, the series documents both the possibilities of and the controversies surrounding the intersection of cultural studies and education. The editors and the authors of this series do not assume that the interaction of cultural studies and education devalues other types of knowledge and analytical forms. Rather the intersection of these knowledge disciplines offers a rejuvenating, optimistic, and positive perspective on education and educational institutions. Some might describe its contribution as democratic, emancipatory, and transformative. The editors and authors maintain that cultural studies helps free educators from sterile, monolithic analyses that have for too long undermined efforts to think of educational practices by providing other words, new languages, and fresh metaphors. Operating in an interdisciplinary cosmos, *Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education* is dedicated to exploring the ways cultural studies enhances the study and practice of education. With this in mind the series focuses in a non-exclusive way on popular culture as well as other dimensions of cultural studies including social theory, social justice and positionality, cultural dimensions of technological innovation, new media and media literacy, new forms of oppression emerging in an electronic hyperreality, and postcolonial global concerns. With these concerns in mind cultural studies scholars often argue that the realm of popular culture is the most powerful educational force in contemporary culture. Indeed, in the twenty-first century this pedagogical dynamic is sweeping through the entire world. Educators, they believe, must understand these emerging realities in order to gain an important voice in the pedagogical conversation.

Without an understanding of cultural pedagogy's (education that takes place outside of formal schooling) role in the shaping of individual identity--youth identity in particular--the role educators play in the lives of their students will continue to fade. Why do so many of our students feel that life is incomprehensible and devoid of meaning? What does it mean, teachers wonder, when young people are unable to describe their moods, their affective affiliation to the society around them. Meanings provided young people by mainstream institutions often do little to help them deal with their affective complexity, their difficulty negotiating the rift between meaning and affect. School knowledge and educational expectations seem as anachronistic as a ditto machine, not that learning ways of rational thought and making sense of the world are unimportant.

But school knowledge and educational expectations often have little to offer students about making sense of the way they feel, the way their affective lives are shaped. In no way do we argue that analysis of the production of youth in an electronic mediated world demands some "touchy-feely" educational superficiality. What is needed in this context is a rigorous analysis of the interrelationship between pedagogy, popular culture, meaning making, and youth subjectivity. In an era marked by youth depression, violence, and suicide such insights become extremely important, even life saving. Pessimism about the future is the common sense of many contemporary youth with its concomitant feeling that no one can make a difference.

If affective production can be shaped to reflect these perspectives, then it can be reshaped to lay the groundwork for optimism, passionate commitment, and transformative educational and political activity. In these ways cultural studies adds a dimension to the work of education unfilled by any other sub-discipline. This is what *Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education* seeks to produce—literature on these issues that makes a difference. It seeks to publish studies that help those who work with young people, those individuals involved in the disciplines that study children and youth, and young people themselves improve their lives in these bizarre times.

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*Perspectives on Teaching the US Labor Movement*

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*To generations of working people,  
without whose solidarity and struggle there would have been no progress*

*and  
to the memory of Joe Kincheloe,  
friend, colleague, and inspiration*

History is a great teacher. Now everyone knows that the labor movement did not diminish the strength of the nation but enlarged it. By raising the living standards of millions, labor miraculously created a market for industry and lifted the whole nation to undreamed of levels of production. Those who attack labor forget these simple truths, but history remembers them.

—Martin Luther King, Jr.



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	ix
Introduction <i>Rob Linné</i>	xi
<b>Section I: Negotiating Knowledge</b>	
<b>Chapters</b>	
1. On Consumerism and Labor Consciousness <i>Leigh David Benin</i>	3
2. Labor's Exclusion from Official Knowledge: The Louisiana/Texas Timber Wars of 1907-1913 <i>Rob Linné</i>	19
3. A Letter to Family and Friends from the Labor Front: Justice for Janitors in Houston, Texas (2006) <i>Courtney Snegroff and Leigh David Benin</i>	41
4. Teacher Solidarity for Educational Excellence <i>Leigh David Benin and Adrienne Andi Sosin</i>	63
5. A Paradigm Shift in the Making for Teachers of Working-Class Students: From Extrinsic Motivation and Border Crossing to Freirean Motivation and Collective Advancement <i>Patrick J. Finn</i>	75
<b>Section II: Organizing the Curriculum</b>	
6. Teaching What Unions Do: Empowering Young People with Knowledge of their Rights at Work <i>Adrienne Andi Sosin, Joel Sosinsky, Cindy Impala and Karin Jones</i>	87
7. An Essay On Racism, War, and Labor's Struggle <i>Leigh David Benin</i>	101
8. Mining Mathematics Education for Labor History <i>Peter Appelbaum and Bob Klein</i>	113



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

9. Uncovering History through Biography and Personal Narrative: Women and the US Labor Movement <i>Laraine Wallowitz and Nicole Sieben</i>	129
10. Using Educational Technology to Teach Students About Child Labor <i>Laura Benin</i>	145
11. Lewis Hine and His Photo Stories: Using Photos for Teaching Across the Curriculum <i>Deborah Smith-Shank and Kryssi Staikidis</i>	155
12. Reading the Labor Movement: <i>La Causa</i> and Literacy Instruction <i>Adrienne Andi Sosin, Miriam Pepper-Sanello, Susan Eichenholtz, Lucia Buttarro and Renee White-Clark</i>	171
13. From <i>The Bobbin Girl</i> to <i>The Breaker Boys</i> : An Annotated Bibliography of Children’s Books with Labor Themes <i>Patricia A. Deleo</i>	191
<b>Section III: Teaching Activism</b>	
14. Horton, Highlander, and the Habituation of Democracy <i>J. Cynthia McDermott and Peter Hoffmann-Kipp</i>	205
15. SEIU Local 32 BJ’s Youth Brigade: Labor Education through Labor Activism <i>Stuart Eimer and Max Mishler</i>	221
16. Every Labor Leader’s Second Favorite Topic: A Short History of the CFT Labor in the Schools Committee, 1987 – 2007 <i>Fred Glass</i>	233
17. Grassroots Organizing and Teacher Education <i>Mary E. Finn</i>	249
18. Where do we go from here? <i>Adrienne Andi Sosin</i>	267
Contributor Profiles and Contacts	275

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We could not have completed this project without the collaboration of many colleagues in the academy and friends in the labor movement, and we offer them our sincere thanks. We begin with the contributors to this volume. Thank you all for sharing your passion for working with young people and your commitment to social and economic justice.

Series editors Shirley Steinberg and Joe Kincheloe supported this project from the very beginning. *Organizing the Curriculum* is the first book of its kind and we are grateful that Joe and Shirley had the vision to encourage us to set off on this road less traveled.

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R.L., L.D.B., A.S.

## INTRODUCTION

Class is rarely talked about in the United States; nowhere is there a more intense silence about the reality of class difference than in educational settings.

—bell hooks

We like to view this book as a raucous picket line of educators and unionists, all concerned about the way labor is treated in the schools, coming together and demonstrating loudly against the silence. For far too long labor has been limited to a footnote in school texts instead of being treated seriously as the most effective force for championing the rights of working people—the vast majority of the citizenry. School textbooks and curricula, for the most part, offer only cursory glances at labor and do not encourage substantive analyses of class or political economy in the content areas. Teachers have been convinced that to bring up class or to teach about the labor movement may be construed as “taking sides,” while the all-pervasive presence of corporate America in our schools is understood as just part of the landscape.<sup>1</sup> So students graduate knowing much about the titans of industry (Ford and Carnegie, Trump and Gates), but little about organizers like Bill Haywood or Joe Hill, and even less about women unionists such as Clara Lemlich or Dolores Huerta. Students do not even know the basics regarding the rights or benefits they can expect in the workplace or how these rights were won. The origins of the forty-hour workweek, overtime pay, health insurance, retirement benefits, or workplace safety seem forgotten and people seem to just assume that employers “give” us these benefits, or perhaps the government, concerned about working people, compels business to offer benefits. Put simply, for all the talk of schools preparing young people for the work world, we are failing to teach them even the basics of how that world is structured and how they can be empowered through collective action.

This failure would be enough to call for change, but several contributors to this volume argue that the reasons to study labor extend far beyond helping students to understand how we arrived at the concept of the weekend in this country. Labor’s story is the story of America. From the exploitation of slave labor early in our history, to the military incursions into Latin America to maintain cheap labor for the United Fruit Company and other US corporations, to current dislocations caused by neo-liberal globalization, labor issues are woven through every major thread of our history and culture. Attempting to teach about the past and present of our society without a foundational understanding of the scope of labor issues would be like attempting to teach biology without building a basic understanding

of evolutionary theory or attempting to teach engineering to students who have no grounding in mathematics; it simply cannot be credibly done.

By placing labor issues at the center of the curriculum we are also calling into question vague formulations in the realm of progressive education that call for respecting diversity within our curricula, but fail to challenge the great inequalities of our society. These formulations simply insert class into a mantra of oppressions to decry that include race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and disability, but do not actually examine the ways labor exploitation informs how and why these other identities are constructed and maintained. While we want our classrooms to counter disrespect for working-class people, we argue that the notions of respect or tolerance are not enough. Teaching class centrally as class identification, something akin to a culture that needs to be affirmed rather than a system that needs to be made more equitable, does not offer working-class students the analytical skills needed to actively participate in our democracy or to effect change. As neo-liberalism has taken hold of educational discourse, Leftist theorists working from a materialist perspective have been building a strong case against both identity politics and weak conceptions of multicultural education. From this perspective, identity politics have proven ineffective overall and lulled progressives or radical intelligentsia into becoming, as Walter Benn Michaels (2006) insists, “the accomplice rather than the opponent of the right” (p. 19). He and others (Chasin, 2000; hooks, 2000; Jacoby, 1999; McLaren & Jaramillo, 2007; Tomasky, 1996) contend that there is nothing inherently radical about honoring diversity if the celebration precludes any serious attack on inequality. When class is subsumed as just one more identity to be celebrated, educators have a tendency to focus on the more visible differences of race and gender without doing the necessary theorizing of how race and gender inequalities are driven by labor issues and exploitation.

From my experiences in the field, I see this dynamic reflected in the ways most educators enact a non-critical multiculturalism even as they claim otherwise. Too often, as I have started to explain our project of bringing labor into the social justice education framework, I have been met with confusion or incredulity. Why, social justice educators wonder, would I focus on something as mundane as the labor movement when our radical education journals and radical education conferences hold many opportunities for sexy research inquiries such as the deconstruction of *South Park* or *Gossip Girl*? McLaren and Jaramillo (2007) see the same kind of loss of focus or passivity overtaking critical pedagogy and they argue that the field “has become so absorbed by the cosmopolitanized liberalism of the post-modernized left” that it has in fact become “domesticated” (p. 34). They see our challenge as revivifying the political roots of critical pedagogy as a counter to neo-liberal globalization. McLaren and Jaramillo do not dismiss gender or race-based critiques simply as “identity politics,” but they do argue that class is at the heart of a “generative matrix, that helps to structure and shape the particularities of the other antagonisms [race, gender, sexuality]” (p. 102). The labor exploitation at the heart of so much discrimination cannot be left out of any credible analysis of society. Regrettably, McLaren and Jaramillo note that class exploitation is the one topic that is most often ignored in schools and schools of education.

However, the long period of self-censorship among educators regarding class and labor issues may no longer hold. We cannot claim to be teaching for social justice if we ignore the class warfare being waged all around us. In recent decades we have witnessed another great redistribution of wealth upwards that at last seems to be shifting attitudes and making the argument that identity, rather than class, should be our central focus of interrogation more and more out of touch with reality. Steven Greenhouse (2008) notes that although US worker productivity has soared in recent decades, wages for workers have stagnated while CEO compensation has exploded. At a time of great wealth creation in the US, income inequality has grown so great as to make our society more closely resemble a third world country rather than an advanced industrial nation. More children live in poverty now and fewer have access to health care even as our medical industry has prospered. The cumulative effect on working families means “more poverty, more income inequality, more family tensions, more hours at work, more time away from the kids, more families without health insurance, more retirees with inadequate pensions” (p. 5). Today in the US, twenty percent of families with children under six live below the poverty line and 22 million full-time workers do not have health insurance (p. 5). James Loewen (1995) points out that in 1950 physicians made two-and-a-half times what unionized workers made, but by 1995 they were making six times as much. Executives of clothing firms made fifty times their workers’ salaries in 1950; by 1995 they were making 1,500 times as much as their sweatshop workers. The Council on International and Public Affairs notes that the gap between the wealthy and poor in the US has become a wide chasm: the wealthiest one percent of families hold more than one third of the wealth in this country; the next ten percent hold another third of the wealth; and that leaves less than one third of the wealth of this country for ninety percent of the population to scramble after.<sup>2</sup> As enacted in the US, multicultural education typically has little to say about such economic issues. But surely, these are issues that should be central to any social justice education agenda.

Bringing labor into the arena of K-12 education will undoubtedly meet political resistance, but an increasing number of educators are motivated to take up the challenge. When we began putting out the call for participation in this project (with help from our colleagues Mary Finn and Patrick Finn) we were somewhat surprised by the enthusiastic response we received from educators and activists. We have also found that allies working in the labor movement as well as colleagues in the field of labor studies are similarly enthusiastic about our project. It is because of this solidarity that we hold out hope that the subject of labor, which has been so effectively silenced as a subject for learning, can at last be openly explored in classrooms across the country. As we go about the work of organizing educators around this project, we are inspired by, and are learning from, our friends in the labor movement. This school reform project is a part of a larger movement for social reform in which organized labor is now playing a leading role.

In the first section of this volume, *Negotiating Knowledge*, contributors interrogate the ways in which knowledge is constructed in school discourses, ways that often disadvantage working-class students and silence the voice of labor in our schools.

This silence leaves young people with a much distorted view of the realities they will face as workers and citizens. The second section, *Organizing the Curriculum*, offers pedagogical strategies and curricula that open discussions around class analysis and political economy via studies of the labor movement. These chapters include diverse voices and demonstrate concrete ways to examine class across the curriculum. *Teaching Activism*, the last section, offers a vision of education that engages young people beyond their classroom walls through experiential education in the larger community. This is necessary because curriculum materials alone are insufficient to enhance students' understandings about the nature of society or to inspire activism among youth. We advocate collaborations with unionists and community activists as a means of making learning relevant to young people.

We end with a call for action and organizing. We hope you will join us.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Mark Maier. "Corporate Curriculum." *Rethinking Schools Online*. Volume 16 No. 4- Summer 2002, at [http://www.rethinkingschools.org/archive/16\\_04/Corp164.shtml](http://www.rethinkingschools.org/archive/16_04/Corp164.shtml)
- <sup>2</sup> See <<http://www.toomuchonline.org/inequality.html>>

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## **Section I: Negotiating Knowledge**





## 1. ON CONSUMERISM AND LABOR CONSCIOUSNESS

It is worth pausing to consider the current dearth of labor consciousness in the United States. Union membership as a percentage of the workforce has declined from 35 percent in the mid-1950s to today's 12 percent.<sup>1</sup> But why should we care? Philip M. Dine believes that we have ample cause for concern:

The unravelling of the labor movement is no small matter. Unions have had the lead role in establishing many of the most fundamental and valued features of today's society. The eight-hour workday, five day work week, paid vacations, retirement and health-care benefits, safety regulations, bans on sweatshops or child labor, protections against employment discrimination, and other workplace advances now taken for granted were the result of struggles—invariably protracted, often bloody, and sometimes even deadly—by workers and their unions.<sup>2</sup>

If we forget how these indispensable workplace advances were won—at such a great cost to so many dedicated and brave working people—we risk losing all that has been gained. Can improvements in workplace conditions that we have come to take for granted really be taken away? The consequences of a seriously weakened labor movement are already starkly evident and have been frankly described by Barbara Ehrenreich:

The middle class, battered by wave after wave of outsourcings and layoffs, scrambled to meet the ever-rising costs of health care, fuel, and college education. The traditional working class, already savaged by deindustrialization, took the low-paying service jobs that were left, trading their hard hats for mops and trays. They crowded children and grandchildren into their homes, which they refinanced at usurious rates. They faced speedups at work and cutbacks in pay. When their monthly health insurance premiums exceeded the mortgage or rent, they abandoned the insurance and fell back on Advil.<sup>3</sup>

The recitation of horrors that follows in her brief but wittily angry account of contemporary America captures the depressing reality that the vast majority of Americans now face as the super-rich ruthlessly redistribute wealth upward. This is what we have come to after a half century of union decline, after losing our consciousness of labor's heroic struggle for a decent life, and after forgetting our heritage as working people and our real history as a nation. Dine writes: "In a profound sense the labor movement has been an indispensable part of the history and fabric of the United States in ways extending far beyond the workplace."<sup>4</sup> He is right.

But we do not see the leading part that labor's struggle has played in shaping the contours of our society and history because, for the most part, our leaders—intellectuals and educators, politicians and prominent religionists, information and entertainment icons, and corporate CEO's and media moguls—who profoundly shape our consciousness of life, have created a conservative political culture that masks labor's true importance.<sup>5</sup> Unsurprisingly, public education reflects this pervasive bias against labor consciousness. To be sure, labor makes a cameo appearance in the current US high school social studies curriculum as one of several responses to Gilded Age industrialism, and again in recognition of the spectacular upsurge in unionism during the Great Depression.<sup>6</sup> But even with respect to these periods, the profound dimensions of organized labor's struggle and the significance of the labor question in shaping a broad range of events are not explicated in the school curriculum.<sup>7</sup> As long as labor is relegated to being a bit player on the stage of American (and world) history, the historical narrative hides more than it reveals.

Why does our culture obscure the true significance of labor? This anti-labor perspective reflects the interests of enormously wealthy and politically powerful corporate employers, who in addition to funding a massive and relentless barrage of anti-labor propaganda and promoting union busting laws to defeat labor organization have constructed an all-pervasive cultural apparatus that acts as a cloaking device to render the very existence of labor invisible, even to those who labor.<sup>8</sup> The worker as worker has disappeared from public consciousness: traditionally, the labor of women, blacks, and Latinos has been ignored or denigrated; and the white "working man," once a fairly familiar figure in American culture, has become the invisible man.<sup>9</sup> The self-conception of the laboring classes has been transformed: working people want to see themselves, and mostly do see themselves, as middle-class consumers. If we are neither wealthy nor on welfare, we see ourselves as middle class—and woe to those who say otherwise. The notion of a "working class" has been thoroughly expunged from public discourse.<sup>10</sup> Even organized labor talks about protecting the "middle-class" status of its members.<sup>11</sup>

Increasingly, we know ourselves by what we have rather than by what we do; as Christopher Lasch observed in the 1970s, workers have become consumers.<sup>12</sup> We now create our personal identity by wearing a mask comprised of corporate logos to magically prove to others—and so to ourselves—that we possess the blessings associated with corporate wealth and power.<sup>13</sup> We eagerly wear their brands, and so are branded and enslaved in spirit by our corporate masters, who themselves are only fictional persons created by laws of incorporation. To be sure, publicly owned corporations are managed by outrageously overcompensated and quite corporeal CEO's, but they and their boards are only the servants, they tell us, of a host of nameless shareholders whose beady eyes are obsessively fixed on the bottom line. We have seen the public enemy and it is us, the public—we are directly or indirectly dependent on the rise and fall of the stock market.<sup>14</sup>

Consumption has even become the *sin qua non* of patriotic duty and citizenship in a time of national crisis; remember President Bush's injunction to the American people after 9/11 to go out and shop.<sup>15</sup> Why not? We are lured into the marketplace

by Memorial Day sales, even in time of war. From this perspective, the “Church of Stop Shopping” may be one of the principal threats to national security today.<sup>16</sup> Without anything approaching industrial democracy, and absent strong, democratic unions, we have little or no voice in determining our conditions of work. And elections and government policies are in great measure determined by the corrupting influence of big money, which makes obscenely large campaign contributions and pays for an army of lobbyists, who play a major role in writing legislation, getting laws passed, and shaping regulatory practice.<sup>17</sup> When “publicly” owned corporations have replaced the people as the body politic, how else than by making choices in the marketplace can we assert our American commitment to democracy? After all, the people (the *demos* in Greek) have been sorted into “demographics” that are scientifically studied and ruthlessly manipulated by the advertising industry and political pollsters.<sup>18</sup> But we live in hope and will affirm with Lincoln (or whomever) that “you can not fool all of the people all of the time.”<sup>19</sup>

We are advocating a reawakening of labor consciousness within the context of this pervasive consumerism that itself reflects the post-World War II compromise of American labor—to exchange a significant degree of union power in the workplace for a greater measure of the fruits of industrial productivity.<sup>20</sup> Our consumerist culture reflects an economic imperative—mass production requires mass consumption.<sup>21</sup> However, being middle income, which affords us the opportunity of buying the things we associate with middle-class life, does not necessarily make us middle class.<sup>22</sup> And tens of millions of American working people earn much less than what can be reasonably regarded as a middle income; the “other America” is usually not broadcast, except when the media, on rare occasions—read Hurricane Katrina—allow us a peek into the world of the poor, allow the fact of poverty to enter our media saturated consciousness.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, the middle income that many American workers came to expect, which enabled them to enjoy the “American standard of living,” was never an entitlement but depended on a social compact that redistributed wealth downward. It was initially fashioned by the New Deal alliance of liberal politics and union power, and was ultimately funded by wartime and postwar prosperity.<sup>24</sup> But millions of agricultural and service workers were systematically excluded from labor and legislative protection. Stimulated by the Civil Rights Movement, President Johnson went beyond FDR, whom he admired, by extending the social compact—in the still prosperous 1960s, when GDP was increasing at nearly 5% per year—to address some of the pressing social needs of poor working-class people: blacks, Latinos, marginalized whites, women, and the elderly. But, tragically, Johnson’s Vietnam War spending undermined the Great Society: as it turned out, we could not have both “guns and butter.”<sup>25</sup> Campus-based New Leftists in the 1960s, with few exceptions, did not attempt to politicize white workers, whom they did not regard as potential agents of radical social change.<sup>26</sup> And many previously marginalized ethnic workers, who themselves had become part of the white “middle class” through labor unionism and labor legislation, rejected Great Society and War on Poverty programs designed to address prior discrimination against minorities.<sup>27</sup>

The backlash by many white ethnic workers against anti-poverty and affirmative action programs, high taxes and big government, civil rights and antiwar protests, and the counter-culture of the baby-boomers contributed to the emergence of Nixon's "silent majority" and later the so-called Reagan Democrats, who were essential to the success of a new electoral coalition of fiscal and religious conservatives, white southerners, and foreign policy hawks. President Reagan, a Roosevelt Democrat until he became the spokesman for General Electric and a conservative Republican, initiated the largest military build-up in American history and ratcheted up the Cold War against the Soviet Union, which he called an "evil empire"; he attacked the labor movement, most famously when he fired 11,345 striking air traffic controllers in 1981; and he implemented the theory of supply-side economics by cutting taxes for the wealthy and anti-poverty programs for the poor.<sup>28</sup> As fewer working people embraced both liberal politics and unionism, and corporate America increasingly accessed international labor markets, the postwar social compact began to unravel. As a result of more than twenty-five years of conservative/neoliberal politics, globalization, and union decline, especially in the industrial sector, working people have experienced: the collapse of corporate pension plans, layoffs, givebacks, wage cuts, stagnant or declining real income, shredding of the social safety net, and an ever widening gap between rich and poor, the biggest since the 1920's.<sup>29</sup>

It was in the 1920s that the advertising industry first made "buy, buy, baby, buy, buy" in essence the battle cry of industrial capitalism, and the cash-poor American consumer utilized newly available credit to charge full tilt into the brave new world of hedonistic consumerism, leaving the Protestant Ethic in the dust.<sup>30</sup> This was a "cultural contradiction" of capitalism, as Daniel Bell described it over thirty years ago, because the culture of consumption, a necessity for a system that would have collapsed without mass consumption to match mass production, undermined the Protestant work ethic on which capitalism was founded.<sup>31</sup> Consumption ultimately replaced work as the ruling social ideal. But a more equal distribution of wealth would have served consumer capitalism better than credit—and it still would. The gross inequality of wealth and free flow of credit set the stage for the Great Depression.<sup>32</sup>

For all the suffering of the 1930s, too many of us—including corporate leaders and elected officials, who conspired to permissively relax business and banking regulations—have been lulled into complacency by the relative but prolonged prosperity of the postwar period. We know better, but we nonetheless consume and invest greedily and recklessly, as though the Great Depression could not happen again, as though it had been only a temporary detour from the superhighway to consumer heaven.<sup>33</sup> But the financial crisis precipitated by greedy bankers issuing risky sub-prime mortgages with large balloon payments, the consequent drastic fall in real estate values, the skyrocketing oil prices, and the falling dollar are gathering and ominous clouds on the economic horizon. As the ownership society turns into the foreclosure society, economic forecasters are arguing over the prospects for a soft or a hard landing for the economy—recession or depression.<sup>34</sup> Either way,

continuing to mortgage our future for the sake of a lifestyle of freewheeling consumption is an option that is rapidly disappearing for most of us.<sup>35</sup>

Nonetheless, we are so bemused by consumerism, so addicted to an expanding horizon of consumption, that we are willing to sacrifice almost anything for the sake of having more. To begin with, we are working longer hours, and we are all working, including children who are not compelled to work by dire economic necessity, compromising education and important aspects of family life.<sup>36</sup> But that has not been sufficient. Individually, as families, and as a nation we are going into ever deeper debt to satisfy the demands of consumption. Our huge trade deficit is not sustainable in the long run and threatens our political independence. We are deeply in debt to China and sovereign wealth funds are buying America on the cheap with petro-dollars.<sup>37</sup> And to sustain the flow of affordable commodities from abroad, we tolerate the exploitation of sweated labor, child labor, and even slave labor.<sup>38</sup> Wal-Mart, which is adamantly opposed to the unionization of its huge workforce and imports goods made by exploited Chinese labor, has in its own estimate replaced the American labor movement as the true defender of the American standard of living—by selling cheap imports, which its employees, nonetheless, can hardly afford.<sup>39</sup> To continue expansively consuming, we have even been willing to sacrifice health security, fight costly foreign wars, and ignore the alarmingly rapid destruction of the environment that sustains us.<sup>40</sup> In the end it is we who are being consumed.

The poet William Wordsworth’s “getting and spending” may stimulate industriousness, enhance prosperity, and keep some people from doing worse things, but will never satisfy our pursuit of happiness—“more” will never be enough.<sup>41</sup> Excessive absorption in consuming as a life project threatens a loss of self and undermines essential values. Consumer power in the marketplace can sometimes profoundly change corporate policy for the better, but cannot replace union power in the workplace. Without a measure of democracy in the workplace—and that can only be achieved through union organization—our working lives are completely subject to the tender mercies of corporate managers, whose highest ideal is the bottom line. Political democracy cannot survive corporate absolutism in the workplace. And active participation in democratic unions is an irreplaceable school for active and mature citizenship—because it requires collectively making crucial decisions, acting on them, and coping with the consequences. But we are doomed to fail in our responsibilities as citizens of a democracy if we approach unions and politics as no more than “educated consumers”: we need to be labor and political activists.<sup>42</sup>

This is merely a call for counterbalancing the enormous economic and political power of multinational corporations with a vital, democratic union movement that is truly international in scope and outlook. Where that road can take us is something worth considering, but the point here is to seriously consider beginning the journey. Our first step is to awaken labor consciousness through education.

Whether labor consciousness is gone forever or is simply dormant is an important question but a difficult one to answer.<sup>43</sup> How much do we have to suffer before we take action? For Barbara Ehrenreich, “The looting of America has gone

on too long, and the average American is too maxed out, overworked, and over spent to have anything left to take.”<sup>44</sup> Necessity can persuade where mere words fail, but not if our spirits are broken. However, the US labor movement is showing signs of renewal and so is liberalism.<sup>45</sup> As a consequence of successful organizing campaigns, union membership as a percentage of the workforce—for the first time in a long time—rose slightly in 2007; we hope that this uptick presages an ongoing and significant increase in union density. There are other convincing indicators of labor’s renewed vigor as well. The “Justice for Janitors” campaign documented in Ken Loach’s film *Bread and Roses*, for example, is innovative and points to the labor militancy of immigrant Latino workers.<sup>46</sup> And liberals have been reenergized in reaction to the disastrous policies of the Bush Administration, whose approval rating has remained below thirty percent for some time. Passage of the Employee Free Choice Act—which requires employers to recognize unions once a majority of their employees sign union cards—would greatly facilitate union organizing. Currently, union recognition requires a secret ballot election supervised by the National Labor Relations Board, a lengthy process that gives employers more than ample time to intimidate their employees, which they routinely do. A determined liberal-labor alliance will have to overcome implacable opposition from corporate America and its political allies to attain passage of this truly crucial piece of progressive labor legislation. But it is worth the struggle. Union wages and benefits for millions of American workers will do infinitely more to address our serious economic ills than the meagre Bush stimulus package could ever have done.<sup>47</sup>

In the past, liberal politicians and labor leaders had to compete with the socialist, communist, or anarchist Left for support among working people. The Left and the labor movement arose in the same historical period, the era of rising industrial capitalism, as related but distinct—and sometimes contradictory—answers to the economic and political marginalization of industrial workers. The “social unionists” of labor’s left wing mainly drew their strength from unskilled and semi-skilled workers in mass production industries; they often envisioned socialism or anarchism as the apotheosis of unionism. But the “business unionists” of labor’s right wing mainly represented skilled workers in the trades; because craft unions could control the supply of labor, they typically saw unionism as a form of working-class capitalism. In the 1930s, the business unionists who controlled the American Federation of Labor (AFL) refused to organize the millions of unskilled and semi-skilled workers who were suffering in the Great Depression. But some AFL leaders, such as John L. Lewis of the United Mine Workers, split from the AFL to form the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), which did organize the mass production industries, giving social unionism a mass base. The CIO’s victory was due in no small measure to the union rights provided by newly enacted New Deal labor laws, such as the Wagner Act. But unions must be organized on the ground. Lewis employed a sizeable cadre of ideologically motivated and experienced radical labor organizers, who had been demanding industrial labor organization for some time.<sup>48</sup> If they saw industrial unionism as a step along the road to an inevitable social revolution, FDR saw his new welfare state as a strategy for saving the capitalist system at a time when economic depression made it

vulnerable to radical alternatives. The Second World War fostered both national unity, including a no-strike pledge from most unions, and economic prosperity, through deficit financing of the war effort.

The US emerged from the Second World War as an economic colossus astride a devastated world, and the developing Cold War called for continuing national solidarity. In the immediate postwar period, Congress passed sweeping anti-labor laws, such as the Taft-Hartley Act, and the CIO responded to Cold War imperatives by expelling its Left-led unions. The AFL leadership had made this marginalization of labor's left wing a pre-condition for labor unity. When the AFL and CIO finally and triumphantly merged in 1955, business unionism was ascendant.<sup>49</sup> And consumerism became a hallmark of the "affluent society."<sup>50</sup>

The labor movement, as a movement, was defeated by the iron fist of domestic Cold War policy and the velvet glove of the consumer culture.<sup>51</sup> What remained was a large but, overall, a fairly conservative and complacent labor organization, which has suffered a long-term decline as a force for progress in American life. The consequences for America are a palpable deterioration of working and living conditions for the vast majority, an unsupportable aggrandizement of the oligarchy, and a dangerous diminution of democracy, which is seriously threatened by workplace autocracy and an alarmingly inequitable distribution of wealth and power. A revitalized labor movement is indispensable to achieving a democratized workplace, and to restoring the economic and social foundations of our political democracy. In order to realize its historic mission, however, labor cannot hold itself above criticism or shut the door to needed reforms that would militate against corruption, foster both democracy and militancy, and promote vigorous organizing.<sup>52</sup> But the process of US labor's renewal has already begun, and holds great promise for the future.<sup>53</sup>

For decades, both here and abroad, the Left and organized labor have generally been in retreat. The more prosperous but radically unequal capitalist sphere trumped the economically stagnant but nominally egalitarian socialist sphere. The collapse the Soviet Union and the Eastern European communist regimes in 1989—91 signified the West's victory in the Cold War, and this triumph of liberal capitalism led some to prematurely proclaim the "end of history."<sup>54</sup> The US, as the surviving superpower, was seemingly in a position to dominate a new liberal capitalist world order. But the Soviet collapse did not reverse the relative decline, since the 1970s, of US power internationally. And "history" has now returned with the economic rise of Russia, China, India and Brazil, as well as the advent of high oil prices, Islamic extremism, and leftist regimes in Latin America.<sup>55</sup> Organized labor in the liberal democracies has retreated from some of its social democratic commitments and even relinquished some important trade union safeguards in order to save jobs by enhancing the business competitiveness on which prosperity in the new capitalist global economy is predicated.<sup>56</sup> But international labor solidarity and trade agreements that insure labor's right to organize and bar the most egregious forms of labor exploitation would serve us better.

What are the prospects for a progressive approach to improving the lives of working people, that is, for a new alliance of labor and liberal—or radical—politics to redistribute wealth downward?<sup>57</sup> While the conservative advocates of supply-



side economics and capitalist enterprise unrestrained by unions or government have made themselves heard in the marketplace of ideas, they are not entirely convincing. Despite a sustained and massive ideological assault on New Deal liberalism by well-funded conservative think tanks and politicians, working people have not been enthusiastic about embracing 19<sup>th</sup>-century-style laissez-faire economics and Social Darwinism—Social Security and Medicare, for example, remain popular, while tax cuts for the wealthy have become less so.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, there is a growing recognition that extreme inequalities of wealth, both domestically and internationally on this “planet of slums,” as Mike Davis calls it, causes great suffering and threatens our security, prosperity, and liberal democracy.<sup>59</sup> To progress toward a more humane and secure world in the era of global capitalism we need to reinvent the labor movement and pro-labor politics on more equitable and truly international lines; that more than anything else will stimulate a resurgence of labor consciousness.<sup>60</sup> But labor education also has a vital role to play in this process of renewal, and we believe that a labor oriented curriculum and labor education programs can help to awaken us to our dignity and power as working people and citizens.

#### POSTSCRIPT

Barbara Ehrenreich entitled her new book on the extreme and growing disparity of wealth in America *This Land is Their Land*. The title slyly recalls Woody Guthrie’s radical song “This Land is Your Land,” first recorded in 1944 in response to Irving Berlin’s “God Bless America,” a song then frequently being sung on the radio by Kate Smith. In 1955, the leftist historians Richard O. Boyer and Herbert M. Morais, despite the palpable conservatism of the newly merged AFL-CIO, expressed their bedrock belief—in *Labor’s Untold Story*—that labor would one day reclaim America: “Labor united, and united with its allies, is an absolutely irresistible social force that can return this rich and lovely American land to the American people whose sweat and blood have made it great.”<sup>61</sup> Not a bad idea. In 2008 Ehrenreich writes, “We’ll need a new deal, a new distribution of power and wealth, if we want to restore the beautiful idea that was America.”<sup>62</sup> But for that to happen, we’ll need to rebuild the labor movement by restoring labor consciousness.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> “By the mid-1950s, 35 percent of American workers belonged to unions. But today, Big Labor is no longer so big. Just 12.1 percent of American workers are in unions, and in the private sector, just 7.5 percent are, the lowest level since 1901.” Steven Greenhouse (2008), *The Big Squeeze: Tough Times for the American Worker* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf): p. 243.
- <sup>2</sup> Philip M. Dine (2008), *State of the Unions: How Labor Can Strengthen the Middle Class, Improve Our Economy, and Regain Political Influence* (New York: McGraw Hill): p. xix. Also see, Michael D. Yates (1998), *Why Unions Matter* (New York: Monthly Review Press).
- <sup>3</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich (2008), *This Land is Their Land* (New York: Metropolitan Books): p. 3.
- <sup>4</sup> Dine, *op. cit.*, p. xx.

- <sup>5</sup> “The reader might be surprised to learn that neither do I quarrel with the notion of a ‘liberal media.’ It is tiny and profoundly underfunded compared to its conservative counterpart, but it does exist.” Eric Alterman (2003), *What Liberal Media?* (New York: Basic Books): p. 9. “The mass media serve as a system for communicating messages and symbols to the general populous. It is their function to amuse, entertain, and inform, and to inculcate individuals with the values, beliefs, and codes of behavior that will integrate them into the institutional structures of the larger society. In a world of concentrated wealth and major conflicts of class interest, to fulfil this role requires systematic propaganda.” Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky (1988), *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon Books): p 1. “Like workers themselves, labor organizations are either ignored or poorly represented in the media” Michael Parenti (1992), *Make Believe Media: The Politics of Entertainment* (New York: St. Martins Press): p. 79. “In the media, the working class is truly the silenced majority.” Michael Zweig (2000), *The Working-Class Majority: America’s Best Kept Secret* (Ithaca, NY: ILR Press): p. 57.
- <sup>6</sup> For example, the 2001 edition of Prentice Hall’s *Brief Review in United States History and Government* discusses the development of labor unions in the Gilded Age, their decline in the 1920s, and their resurgence during the New Deal. Bonnie-Anne Briggs and Catherine Fish Peterson (2001), *Brief Review in United States History and Government*. (Needham, MA: Prentice Hall): pp. 129, 212, and 233.
- <sup>7</sup> “In the course of a quarter century, hundreds of books have emerged that . . . reveal stories of labor conflict, enrich the understanding of labor’s role in American politics, and give voice—usually through oral history—to those rendered voiceless, faceless, and mindless in the standard history textbooks.” Gary Nash (1997), *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf): p. 65.
- <sup>8</sup> “Earlier this month, the Center for Union Facts, a Washington-based group partly backed by corporate interests, ran what may be the first TV commercial designed to disparage the labor movement as a whole. The commercial followed the group’s purchase of similar antiunion newspaper ads earlier this year.” Kris Maher (May 19, 2006), *Wall Street Journal*. “However, and this was an important point in Gramsci’s argument, the workers could only win if they achieved cultural ‘hegemony’ before attaining political power. . . Every class tries to secure a governing position not only in public institutions but also in regard to the opinions, values, and standards acknowledged by the bulk of society. The privileged classes in their time secured a position of hegemony in the intellectual as well as the political sphere; they subjugated the others by this means, and intellectual supremacy was a precondition of political rule.” Leszek Kolakowski (2005), *Main Currents of Marxism* (New York: W.W. Norton): p. 980.
- <sup>9</sup> “All around the world women work, in the home, in the fields, in the factories and workshops, alongside men or apart from them, growing food, making goods, rendering services. Yet the work that they do is habitually viewed as less important than the work performed by men, may not even be considered ‘real’ work.” Harriet Bradley (1989), *Men’s Work, Women’s Work: A Sociological History of the Sexual Division of Labor in Employment* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press): p. 1. “In American history, as in American life, Black Americans are invisible presences.” Lerone Bennett, Jr. (Feb., 1984), The 10 Biggest Myths about Black America, *Ebony*. “Native-born workers share this invisibility, but it is far worse in the case of immigrant workers, who are often, for all practical purposes, nameless.” Ehrenreich, *op. cit.*, p. 74. “It has been only about 160 years since photography was invented, but in its short history it has been used to portray every imaginable topic – except the daily life of workers, it seems. For every 100 glamour pictures of a car that we see in ads, in media stories, and in movies, there is probably only one picture ever shown of a worker building that car. Just the way that we have come to take the multitude of pictures for granted in our image saturated society, we also take for granted the appalling lack of representation of workers in the media.” Vince Pietropaolo, The CAW PhotoJournal Project in Perspective. <http://www.caw.ca/visual&printlibrary/photojournal/index.asp>
- <sup>10</sup> “Four strands of thinking have combined to promote the idea that we’re all middle class and to dissolve working-class identity: 1) ideas about upward mobility, 2) the promotion of consumerism,

- 3) the politics and ideology of the Cold War, 4) media coverage of class and economic issues.” Zweig, *op. cit.*, p. 39.
- <sup>11</sup> “When Al Gore unveiled a modest appeal to ‘working families’ at the 2000 Democratic National Convention, he drew a sharp response. His Republican opponent, George W. Bush, immediately counterattacked, accusing Gore of unleashing ‘class war’ on the country. The preferred term of address had long been ‘middle class’; even the AFL-CIO avoided the shoals of class rhetoric to try to co-opt the conservative family-values agenda.” Leon Fink (May 2, 2008), Obama and the unmaking of America’s working class, *Chicago Tribune*.
- <sup>12</sup> Christopher Lasch (1978), *The Culture of Narcissism*. (New York: W.W. Norton).
- <sup>13</sup> “One of the most significant legacies of the past one hundred years has been the ever-increasing centrality of consumption in everyday life. The development of advertising over this period as a profound pedagogical site has helped to elevate consumption into a primary role in defining our social selves.” Michael Hoehsmann, Advertising Pedagogy: Teaching and Learning Consumption. In Donaldo Macedo and Shirley R. Steinberg (2007), *Media Literacy: A Reader* (New York: Peter Lang): p. 653.
- <sup>14</sup> “The large industrial unit has become our representative social actuality; and its social organization, the large corporation in this country, our representative social institution.” Peter F. Drucker (1972), *Concept of the Corporation* (New York: The John Day Company): p. 5. “At the pinnacle of the inequality pyramid are the nation’s CEOs. American corporations may be parsimonious about raises for most workers, but they paid their chief executives \$10.5 million on average in 2005, including salary, bonuses, and stock options. That was quadruple their pay a dozen years earlier. This means the typical CEO earns 369 times as much as the average worker, up from 131 times in 1993 and 36 times in 1976.” Greenhouse, *op. cit.*, p. 41.
- <sup>15</sup> “People are going about their daily lives, working and shopping and playing, worshipping at churches and synagogues and mosques, going to movies and to baseball games.” George Bush (Nov. 8, 2001), speech in Atlanta, Ga. “The unemployment rate has remained low, at 4.5 percent. A recent report on retail sales shows a strong beginning to the holiday shopping season across the country—and I encourage you all to go shopping more.” George Bush (Dec. 20, 2006), press conference in the Indian Treaty Room.
- <sup>16</sup> “Directed by Dietmar Post, this documentary follows New York City-based performance artist Bill Talen—whose alter ego, ‘Reverend Billy,’ is a regular personality within the anti-globalization movement—as he stages ‘Stop Shopping’ sermons at a Manhattan Starbucks and a Disney store in Times Square.” Tracie Cooper (July 18, 2008), Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping (2002), *New York Times*.
- <sup>17</sup> “The contest of American politics has always been a dynamic drama of ‘organized money and organized people,’ as Ernie Cortes put it. Nothing is ever likely to change that. What is missing in contemporary politics, however, is a clear understanding of how this conflict has been changed and why power has accumulated steadily in the direction of ‘organized money.’” William Greider (1992), *Who Will Tell the People: The Betrayal of American Democracy* (New York: Simon & Schuster): p. 28. For data on corporate campaign contributions and lobbying, see The Center for Responsive Politics [www.opensecrets.org](http://www.opensecrets.org) “The ‘industrial democracy’ of John L. Lewis, no less than that of Franklin Roosevelt, was predicated upon a thoroughly republican sense of democratic governance.” Nelson Lichtenstein (2001), *State of the Union: A Century of American Labor* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press): p. 32.
- <sup>18</sup> See *The Merchants of Cool* (2001), a documentary directed by Barak Goodman and written by Rachael Dretzin for the Public Broadcasting System’s show “Frontline.” It explores the symbiotic relationship between teens and the media.
- <sup>19</sup> “You can fool all of the people some of the time, and some of the people all of the time, but you can not fool all of the people all of the time.” These words were attributed to Abraham Lincoln, in a speech at Clinton, September 8, 1858. N.W. Stephenson, *Autobiography of A. Lincoln* (1927). They have also been attributed to Phineas Barnum. See *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, Third Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980): p. 314.

- <sup>20</sup> “A GM executive put it with blunt candor years later: ‘Give the union the money, the least possible, but give them what it takes. But don’t let them take the business away from us.’ This proved to be an irresistible formula.” David Brody (1980), *Workers in Industrial America: Essays on the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Struggle* (New York: Oxford University Press): pp. 187-188; William Serrin (1973), *The Company and the Union* (New York): p. 156.
- <sup>21</sup> “Going into debt for consumer purchases, a practice condemned in previous more frugal eras as the last refuge of the spendthrift incompetent, came to be honored as a way to raise the standard of living and stave off depression—although in 1926 one Farmer-Laborite radical objected: ‘The people have mortgaged their future to live in the present. Even opium would not enable a man to invent a system of that kind.’” Paul A. Carter (1975), *The Twenties in America*, Second Edition (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company): p. 34.
- <sup>22</sup> “Even though the middle class is only about thirty-six percent of the workforce, almost every aspect of politics and popular culture, with help from the media, reinforces the idea that ‘middle class’ is the typical and usual status of Americans.” Michael Zweig, *op. cit.*, p. 39.
- <sup>23</sup> “The top 10 percent of households saw their net worth rise by 6.1 percent to an average of \$3.11 million while the bottom 25 percent suffered a decline from a net worth in which their assets equalled their liabilities in 2001 to owing \$1,400 more than their total assets in 2004.” Ehrenreich, *op. cit.*, p. 92. Michael Harrington’s *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* (1962) interrupted the celebration of American affluence by calling attention to the large minority of impoverished Americans, paving the way for the War on Poverty. “Hurricane Katrina has thrust the twin issues of race and poverty at President Bush, who faces steep challenges in dealing with both because of a domestic agenda that envisions deep cuts in long-standing anti-poverty programs and relationships with many black leaders frayed by years of mutual suspicion.” Michael A. Fletcher (Sept. 12, 2005), Katrina Pushes Issues of Race and Poverty at Bush, *Washington Post*, p. A02. Also see, David K. Shipler (2005), *The Working Poor: Invisible in America* (New York: Vintage Books).
- <sup>24</sup> “Instead, mass unionism moved to the center of the political agenda during the 1930s because state-assisted growth of these institutions seemed to offer solutions to two of the central problems confronting the early-twentieth-century.” Nelson Lichtenstein, *op. cit.*, p. 21. “Our extravagant postwar vision formed from a series of historic events: the Great Depression, the Second World War, and the early surge of postwar prosperity. . . All these events combined to give us a sense of a limitless future, in which all possibilities, both for the nation and for individuals, were within our grasp. This is what I mean by entitlement: the conviction that we could completely control our economic, social, and political surroundings. Too sweeping, it was bound to disappoint, and we are now experiencing its bittersweet legacy.” Robert J. Samuelson (1995), *The Good Life and Its Discontents: The American Dream in the Age of Entitlement, 1945–1995* (New York: Times Books): p. xvi.
- <sup>25</sup> The average annual growth rate of real gross domestic product from 1960 to 1970 was 4.6%. Arthur Marwick (1998), *The Sixties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press): p. 251. “In the end, however, the War on Poverty had only a modest impact. Controversial from the beginning, always without funding adequate for its goals, it scored some significant local successes and helped to create several programs of lasting value (including Head Start and Food Stamps). . . But mounting political opposition to the community action programs as well as budgetary pressures caused by the expansion of the Vietnam War brought the War on Poverty to a premature end in 1967.” Eric Foner and John Garraty, Eds. (1991), *The Readers Companion to American History* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin): p. 472.
- <sup>26</sup> Alan Adelson (1972), *SDS* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons); Todd Gitlin (1987), *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (Toronto, Can.: Bantam Books); Leigh D. Benin (2000), *The New Labor Radicalism and New York City’s Garment Industry: Progressive Labor Insurgents in the 1960s* (New York: Garland).
- <sup>27</sup> New immigrants became part of white America through the labor movement, New Deal reforms and home ownership. “A solid majority of white workers, and particularly white male workers, literally had their rights to social citizenship insured. Huge majorities of black and Mexican American

- workers stood ‘outside the law’ where benefits were concerned. . . . Recent scholarship on the CIO has begun to reflect the ways in which the organization’s nonracial syndicalist founding principles ensured that it would not transcend the existing arrangements of the labor market, even as advances over AFL practices occurred.” David R. Roediger (2005), *Working Toward Whiteness: How America’s Immigrants Became White* (New York: Basic Books): pp. 205–206, 215.
- <sup>28</sup> Foner and Garraty, *op. cit.*, pp. 914–915. Also see, Robert Kutner (1980), *Revolt of the Haves: Tax Rebellions and Hard Times* (New York: Simon & Schuster).
- <sup>29</sup> “Corporate profits have climbed to their highest share of national income in sixty-four years, while the share going to wages has sunk to its lowest level since 1929.” Greenhouse, *op. cit.*, p. 8. “Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.” David Harvey (2005), *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press): p. 2. For a critique of neoliberalism, see Richard Polin (2003), *Contours of Descent: U.S. Economic Fractures and the Landscape of Global Austerity* (London: Verso). Also see: Kevin Phillips (1990), *The Politics of Rich and Poor: Wealth and the American Electorate in the Reagan Aftermath* (New York: Random House); and Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison (1982), *The Deindustrialization of America: Plant Closings, Community Abandonment and the Dismantling of Basic Industry* (New York: Basic Books).
- <sup>30</sup> “Business developed ingenious methods to transform anxiety about scarcity into a desire for ‘luxury consumption of leisure and the surplus product.’ The advertising man and the salesman assaulted the older virtues of thrift and prudence. . . . Advertisers sold not products but qualities like social prestige, which the possession of products would allegedly secure. . . . With debt no longer shameful, people bought on instalment.” William E. Leuchtenburg (1958), *The Perils of Prosperity, 1914–32*. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press): p. 200.
- <sup>31</sup> “The greatest single engine in the destruction of the Protestant ethic was the invention of the instalment plan, or instant credit. . . . The system was transformed by mass production and mass consumption, by the creation of new wants and new means of gratifying those wants. . . . The Protestant ethic had served to limit sumptuary (though not capital) accumulation. When the Protestant ethic was sundered from bourgeois society, only the hedonism remained, and the capitalist system lost its transcendental ethic.” Daniel Bell (1996), *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books): p. 21.
- <sup>32</sup> “Management has siphoned off gains in productivity in high profits, while the farmer got far less, and the worker, though better off, received wage increases disproportionately small when compared to profits.” Leuchtenburg, *op. cit.*, p. 25.
- <sup>33</sup> “‘Subprime was a symptom of the problem,’ said James F. Keegan, a bond portfolio manager at American Century Investments, a mutual fund company. ‘The problem was we had a debt or credit bubble.’” Vikas Bajaj and Louise Story (Feb. 12, 2008), Mortgage Crisis Spreads Past Subprime Loans, *New York Times*. See Kevin Phillips (2008), *Bad Money: Reckless Finance, Failed Politics and the Global Crisis of American Capitalism* (New York: Viking).
- <sup>34</sup> “The U.S. economy is in recession, or soon to be in one, according to USA Today’s quarterly survey of leading economists.” John Waggoner and Barbara Hansen (April 29, 2008), USA Today Survey: We’re in a recession, economists say, *USA Today*. (The unnerving financial meltdown of September 2008 has signalled the danger of a world-wide economic depression.)
- <sup>35</sup> “An example of the spreading credit crisis is seen in Don Doyle, a computer engineer at Lockheed Martin who makes a six-figure income and had a stellar credit score in 2004, when he refinanced his home in Northern California to take cash out to pay for his daughter’s college tuition. Mr. Doyle, 52, is now worried that he will have to file for bankruptcy, because he cannot afford to make the higher variable payments on his mortgage, and he cannot sell his home for more than his \$740,000 mortgage.” Bajaj and Story, *op. cit.*
- <sup>36</sup> “In effect, Americans trade their productivity for more money, while Europeans trade it for more leisure.” James Surowiecki (Nov. 28, 2005), No Work, No Play, *The New Yorker*, the Financial

Page. “Americans are putting in more hours at work, about 42.5 hours in 2006, compared to about 37.5 hours in 2003.” Suzanna De Baca (Jan. 4, 2008), *Americans Working Longer Hours, Especially in Small Business*, Expert Business Source.

- <sup>37</sup> “While corporate America continues to clamour for more free trade agreements, many Americans—ranging from the billionaire Warren Buffet to the AFL-CIO—are voicing alarm about another aspect of globalization, the nation’s huge trade deficit. In 2006, the deficit climbed to a record \$764 billion, by far the largest of any nation in history. With China alone, America’s trade deficit was \$230 billion. By some estimates, the nation’s recurring trade deficits are responsible for destroying two-thirds of the 3.5 million factory jobs the nation has lost since 2000. To finance its trade deficits, the United States has run up \$3 trillion in foreign debts. Roughly \$1 trillion of that has been borrowed from China’s central bank, giving China considerable leverage over the United States. America has also indirectly financed its deficits by selling off assets to foreigners, from Manhattan real estate to large pieces of prestigious investment banks.” Greenhouse, *op. cit.*, 210.
- <sup>38</sup> “Children constitute part of the labor force in virtually every country. An estimated 246 million people between the ages of 5 and 17 work in the agricultural, industrial, and craft sectors worldwide. Approximately 180 million of these children work under the worst form of child labor as defined by the International Labor Organization (2002).” Gregory E. Hamot and Elizabeth S. Jensen, *Teaching about Child Labor and International Human Rights*, Eric Educational Reports. “Child workers, some as young as 10, have been found working in a textile factory in conditions close to slavery to produce clothes that appear destined for Gap Kids, one of the most successful arms of the high street giant.” Dan McDougall (Oct. 28 2007), *Indian ‘slave’ children found making low-cost clothes destined for Gap*, *The Observer*. “Some of America’s slaves are captive domestics. . . Others are sweatshop or restaurant workers, and at least ten thousand are sex slaves lured from their home countries to American brothels by the promise of respectable jobs.” Ehrenreich, *op. cit.*, p. 21. “My best estimate of the number of slaves in the world today is 27 million.” Kevin Bales (2004), *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press): p. 8.
- <sup>39</sup> “. . . Wal-Mart’s illegal and unethical activities, such as forcing employees to work off the clock and locking its workers in at night . . . as well as violating child labor laws in Arkansas, Connecticut, Maine, and New Hampshire; having illegal immigrants work seven days a week cleaning its stores; and buying goods from Chinese sweatshops where managers beat workers and hold them in virtual slavery. . . Scott sees himself as a champion of the value-seeking consumer. He is constantly talking up Wal-Mart’s role in saving American consumers billions each year. He often portrays Wal-Mart as the best friend of “working families” (borrowing the vocabulary of the AF-CIO), saying its jobs and prices have helped millions of struggling families ‘achieve a higher standard of living.’” Greenhouse, *op. cit.*, pp. 135–137.
- <sup>40</sup> “Supercapitalism is generating unimagined prosperity around the world, a great accomplishment. But it is also fomenting social discontent as inequality widens, jobs become less stable, old ties are severed, older communities are abandoned, air and water quality deteriorates, and traditional cultures are offended by commercial prurience. That all of this is being driven by global consumers and investors—some of whom themselves are deeply troubled by these social consequences—does not diminish the sting.” Robert B. Reich (2007), *Supercapitalism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf): pp. 125–126.
- <sup>41</sup> “The world is too much with us; late and soon./Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers.” William Wordsworth, “The World is Too Much with Us” (1807).
- <sup>42</sup> “The second key is internal union democracy. . . Fighting for democracy in the workplace—not simply the right to form unions—is vital to restoring the social mission of labor and returning unions to their social-movement heritage.” Lichtenstein, *op. cit.*, p. 274.
- <sup>43</sup> “So despite the boom of the 1990s, the future did not look hopeful, either for American trade unions or for those workers who sought to join them.” *Ibid*, p. 245.
- <sup>44</sup> Ehrenreich, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

- <sup>45</sup> From 2006 to 2007 union density rose from 12% to 12.1%. Union Members Summary, Bureau of labor Statistics (Jan. 25, 2008). “At its heart the liberal project is what it has always been: to create a free fair and prosperous society” Paul Starr (2007), *Freedom’s Power: The True Force of Liberalism* (New York: Basic Books): p. 2. “I believe in a relatively equal society, supported by institutions that limit extremes of wealth and poverty. I believe in democracy, civil liberties and the rule of law. That makes me a liberal, and I’m proud of it.” Paul Krugman (2007), *The Conscience of a Liberal* (New York: W.W. Norton): p. 267.
- <sup>46</sup> Preston Rudy, ‘Justice for Janitors,’ not ‘Compensation for Custodians.’ In Ruth Milkman and Kim Voss, Eds. (2004), *Rebuilding Labor: Organizing and Organizers in the New Union Movement* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press): p. 133.
- <sup>47</sup> Ehrenreich, *op. cit.*, pp. 129–131
- <sup>48</sup> Robert H. Zieger (1995), *The CIO, 1935—1955* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press); Robert H. Zieger (1988), *John L. Lewis, Labor Leader* (Boston, MA: Twayne Publishers).
- <sup>49</sup> Patricia Cayo Sexton (1991), *The War on Labor and the Left: Understanding America’s Unique Conservatism* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press); Ann Fagen Ginger and David Christiano, Eds. (1987), *The Cold War Against Labor*, Two Volumes (Berkeley, CA: The Meiklejohn Civil Liberties Institute); and William E. Forbath (1991), *Law and the Shaping of the American Labor Movement* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).
- <sup>50</sup> Kenneth Galbraith (1958), *The Affluent Society* (New York: Houghton Mifflin).
- <sup>51</sup> “The separation of political from economic organization distinguishes the left in the United States from that in every other industrialized society.” Seymour Martin Lipset and Gary Marks (2000), *It Didn’t Happen Here: Why Socialism Failed in the United States* (New York: W.W. Norton): p. 85.
- <sup>52</sup> Robert Fitch (2006), *Solidarity for Sale: How Corruption Destroyed the Labor Movement and Undermined America’s Promise* (New York: PublicAffairs).
- <sup>53</sup> “Unions are redesigning and redefining what it is to be a union in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.” Dine, *op. cit.*, p. 247.
- <sup>54</sup> “It is possible that if events continue to unfold as they have done over the past few decades, that the idea of a universal and directional history leading up to liberal democracy may become more plausible to people, and that the relativist impasse of modern thought will in a sense solve itself.” Francis Fukuyama (1992), *The End of History and the Last Man*. (New York: The Free Press): p. 388.
- <sup>55</sup> “The world has not been transformed, however. Nations remain as strong as ever, and so too the nationalist ambitions, the passions, and the competition among nations that have shaped history. The world is still “unipolar,” with the United States remaining the only superpower. But international competition among great powers has returned, with the United States, Russia, China, Europe, Japan, India, Iran, and others vying for regional predominance. Struggles for honor and status and influence in the world have once again become key features of the international scene. Ideologically, it is a time not of convergence but of divergence. The competition between liberalism and absolutism has reemerged, with the nations of the world increasingly lining up, as in the past, along ideological lines. Finally, there is the fault line between modernity and tradition, the violent struggle of Islamic fundamentalists against the modern powers and the secular cultures that, in their view, have penetrated and polluted their Islamic world.” Robert Kagan (Aug. and Sept., 2007), *End of Dreams, Return of History, Policy Review*. Also see: Robert Kagan (2008), *The Return of History and the End of Dreams* (Alfred A. Knopf); Fareed Zakaria (2008), *The Post-American World* (New York: W.W. Norton). “What ends as Jihad may begin in a simple search for a local identity, some set of common personal attributes to hold out against the numbering and neutering uniformities of industrial modernization and the colonizing culture of McWorld.” Benjamin R. Barber (1996), *Jihad vs. McWorld: How Globalism and Tribalism are Reshaping the World* (New York: Ballantine Books): p. 9.
- <sup>56</sup> “The United States has among the most flexible labor laws in the world. The easier it is to fire someone in a dying industry, the easier it is to hire someone in a rising industry that no one knew would exist five years earlier. This is a great asset, especially when you compare the situation in the

United States to inflexible, rigidly regulated labor markets like Germany's, full of government restrictions on hiring and firing." Thomas L. Friedman (2005), *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux): p. 246. Also see David Rothkopf (2008), *Superclass: The Global Power Elite and the World They are Making* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux).

- <sup>57</sup> "In the context of the rise of global movements that challenge transnational capital, a small but growing group of social theorists and economists have opened a discussion of alternatives to capitalist hegemony." Stanley Aronowitz (2006), *Left Turn: Forging a New Political Future* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Books): p. 210. Also see, Bertram Silverman and Murray Yanowitch (1974), *The Worker in "Post-Industrial Capitalism": Liberal and Radical Responses* (New York: The Free Press) and Stanley Aronowitz and Stanley Cutler (1998), *Post-Work* (New York: Routledge).
- <sup>58</sup> "The great domestic policy struggles of the last fifteen years—Newt Gingrich's attempt to strangle Medicare, George Bush's attempt to privatize Social Security—were exactly what [Adlai] Stevenson described: the party of the reckless and embittered trying to dismantle institutions that are essential parts of modern America's social fabric." Krugman, *op. cit.*, p. 266. "Bush proposed a Social Security plan in 2005 that focused on creating private accounts for younger workers, but it never came up for a vote in Congress. Democrats strongly opposed the idea and few Republicans embraced it." Obama Links McCain to Unpopular Bush Policies, *AP News* (May 19, 2008). "In recent years, the numbers regarding income disparity have been startling. . . . But the tax cuts pushed through by President Bush have in many ways aggravated the disparities, giving \$20 on average to the bottom 20 percent of American households, \$744 to the middle fifth, and \$118,477 to those making more than \$1 million annually." Greenhouse, *op. cit.*, pp. 40–41.
- <sup>59</sup> "As Jan Breman, writing of India, has warned: 'A point of no return is reached when a reserve army waiting to be incorporated into the labour process becomes stigmatized as a permanently redundant mass, an excessive burden that cannot be included now or in the future, in economy and society.'" Mike Davis (2007), *Planet of Slums* (London: Verso): p. 199.
- <sup>60</sup> See Milkman and Voss, Eds., *op. cit.*
- <sup>61</sup> Joe Klein (1980), *Woody Guthrie: A Life* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf): p. 276. Richard O. Boyer and Herbert M. Morais (2003), *Labor's untold Story* (Pittsburgh, PA: United Electrical, Radio & Machine Workers of America): p. 379.
- <sup>62</sup> Ehrenreich, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

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## 2. LABOR'S EXCLUSION FROM OFFICIAL KNOWLEDGE

### *The Louisiana/Texas Timber Wars of 1907-1913*

Every few years the Texas State Board of Education holds meetings to gather public input regarding the selection of school textbooks and all hell breaks loose. Competing groups shout over “whose America” is honored in the texts while working to ensure that no “dangerous ideas” will slip through to influence the children of the state. Tears are shed, Jesus and Sam Houston are invoked, and large sections of history, literature, science, and health textbooks are redlined for revision or deletion. Most citizens laugh off the histrionics, but many educators argue that it is indeed important to consider what is taught and who gets to choose. Michael Apple (1991) contends that we must understand the political processes by which some groups manage to have their histories, values, and perspectives validated by the state as “official knowledge.” Because knowledge is often the product of struggles over power and control, what counts as knowledge in schools cannot be understood simply as a neutral presentation of the facts. Some groups “win” and their cultures become accepted as natural or superior, while other groups “lose” and become marginalized or even silenced. Textbooks, the most explicit representation of official knowledge in the schools, clearly mirror very particular values and beliefs. In order to understand schooling in a given society then, we cannot ignore the history and politics of the social movements that have shaped the culture nor the socializing institutions charged with reproducing that culture (Apple, p. 7).

I offer my own explorations of the little known history of the Louisiana and Texas Timber Wars as a case study in the production of official knowledge:

I have some grainy, old family photos from childhood trips to the Piney Woods of East Texas that I like to look at every now and then. In one, my sister and I are on a walk in the woods with our grandmother, on a trip to the area where her family came from. I remember the musky-sweet smell of the old sugar cane mill where we picked up fresh cane syrup, and I can still envision, very clearly, the roughhewn log cabin where my great grandmother was born and raised near the lumber town of Moscow. Trying to picture her growing up in this old “dog run” cabin with no electricity was fascinating, but it was also disconcerting to see this piece of our family history disregarded by the farmer who was using the house to store hay.

Some photos show me watching drummers and dancers performing at the Alabama-Coushatta Indian reservation nestled deep in the Big Thicket. I loved the ceremony, but because of all the violent Westerns I had watched as a child, I felt a

little anxious the whole time. Other photos capture the forests from the back of a restored steam railroad. The State of Texas ran the abandoned Rusk line for historical education on the railway that had been built in the 1890's in order for some businessmen to profit from prison labor. Then, the tracks transported ore and timber processed by cheap prison labor; now, they transport tourists wanting a quaint view of the era of steam locomotives.<sup>1</sup>

East Texas was sparsely populated when I visited as a youth back in the 70's. Some small farms and ranches clung to the roadsides, along with weekend cabins lining the sandy bottom lakes, but most of the small towns were forlorn and largely abandoned. Some of the old buildings were still standing in Moscow, including the ruins of the old Masonic Girls and Boys Academy. Camden, where my great aunt Vera ran a boarding house for timber workers, had been a lumber company town before the 1960's when Champion Paper bought the entire area, forced the residents to relocate, and demolished the boarding house, the school, and most of the homes. Other towns in the area did not fare much better. Most downtowns were boarded up and many people lived in shotgun shacks or old frame houses that seemed to lean one way or the other. The signs of poverty were everywhere, but to my young eyes it was just bucolic and peaceful, worlds away from my home in constantly changing Houston. One reason I think I liked the area was because nothing much seemed to happen in those backwoods, ever.

My schooling did little to disabuse me of my understanding of East Texas as a place where little of importance happened. In school, even though Texas history is a mandated full curriculum for all students, our lessons skimmed over the Piney Woods region, except to briefly mention the indigenous tribes encountered by the early missionaries and the turn-of-the-century Spindletop oil gusher. Our heritage, as told to us in school and the media, was of the West: horses, cattle, oil wells, and guns. Our heroes were military: the Alamo martyrs, Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders, Pancho Villa's border raiders, and the Texas Rangers.

Despite the relative poverty of most in the state throughout history, our story was also one of big money. Great fortunes were made in the tremendous cattle drives from South Texas all the way to Northern markets and bigger ones were made by industrious wildcatters in the West Texas oil fields and later by the business visionaries who built Dallas and Houston. Peaceful and impoverished, East Texas just did not fit into this grand narrative of quick guns and fast fortunes. So despite the fact that Texas history remains alive among the people and many Texans can recount the most famous stories about the state or about the colorful characters of our past, few can tell you much of anything that ever happened in the East Texas woodlands.

However, I have found that those deep, dark forests hold some telltale secrets.

In the bottomlands of the Texas and Louisiana border area a dramatic story played out at the turn of the century that would have ramifications for the history, culture, politics, and economics of the region for generations to come. The events were anything but peaceful and involved poor whites, blacks, Native-Americans, Cajuns, and Redbones<sup>2</sup> coming together under one union, railroad and lumber barons who printed their own form of money, "The Prince of the Pines," gun-toting

Burns Detective agents, socialist “rednecks,” company stores stocked with cocaine and morphine, the outlaw “Leather Britches” Smith, New Orleans dandy and poet Covington Hall, “Big Bill” Haywood and “The Wobblies,” the “Good Citizens League,” the KKK, the Louisiana Guard, backwoods communes, and bloody shootouts. If only the Texas history textbooks used in schools were so enticing. The wild story of the Texas and Louisiana Timber Wars can compete with the best Texas legends in terms of drama and character, but more importantly, it resonates in terms of social and historical significance.<sup>3</sup>

Yet this story is virtually unknown today. It is not taught in schools, and is kept just barely alive through oral tradition among older unionists in the area. As an English teacher in Corpus Christi, I team-taught within an interdisciplinary curriculum model that incorporated Texas history and literature. Although the state-supplied texts did offer token materials about Latino migrant workers that resonated with our student population, little else was mentioned about labor. And even though my Texas roots can be traced back to a cabin built of old growth Piney Woods timber, I had never heard of the fascinating war between working people and powerful corporations there until I stumbled upon an obscure reference in an old labor history volume. I began looking into the timber union mostly because I have fond memories of the area and as a reader of Texas history I was curious about this loose end of the historical record. As I discovered more about this history I had to question whether or not this labor struggle was simply an interesting footnote or if there was something of true importance to learn here.

I argue that by examining the events as they happened, as well as deconstructing the fate of the historical record, we can understand much about our culture, politics, and economics. To know the story of Texas (and the US), young people need to know this *people's history* just as much as they need to know about Travis drawing his line in the sand at the Alamo. I want to interrogate the production of what counts as history and examine why this fascinating piece of our past has been buried. There has to be a reason why this epic tale is not a part of the folklore of a people who love their stories outrageous and their characters larger-than-life.

#### THE LOUISIANA/TEXAS TIMBER WARS 1907-1913

The Southern lumber industry exploded in the 1890's when the government gave away huge tracts of pine forests to corporations or syndicates financed by Northern capitalists. The land had been set aside to earn income for education, but investors snatched up millions of acres for 12.5 to 75 cents per acre, leaving next to nothing for the promised school funding. The timber companies took control of the land and dislocated many independent yeoman farmers and woodsmen who were thus forced to become dependent tenant farmers or wage workers in the lumber mills. The great stands of long leaf and yellow pines that previously had been cut in sustainable numbers were more than 90% clear cut following this government give-away that directly caused one of our nation's greatest environmental disasters (Krom, 2005). By 1920 the monopolies had leveled the forests on both sides of the Sabine River bordering Texas and Louisiana, and with no effort made to repair the

damage the area was left largely to economic decay (Allen, 1961). Decades would pass before the miles of clear-cut resembled anything like a great forestland again while the economic prospects of most people in the area declined or remained stagnant.

In the midst of this environmental calamity a great battle was fought between the lumber workers and the timber monopolies. The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) became involved with the organizing in what labor historian Philip Foner (1965) contends is one of the most fascinating and inspiring labor struggles in the country's history. However, this uprising should not be viewed as a singular conflict arising out of temporary labor complaints. Examined in socio-political context, the struggle reflects much about the ways in which people in this area responded to the rise of industrialism as well as the (often violent) means capital used to forge the systemic structures that would last generations and the ideologies that would maintain them.

James Green (1978) argues that resistance to monopoly capitalism was evident even from the early days of the timber industry in the region. The people of the Piney Woods were given to communal, progressive, or radical ways of interpreting their rapidly industrializing world that today we rarely associate with a Southern ethos. Before the timber industry took over the land, most of the locals lived a hardscrabble life of the farm, river, or woods. The new work in the mills offered more in wages than most tenant farmers could earn at the time, but the industry also brought a very different way of living and a different relationship to the land. Farmers were used to hard work but they worked with the rhythms of the day and of the seasons as well as with the rhythms of family and community. The complete decimation of the forests by the timber barons was anathema to those who had worked the land on different terms for generations. The harsh discipline of the mills and the constant pressure to produce more, faster, also fomented resistance from the start.

Men and women from this agrarian tradition were connected to nature and a communal way of life that included an acknowledgement of squatters' rights and practices such as common lands for hunting or running cattle and hogs. The new system based on corporate ownership of the land caused massive dislocations and the weakening of families as family men were forced to be away from the home working at the mill during most daylight hours, while unattached men did not find much of a community in the small company towns or isolated lumber camps that spread out through the previously virgin forests. The workers were treated almost as feudal serfs living at the mercy of the company bosses with little say in many aspects of their lives. Many of the workers represented forced prison labor as the company town sheriffs were notorious for randomly arresting men on trumped up charges and making them work off their sentences or their fines (Foner, 1965, p. 234). Moreover, many of the camps were effectively run like prisons anyway as the workers were often fenced in and subject to the "law" of the company (Creel, 1915). The loss of autonomy was devastating for these proud people accustomed to independent living.

The work was brutal and backbreaking with very little concern shown for the health or safety of the workers. Many were maimed on the job and discarded; others lost their lives. The companies constantly found ways to cheat workers out of their pay or charge fees for myriad aspects of living in the camps or towns, even though most of the wages were paid in scrip that ended up back in the company coffers anyway. Housing was deplorable, sanitation was almost non-existent, and the high prices charged by the company stores for goods left little purchasing power for anything other than alcohol or narcotics. The horrific working conditions and isolation of many of the camps and mills led to excessive alcohol consumption and narcotic drug use was purposely cultivated as many company stores stocked cocaine and morphine for the workers (Hall, 1999).

However, the locals did not just resign themselves to the inevitability of the new feudal system. When company surveyors first showed up to begin claiming the land from the residents there were reports of backwoods snipers, and for years the locals employed sabotage against the sawmills and the lumber camps. At times resistance took the form of simply dropping out from the company workforce. Workers who still had families with farms in the areas would often just leave the mills for long periods to pick cotton or find other seasonal farmwork. At other times the workers would stage loosely organized walkouts in order to force minimal concessions. But the workers also began more systematic planning and organizing as their lives became more onerous. The idea of organizing against monopoly capitalism would not be an entirely new concept to many of the workers because the region had been caught up in earlier radical movements and anti-corporate sentiment ran deep in these woods (Fehrenbach, 2000; Green, 1978). The Populist movement (later the People's Party) was born in the Texas Hill Country as the Farmer's Alliance and was embraced in much of East Texas and Louisiana as well as large swaths of the US by the late 1870's. The Populists, who agitated for the interests of both small farmers and laborers, railed against the monopoly capitalism of the railroads and the banking system's stranglehold on the farmers. The farmer's co-op movement began as a tool to regain economic power for the farmers, but also sought to make alliances with wagedworkers.

The Populists caused great concern for the status quo. Indeed, Theodore Roosevelt was so alarmed that these radical farmers were igniting social revolution that he actually proposed shooting Populist leaders in firing squads (Fehrenbach, 2000, p. 624). In reaction to this powerful movement sweeping the region, large landholders, industrialists, and middle-class merchants and professionals worked frantically via the Democratic Party to destroy the People's Party by the turn of the century. However, populist ideals did not die, and the movement did lay the groundwork for the alliance between timber workers and farmers that would later be cemented in East Texas and Louisiana. The timber workers also borrowed much from the radical Knights of Labor who had left a legacy of militant, interracial unionism, especially through the sugar laborers they organized in Louisiana in the 1890's, as well as farm workers and laborers in Texas (Foner, 1965). Resistance was part of the landscape in these woods, not just a temporary response to unique working conditions of the camps and mills.

So, in 1907 when many of the lumber mills lengthened the twelve-hour workday and cut pay 20 percent or more, the workers rose up en masse and walked off the job. The disorganized strike, however, was easily beaten down and the mills held the upper hand when work resumed. Recognizing the necessity of a more effective organization, a handful of workers began secretly organizing across Texas and Louisiana and by 1911 had built a formidable operation that would organize men and women, black, white, Native American, and Redbone in solidarity. Together they created the Brotherhood of Timber Workers (BTW). When the lumber barons finally found out about the quiet organizing drive they organized the Southern Lumber Operators Association (SLOA) and began an intense anti-union campaign. The association hired spies to infiltrate the BTW and then blacklisted thousands suspected of union involvement. Knowing that unions needed cash to survive the companies began tighter enforcement of the scrip-only economy. Organizers were violently beaten or threatened and many in the Brotherhood felt the need to carry arms at all times (Gray, 1973).

The backlash from the companies quickly weakened the union so the Brotherhood decided to affiliate with the International Workers of the World (IWW), widely known as “The Wobblies.” “Big Bill” Haywood travelled to the region to rally the workers and strengthen their interracial solidarity. The Brotherhood welcomed all races from the beginning, but they met in separate halls to avoid breaking the laws forbidding whites and blacks to congregate together for meetings or rallies. Haywood recognized their racial solidarity, but he insisted the Brotherhood ignore the ridiculous laws and meet in the same hall. From that moment on the level of solidarity among the races achieved by the Brotherhood was unique among US labor unions. The BTW was also notable regarding gender solidarity. This rural union, for example, was one of the few labor organizations ever in which the wives of the male workers held full voting rights in all union affairs (Roediger, 1999).

After organizing a large majority of the workers, the Brotherhood presented the SLOA with a list of issues to be negotiated, including a ten-hour workday and payment in US currency. The union pledged non-violence and moderation, but the timber association responded with full force and denied the possibility of any negotiations with the union. The association hired more gunmen from the Burns Detective Agency to supplement company guards and company-controlled sheriffs as they quickly escalated the violent repression of the union. Hired thugs attempted to assassinate a union organizer, and in response members of the Brotherhood marched on the lumber company town of Grabow, Louisiana on Sunday July 7, 1912. The procession stopped at a crossroads near the Galloway Lumber Company and union leader A.L. Emerson stood on top of a wagon to begin addressing a crowd that had gathered, but not long into his speech gunmen opened fire on the assembly from concealed positions. The unionists, encouraged on by the outlaw “Leather Britches” Smith, fired back but were no match for the heavily armed company men and had to disperse. Four men were killed, including one bystander. “Leather Britches” escaped into the forests, but was later hunted down and killed. Over forty people were wounded including women and children. The owner of the

mill wired the Governor of Louisiana and the state immediately called the Louisiana Guard to the area. Many workers were outraged and wanted to escalate the events into full-out warfare, but the BTW leadership urged non-violence and argued that they should let the law take its course. When the law did act, sixty-five union men were arrested on charges of inciting riot and murder and were held for trial in Lake Charles; conversely, none of the company men who fired upon the crowd were indicted (Gray, 1973; Krom, 2005).

The union men were held for months in deplorable conditions down in Lake Charles. One observer found sixty men being held in a 42x30 foot room in the jail. But when the trial finally commenced it only took the jury a few minutes to find all the union men "not-guilty." The courtroom gallery erupted in cheers and a great parade spilled out into the streets of Lake Charles with celebrations raging deep into the night. Hundreds of unionists from isolated corners of Texas and Louisiana had poured into the city in a show of solidarity and they now felt the power of the union as they marched together. The next day Eugene Debs polled well in the pinewoods of Louisiana and Texas while a socialist union man was elected mayor of the lumber town of Deridder. Such rebellion at the polls was remarkable because large numbers of the poorest lumber workers, black and white, were disenfranchised by various means, including poll taxes and literacy tests. It seemed to all that the alliance of farmers and timber workers, held together by interracial solidarity, was on the brink of a major victory that might ignite another Texas revolution.

However, the victory proved pyrrhic. The lengthy trial had depleted the union's funds while giving the timber companies time to regroup and strengthen their paramilitary forces. The national IWW did not come through with enough financial support, and the timber barons, led by East Texas "Prince of the Pines" John Kirby (later to be known as the Father of Texas Industrialism), began to increase their efforts to crush the beaten-down unionists. The Brotherhood was initially so successful in part because many people in the area, including small farmers and merchants, were in solidarity with the workers and were against the abusive power of the timber barons. Unique among IWW locals, the Brotherhood recruited farmers into the union and was associated with the interracial Texas Renters Union (tenant farmers). The area's close-knit communities saw this revolt as a way to achieve the goals of the earlier Populists and Knights of Labor, so many rallied to the cause. Indeed, organizers from the IWW were amazed at the level of solidarity achieved throughout Texas and Louisiana. George Speed marveled, "How did you boys do it? I have never seen whole communities lined up as they are here lined up behind the IWW in this fight" (Hall, 1999, p. 142).<sup>4</sup>

Kirby recognized that the industry had to drive wedges between the groups making up the alliance, and he began by pressuring the middle class of the area to abandon the workers. The companies typically controlled the ability of the middle class—teachers, ministers, doctors, guards and sheriffs, as well as many of the merchants—to maintain their livelihoods, so it was not all that difficult for the companies to force many of this class back into line (Green, 1978, p. 213). Company guards and mill managers quickly organized "Good Citizens Leagues," and recruited teachers, ministers, doctors, and some merchants to join vigilante



groups set on intimidating union supporters while stirring up racial fears and hatreds. At the same time, Kirby conspired with Samuel Gompers of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) on a plan to divide the races by allowing the less radical AFL into the timber region if they promised the white workers they would not allow black membership and would give whites a monopoly on the more skilled and higher paying jobs. (When news of the plan leaked through union newspapers, the strategy caused an angry backlash against the AFL and they were not allowed into the pine belt.) The timber companies also ratcheted up race baiting and mobilized the KKK in the area, starting in Jasper, Texas, to spread terror across the region.<sup>5</sup>

The climactic battle of the Timber Wars illustrates the power the corporations could gather once they enlisted the middle class. Feeling empowered by their strengthened position, in 1912 the SLOA engineered events to induce a strike at the American Lumber Company mills in Merryville, Louisiana. However, the workers and their farmer allies surprised the company with tenacious solidarity. Three months into the strike, the workers were providing for their families by forming a communal organization that was ahead of its time for the US and attracted considerable attention in radical circles across the country (Gray, 1973). White and Black farmers in the area rallied to the union cause and fed the strikers' families. One farmer at a union meeting summed up the solidarity in the community:

We farmers and workers will have to stick together in the Union and win this fight, or all of us, white and colored, are going back to slavery. I have so many pigs in my pen, so many head of cattle in the woods, so many chickens in the yard, and so many bushels of corn and sweet potatoes, and so many gallons of syrup in my barn, and I pledge myself that so long as I have a pound of meat or a peck of corn, no man, white or colored, who goes out on strike will starve, nor will his children. (Foner, 1965, p. 253)

And yet the budding community of unionists was no match for the heavily armed lumber companies. In the middle of the unusually cold winter of 1912, the Merryville "Good Citizens League" destroyed everything the community had built to sustain the workers' families and in the process crushed the life out of the union. The middle-class members of the League, led by the Merryville company doctor, mustered with armed guards and Burns detectives, marched through town as a show of force, and easily routed the union families. Worker shacks were ransacked without warrant and families were thrown out into the cold as the League assumed the roles of the law and the judiciary. The vigilantes levelled the union headquarters and torched the communal soup kitchen staffed by female BTW members. Women and children were led away from the kitchen at gunpoint and many union men were severely beaten or shot. In the days that followed an armed mob of League members "arrested" and "deported" the remaining pro-union workers and families at the penalty of death if they ever returned to the Piney Woods (Foner, 1965; Krom, 2005). The Brotherhood of Timber Workers was routed, with the blessing of the state, and disintegrated over the coming months. The lumber companies easily regained control of what was left of the great

Southern pine forests, and the region remained mired in poverty for generations. The hard-fought Texas and Louisiana Timber Wars were lost and the story of the workers faded into the shadows of the dark woods.

The brief account of the early East Texas timber industry, as succinctly told in a sidebar in my old Texas History book, offers a different perspective:

The great pine trees provided lumber for the early Spanish and Anglo-American settlers. They used the timber for building houses, barns, and fences, and for heating their homes. Sawmilling became an early industry in the region. Today many people are still employed in the lumber industry. Lumber is used for building homes and making furniture, boxes, crates, railroad ties, poles, and fence posts.<sup>6</sup>

### THE PRESS, THE PULPIT, AND THE SCHOOL

I began this story by pondering why such a wild tale would not be included in the canon of narratives told and re-told about this colorful corner of the world. I believe the answers to this query may prove relevant to so many other questions people have been struggling with about how we have arrived at our current moment in history, both in Texas and the United States in general. (I begin with examining the story in relation to Texas before broadening the perspective to include the entire U.S.) I want to explore what the lacunae in the historical narrative say about our national mythologies and how our cultural self-image is manufactured and maintained. I have found that the more labor's hidden stories are uncovered, the more obvious it becomes that the Louisiana and Texas Timber Wars are not an anomaly or a mere footnote to the historical record of the region; such labor struggles *are* our history.<sup>7</sup> From the Ludlow, Colorado Massacre of 1914 in which men, women, and children of striking families were killed to the Chicago Memorial Day Massacre of 1937, the stories of violent repression repeat what seems like the same bloody plot over and over again. Corporate powers in collaboration with the state have repeatedly waged wars on American citizens in order to terrorize working people into submission. Such relentless repression suggests that the outcome of the battles was absolutely crucial to those determined to direct the route our society and culture would take.

Although US labor struggles are typically not as violent today, physical force and intimidation by corporate and state powers are used against workers more often than most citizens may assume.<sup>8</sup> The threat of physical force against labor however, supports what is primarily an ongoing *ideological* battle. The term culture war is too easily tossed around of late, but the labor struggle truly has been a war waged over culture and values just as much as it has been about specific benefits or wages. Labor and working people have more often than not lost, and as a result it is now difficult to see beyond the hegemony of corporate values and consumer culture. To return to Texas as an example, we can see that capital and government have increasingly employed propaganda in order to avoid having to use coercive power. Corporate interests use both private institutions (the press and

other media) as well as government institutions (e.g., schools) to construct a distinct vision of who we are as a people and to communicate the values inherent in the notion of American individualism.

Yet, we must understand that any artifice is created as much by what is left out as by what is included. The project of constructing a seamless Texas mythology has largely been accomplished through the erasure of people and ideas that do not fit a conservative ideology.<sup>9</sup> Texas history—as told in schools, museums, historic sites, and even Texas tourism guides—largely ignores history from a working people’s perspective while romanticizing heroes of business and government.<sup>10</sup> What we are left with is a conservative, “pro-business” mythology centered on the “great men who built the state” and a socio-economic structure that inevitably grew out of the local culture. Our “right to work” laws, under-funded education system, and extremes of wealth and poverty simply represent a natural progression from the individualistic pioneer spirit and cowboy culture to the new frontier of the modern global economy. Any attempt to constrain individualism (or “individual” corporate power) via collective action or worker solidarity is doomed to fail because such ideals are anathema to our cultural DNA. Davidson (1990) contends that conservative Texas politicians have shrewdly conflated conservative ideology with a singular Texas heritage and identity to shape the state in their image. Just as no one wants to be against “family values,” there is an emotional cost to being positioned as unpatriotic, un-American, or anti-Texas. In brief—don’t mess with Texas exceptionalism!

Some activists contend that progressives in the South have grown more and more timid in part because our socializing institutions have been so successful at cutting us off from our history of resistance. “Consciously or unconsciously, too many buy into the myth of a monolithically conservative and unchanging South, a mindset which in turn lowers our vision of what’s possible in the region now and in the future” (Krom, 2005, p.1). This notion that the South “is just this way,” leaves us to a passive stance that does not serve our democracy or culture well. In their work on the “social psychoanalysis” of the South, Kincheloe and Pinar (1991) examine the culture through a Frankfurt School lens. They contend that it is necessary to unravel the social constructions a society creates about itself by interrogating when and how the myths originated. Such historical analysis reveals the tendency of cultures to make existing social arrangements appear predetermined and rational and of individuals to internalize distortions that make their “given” place in the order seem deserved. Our politics, our culture, our language are all products of the stories told and re-told until they become part of a group identity. Perhaps we can see this especially clearly in the South where epistemology begins with narrative. Stories are used to teach many valuable lessons and to pass on culture and tradition in the South. The danger lies in an unquestioning acceptance of any overarching narrative, especially one used to maintain hierarchy. We need not reject all the stories of our home culture, but we must learn to read them carefully in order to challenge visions imposed on us by privilege and power. In this light, individuals may see themselves as influenced by their cultural history, but not hopelessly predestined to repeat the past. Kincheloe

and Pinar (1991) see the beginnings of individual agency—and thus the potential for true democracy—in a deeper understanding of the fluid and contested nature of the past and how it is represented: “Until free people bracket the myths and conceive of the possibilities offered by emancipation, slim is the possibility of authentic self-direction for the individual and society” (p. 3). Working people need to reintroduce the history of their struggles into the narrative which will create the possibilities for future struggles.

The story of the Brotherhood, for example, offers us an unexpected reality of the South to ponder, a reality in which poor Southerners came together across lines of race, ethnicity, and gender in hopes of building a better future for all. That story is quite compelling and raises the question: What might have been? I do not intend to write a revisionist history of Texas that wishes away the years of ugly racism, reactionary state politics, nor the pernicious teachings of too many Southern churches. Obviously, conservatives have maneuvered to dominate the region, but history proves that the culture is more complex than the popular image of the state suggests. There has always been resistance. The story of the Brotherhood reminds us of that fact. Krom (2005) notes, “The union’s ultimate demise, rather than showing the futility of labor organizing in the South, [speaks] more to the climate of anti-union (and racist) terror mobilized by the Southern elite.” The courage of the workers who came together during a time of brutal racial violence and harsh oppression of workers gives hope for those struggling today. As well, the violent backlash to the Brotherhood deconstructs the rhetoric of the benign and preordained rise of contemporary conservative politics and culture. The logical fallacy undercutting the argument of inevitability is revealed by events on the ground: how could it be plausible to argue that our current economic order simply reflects our culture when those pushing the system have repeatedly had to resort to extreme repression and even violence. There is nothing natural or neutral about an agreement that is signed onto at gunpoint.

The history of the Timber Wars also teaches very clearly that the race line in the South was purposfully constructed, and not reflective of inevitable cultural antagonisms.. The race line has always been about the exploitation of labor, and can be traced from slavery clear through to the contemporary Republican Party’s “Southern Strategy.” The pattern gelled at the onset of early industrialization in the region as each time the farmers and laborers achieved some level of success in the struggle for a more just society through solidarity across trades and especially solidarity across races, the corporate class and the state worked in concert to foment racial antagonism, tighten Jim Crow’s grip, and terrorize anyone seeking to work across racial lines. (It is telling that a central component of segregation laws insisted on prohibiting whites and blacks from congregating together in public forums.) Radical uprisings such as the Farmer’s Alliance, the People’s Party, the interracial New Orleans dock strikes, the farmer/worker alliance of the Timber Wars all created fear among the owning classes that led directly to increased racial violence, including lynchings and race riots. Blacks and many poor whites were also disenfranchised via laws and intimidation, while union busting strategies were refined at each stage. However, the destruction of the People’s Party and the defeat

of radical labor in the area did not stop the onslaught of race-based politics and fear mongering. The vacuum only left white supremacy unchallenged and allowed for the continuation or acceleration of racial antagonisms that would keep the South economically, culturally, and morally arrested for decades to come (Davidson, 1990; Smith, 2006).

I do not want to suggest that the progressive movement or unions represented a utopia free of racism. Some Populists unleashed anti-Semitic rhetoric in their tirades against Northern capitalists, and racism among the ranks of union workers was always the Achilles heel of labor solidarity in the South. But the fact remains that several unions did try to build interracial solidarity and unions integrated in important ways years or decades before the state as a whole was forced to desegregate. Conversely, anti-union forces in the state have repeatedly fostered racism as a means of breaking class solidarity. For example, Galveston's white and black dockworkers had a history of working together for some fifty years before the 1920 International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) strike. To break those bonds, steamship companies began replacing black ILA workers with white scabs while replacing white ILA workers with black scabs. The companies also brought in many Mexican immigrant workers to add to the racially charged atmosphere. Union solidarity was thrown into turmoil as race riots threatened to engulf the city. In order to put down the strike and "restore order," Governor Hobby declared martial law and sent in the Texas Rangers along with 1,000 National Guard troops.<sup>11</sup> It seems that the state was not only wary of an empowered ILA, but also very concerned about the ramifications of a unified working class.

Education, on various fronts, played a role as well in fanning the flames of the class- and race-based politics of the region. Educating institutions such as the press, the church, and the school each were contested grounds in the ideological struggles. In the early years of the Timber Wars, both sides recognized education as a powerful tool to be employed. New Orleans poet and dandy, Covington Hall traveled to the Piney Woods at news of the events and soon joined in with the organizing. Hall recognized the need to counter the conservative, pro-business newspapers with a people's journalism. He published *The Lumberjack*, a union newspaper that educated the workers on the strategies of the IWW in a populist vernacular that made connections between the locals' hatred of industrial capitalists and the ideology of the more urban IWW. Hall's radical writing style built on local knowledge and the populist tradition as he recognized that many of these timber workers "were sons of the most rebellious farmers in the United States" (Hall, p.130). The education provided by Hall and organizers Jay Smith and A.L. Emerson helped direct the anger of the people into a smart, well-organized movement. *The Rebel*, a socialist paper out of Hallettsville, Texas, with wide readership in the Southwest, also covered the Piney Woods struggle in depth, while many of the weekly radical papers that were then in circulation managed to cover events from the isolated forests as well. Union pamphlets and papers were scattered across Louisiana and Texas and were largely responsible for bringing the facts of the Grabow Trial into the light before the union men could be railroaded into prison labor.

Beyond the press, the church also represented a site where ideology was contested in ways that reflect the pattern of conservative politics in many Southern churches to this day. Historically, labor struggles in Texas have often been hampered by anti-union preaching from the pulpit. At the time of the Timber Wars, many of the local ministers relied on the lumber companies to maintain their incomes, so it was not too surprising that many preached a need to know one's place and be subservient to one's masters. Hall noted that the lumber companies kept fifteen or more itinerant preachers on the payroll at all times, traveling up and down the rail lines, preaching against the sins of unions. Black preachers warned black families not to be used as pawns by working-class whites in risky schemes that threatened authority but to instead be grateful for the paternalism of the company owners who put food on their tables (Hall, 1999, p. 166). The message: be humble here on earth that you may receive just rewards later in heaven.

Education as propaganda took many other forms, from speeches aimed at middle-class audiences at lodges and civic organizations to pamphlets and cartoons in the mainstream press. John Kirby began hosting free barbecues in Kirbyville and other lumber towns ostensibly to demonstrate his generosity to the local communities, but more importantly to gather crowds for anti-union speakers. But schools were especially contested as sites for shaping education around particular perspectives regarding the labor problem. From one side, the progressives of the era included quality schools in their agenda and attempted to set up free local schools for black and white children in Texas (Smith, p. 38), while also agitating for universal schooling for the poor and school reform on the state level (Apple, 1991). Along with hopes for more social mobility, the populists believed that a better-educated populace would lead to a modernized state that would be empowered to challenge the status quo. From the other side, schools were viewed as important sites for maintaining order and the status quo. For example, the SLOA recognized early on that the alliance between farmers and wage laborers in this corner of the world was both unique and potentially explosive, so the association quickly organized an "educational campaign among the better class of farmers . . . to bring disruption between the farmers and the Union" (Gray, 1973, p. 191).

However, the SLOA knew the most effective wedge was race. Kirby was a master at manipulating racial fears and he made sure to include schools in his strategic planning. While Kirby secretly supported the resurgence of KKK terrorism in East Texas during the Timber Wars, he also supported black schools and churches as he promoted himself as the "true friend and employer" (Gray, p. 187) of black families in East Texas. This strategy not only helped Kirby co-opt leaders who might otherwise help organize workers, but it also enabled Kirby to push an ideology through the schools. Kirby paid J.B. Rayner, previously a black Populist leader, to open schools in Texas that would inculcate a conservative message through Booker T. Washington's pedagogy of individual self-help. A letter Kirby wrote to another black leader he had placed as principal of a school in Silisbee, Texas reveals much about Kirby's machinations. "Tell the men of your race around Silisbee," Kirby wrote to Principal A. J. Criner, "that the promoters of

the Brotherhood have no concern for the colored citizenship except insofar as they can use the negro for their personal advantage” (Gray, p. 187). Kirby hoped that his paternalistic support of black institutions would lead the community to side with their employers instead of the white workers he cynically pitted them against. At the same time, the segregated white schools and churches Kirby supported would promote racial fears and a reactionary white supremacy. In honor of Kirby’s enthusiastic interest in education a number of public schools in East Texas remain named after Kirby to this day.

Schooling, we might induce from these examples, may be used to control as well as to emancipate.

#### A LEGACY OF CONSERVATIVE SCHOOLING

In hindsight, the use of education as propaganda in turn-of-the-century Texas was rather crude and transparent. The messages young people receive about class and race in today’s schools are more nuanced, but countless studies implicate our education system in reproducing distorted views of socio-economic inequities in the U.S. while romanticizing unfettered industrial capitalism (Aronowitz, 2008; Anyon, 1980; Foley, 1990; MacLoud, 1995). Though the ideology was more explicit in the earlier discourses, the objectives have remained rather consistent over the decades. Somewhat ironically, we can pick up the story of the institutionalizing of conservative curricula—again in Texas—at about the same time period of the Timber Wars and the decades immediately following. As the Populists and radical labor were destroyed in Texas a sweeping reform movement was mobilized to reform education in the state to meet the needs of burgeoning industrialization. John D. Rockefeller and other Northern capitalists, supported by an emerging Southern middle class, pushed reforms that led directly to more centralized control of schools and curricula by experts under the lead of state government. Although this reform movement ostensibly addressed progressive concerns such as clean government and universal schooling, the ideology driving the reform was actually antithetical to many core populist ideals. The newly centralized system, characterized by a hierarchical view of society, was to be constructed by expert elites and informed by middle-class advocacy groups, industry-based interests, or professional and trade organizations (Apple, 1991).

The new state-controlled system was a reaction to the political discord of the era, and the curriculum was standardized in hopes of creating a shared culture and values. The shared culture, however, was to be based on middle-class values and conformity and obedience were to reflect those values in the schools. Apple (1991) cites Texas state documents that declared the goals of public school pedagogies and curricula were to “develop a broad and efficient system of drilling children . . . to the habits of discipline and the customs of obedience which make for the public order” (p. 17). Butts (1989) notes that the civics education at the center of much reform during the progressive period emanated from the pro-business concerns of the burgeoning industries. School materials were to reinforce the “glorification of

the self-made man, who prospered on behalf of free enterprise unhampered by a limited government” (p. 131). To this day, the Texas State Board of Education maintains rules for adopting school materials or curricula that insist on conformity to conservative values and social control. According to the Texas State Board of Education, texts should “promote citizenship, patriotism, understanding of the essentials and benefits of the free enterprise system (capitalism and property rights) and respect for recognized authority” (Clark-Madison, 2002). School materials may not “encourage or condone civil disorder (or) social strife,” nor “encourage life-styles deviating from generally accepted standards of society” (Clark-Madison, 2002). So much for our lone cowboy spirit, and forget the Alamo. It seems that the idea of civil dissent died at the Battle of San Jacinto and the individual freedoms espoused by the state apply only in the arena of the market.

The centralized control of standardized curricula in Texas created a textbook market in which Texas standards inordinately influence curriculum materials across the US. (Apple, 1991; Sleeter & Grant, 1991; Stille, 2002). Because the Texas Board of Education adopts books for the entire state, a chosen text holds a monopoly on a huge market and the publisher of the text is blessed with enormous profits. Textbook publishers aim to please the folks influencing the selection of materials in Texas, and therefore the books aimed at the Texas schools end up being used across the US. Although an original aim of the centralized system was to place curricular decisions in the hands of professional educators, the system was hijacked early on by conservative special interest groups outside of the teaching ranks. These advocacy groups have used deep financial resources to elect their candidates to the State Board of Education as well as local boards, and they mobilize their members to testify at the circus-like state textbook adoption hearings in Austin. Far Right advocacy groups with Orwellian names, such as The Education Research Analysts, Citizens for a Sound Economy, The Texas Public Policy Foundation, and Concerned Women for America have exerted great influence over the curricular materials schoolchildren have access to in Texas, and thus across the country. These groups vet texts for any “anti-Christian”, “un-American”, or “anti-capitalist” ideas before choosing which books to advocate for at the state hearings. The groups most vehemently oppose discussions of economics and social class, as well as evolution, gay rights, American militarism, and most recently global warming. The textbook companies are very aware of the power these groups hold and it is an open secret that publishers produce school materials with this audience in mind. Publishers even send their in-progress textbooks to the conservative advocacy organizations for vetting *before* the State Board of Education even has access to the materials. Sections that offend the sensibilities of these organizations are often revised or even removed. The Director of Citizens for a Sound Economy (Texas Chapter), Peggy Venable, illustrates the thinking behind the censorship of “problematic” moments in our history: “I don’t mean that we should sweep things under the rug, but the children should see the hope and the good things about America” (Stille, 2002). Such sentiment suggests that our students are not capable of discussing the conflicts and controversies that



are a part of our history without rejecting out of hand the idea of America. Following this line of thinking, texts are developed with an eye to political correctness, and students are left with bland accounts of history, literature, art, and culture that have very little to do with reality.

Although Texas politics inordinately influence curricula across the country, we cannot assume that the Texas system is solely responsible for the deplorable quality of educational publishing. Schooling in the US has always been wrapped up in politics and dominated by powerful constituencies regardless of the politics of the Texas school system. Historically, pressure at both the state and national levels has been exerted to ensure that school materials and texts are ideologically conservative and teach from a pro-business slant. When textbook publishers attempt to add even a little balance, they are usually met with strong resistance. For example, in the 1930's a furious backlash against an American Civics textbook series caused reverberations to echo throughout the industry for years to come. Dr. Harold Rugg's textbook series attempted to bring some realism to a genre that typically only offered students a romanticized view of an America with no problems to solve. Rugg introduced basic economic lessons and discussed previously ignored topics such as unemployment, consumerism, economic classes in the US, and the struggles of new immigrants to fit into the economy. The book was extremely popular in schools for almost a decade, and it was used in nearly half the school districts in the US. However, in 1939 right wing critics began a campaign against the series. The Advertising Federation of America, the National Association of Manufacturers, and the American Legion all accused the book of promoting socialist or communist propaganda because of the discussion of American economics and class. Many school boards banned the series while others just dropped it from circulation. In a matter of years the books were no longer available to school districts anywhere in the country (Fitzgerald, 1979).

Content analysis studies of contemporary book series have found that texts used across the country continue to avoid even the most basic explorations of economics or class analysis. Sleeter and Grant (1991) find that most textbooks present a picture of the US as a classless society where almost everyone is middle class and, beyond the noted heroes of industry, there are few citizens of great wealth and few people living in poverty. The great majority of people and situations presented in teaching materials are middle class, suggesting to young people that the US is only comprised of one class. When texts do present the idea of social change, the stories focus on individual heroes, thus reinforcing the notion of American individuality. Texts do not focus on collective responses to problems, so young people are not provided with the vocabulary or understandings that would help them see themselves as members of social groups that hold the power to participate actively in democracy beyond the act of simply voting every few years. From this perspective all problems are individual in nature. Racism, then, is simply a personal failing to be overcome through respecting diversity, and poverty is a result

of individual failure to achieve. The socio-political factors maintaining class structures and fostering racial divides are left unexamined (Sleeter & Grant, 1991).

And because class in general is practically taboo, the most important force countering economic exploitation, the labor movement, is barely covered in school materials (Loewen, 1995). Texts superficially skim a few of the more well known struggles, such as the Pullman or Homestead strikes, but little in the way of socio-political context is explored. The big picture of how the labor movement has changed the country is lost in the rundown of a few battles, so young people cannot connect the courage of everyday people in past labor struggles to their own lives. Few references are made to contemporary labor struggles, so labor is presented as only an issue of the distant past. I have been surveying current textbooks and I find little has changed. Labor is still treated as a series of isolated strikes that typically end in defeat. For example, the popular US history text, *America: Pathways to the Present* (Cayton, 2005) is a massive tome of almost 1300 pages, and yet there are less than two-dozen references to pages that include information about labor unions. Most of the references take place before page 482, at the time of the Pullman strike of 1894. After that time, brief paragraphs mention events such as the passage of the New Deal National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) of 1935, the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947, and the air traffic controller's strike of 1981, but the effects of these events are not discussed in any depth. The text does not discuss how much of the NLRA legislation protecting workers was weakened over the following years or how much Taft-Hartley and the defeat of the air traffic controllers union set back the labor movement and thus the living conditions of working people. Correlations between the decline of labor and the devastation of the US working class are not explored. So although the texts do provide historically accurate facts for the most part, they do not portray an honest account of history, and they do not encourage young people to contemplate how past events have shaped their current prospects. History reduced to decontextualized facts lacks meaning. When initially discussing with my university students whether or not labor history holds any relevance to their current lives or future aspirations, I do not get much of a response. The disconnect of youth to working-class history reminds me of a scene in the film *The History Boys* (Hytner, 2007). Prepping for a state exam, a working-class student named Rudge is asked by his teacher to define history. "How do I define history?" The boy looks completely baffled, but eventually struggles to answer, "Well, it's just one fucking thing after another."

So perhaps I should not be surprised that the fascinating story of the Timber Wars was not included in any Texas History curricula I have ever come across. The story has too much going against it to be canonized. To begin with, the plot is too engaging and might hold the potential to wake students up during history class and who knows what might happen next? Young people might find relevance in our great history. They may begin to ask questions or be motivated to become active citizens. The story of this kind of class struggle deconstructs the myths of a classless society and the neutrality of the state. The roles played by the government

as well as the press, the church, and the schools also call into question the belief that these institutions are always emancipatory and act in the best interests of democracy. The ways in which race was manipulated to destroy class solidarity challenges the simplistic formulations many hold about class and race as cultural difference. Basically the big ideas of American exceptionalism and the American Dream would be up for debate.

It would be naïve to assume that the guardians of official knowledge would allow such debate in our schools without a fight.

### RECONSTRUCTING HISTORY

I began my journey back to the East Texas woods of my childhood by pulling at a single frayed thread of history I found in an old book, yet I ended up unraveling so much of what I thought I knew about where I come from. Through this largely unknown moment of our past, I found personal connections to my own family history in Texas, but I also found important links to the larger story of America—the exploitation of the poor, the racial politics, the problematic history of schooling. History is all around us, but we do not teach like it is. Some of that history may not seem that important at first, such as the fact that I have driven down Kirby Drive through the exclusive River Oaks section of Houston hundreds of times without knowing anything about the man this route honors. Or the history may be at the center of what we are trying to teach. When I was schooled in the South during the 70's and 80's there was a big effort to teach tolerance and move beyond racism. However, we were never taught much about the origins of the racism that swirled all around us or the inspiring stories of people who have at times reached across the race line in the South. Racism was addressed as a personal failing rather than an ideology enacted for economic reasons. It seems counter-productive at best to attempt an anti-racist pedagogy without exploring the labor dynamics at the heart of white supremacy.

That history of class struggle is all around us, written even on the buildings of our cities. John Kirby's famous mansion remains standing in Houston, a few blocks from the shotgun shacks of the Fourth Ward, an historic neighborhood where the city's poor have struggled for years. I believe most people unconsciously read the contrasts in these structures simply as the way things are in Texas and the US: some people lack ambition or luck and therefore live in shotgun shacks, while a few great men work hard and therefore get to live the American Dream writ large. I have to believe as well that most would question such a reading of those buildings if the disturbing story of how John Kirby came about his wealth was told along with the story of the ways in which the working people of East Texas have suffered and yet at times came together to challenge their "lot in life."

Writing decades ago, Covington Hall understood how ideology was planted within a society, and he recognized the need to give voice to the working people of even this forgotten corner of the world. He recorded their struggles so that others might learn how and why history played out as it did in these woods.

The constant insistence of Hall was that, especially in the supposedly benighted and quiescent region into which he was born, workers fought back, acted and organized—struggled—against their oppressors . . . The struggles waxed and then distinctly waned, and defeat loom[ed] as a fact of life, but not as a fact that denied the reality of resistance. (Roediger, 1999, p. 9)

As educators we have to bring these stories to life for our students if we are to confront what Stanley Aronowitz (2003) calls the “social amnesia” that shrouds our past—as well as our current circumstances—in the myth of inevitability. Mary Finn and Patrick Finn (2007) argue that organized labor, “historically the most potent force in challenging the hierarchical structure and championing the cause of working families,” (p. 3) must have a voice in educating our youth and be allowed to tell the story of labor in order to counter the all-pervasive presence of business interests in our schools that tell only one side. They cite Janet Zandy (2001) who urges us to fight for the power to “construct, reconstruct, remember, reinvent, rediscover, reconnect, and struggle for the knowledge that belongs to the majority of people, the working class” (p. 249). Imagine the powerful inquiries young people could engage in if schools allowed students to critique authentic historical texts and dissect the politics of race, class, and gender that have been used to subvert our democracy from its very beginning. I call for a pedagogy that encourages the study of local histories and cultures as told through working-class voices. Young people who view their working-class roots not in shame, but in respect of all those who have come before and struggled courageously, will be more likely to lay claim to our democracy as a project in-the-making, one that we are all responsible for improving with each generation. The vast majority of our students come from working families and they must know that they need not cede the democratic experiment to a small oligarchy of corporate elites. The idea of America has always been contested and each citizen holds the right to envision a more just manifestation of democracy and to agitate for that vision. I understand that in this age of standardized testing and corporate produced textbooks that it is very difficult to bring utopian thinking into the schools or to see any alternative for our educational system than to continue reproducing hierarchies, but perhaps we must pause first to retrace our steps some to see how we have arrived at this place. We will find that at each low point in the history of our democracy some citizens continued to hold out for a more just society. Even if they did not win their battles they left behind important lessons for us to learn from if we pay attention. Covington Hall, writing of a utopian movement waged by the poorest of the poor during very dark times, recognized the power of stories long before social scientists began theorizing the narrative turn. He wrote about everything he saw in the Piney Woods because he believed we had to hold on to the imagination in order to have any hope for change:

“In their secret hearts all men and women are always dreaming, are always visioning things that are not but should be, and this we must do or perish.”  
(Hall, 1999 p. 12)

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See <<http://www.texasstaterailroad.com/>>
- <sup>2</sup> See <<http://www.redboneheritagefoundation.com>> Redbones, sometimes known as the “mystery people” of Louisiana and East Texas, represent a subculture that has lived in isolated areas of the Piney Woods since the early 1800’s. Their heritage has been debated for years, but they typically self-identify as tri-racial with Native-American, African-American, and European-American lineage. Many trace the lineage back to Turkish slaves that were released on the East Coast before the area was settled. The pattern of interracial marriages began before the states began instituting barriers between the races. The culture is often linked to the Melungeon ethnicity of Virginia, the Carolinas, and Tennessee. This branch settled the Neutral Area of the Sabine River valley in the early 1800’s.
- <sup>3</sup> We can see an apt metaphor for the loss of radical history in language, such as the etymology of the term “redneck.” Redneck, as a term of derision for union men and women in the South, grew out of the wearing of red bandanas as symbols of union solidarity in the West Virginia mine struggles. Today, the term typically connotes hyper-conservative, rural, working-class.
- <sup>4</sup> John Kirby organized Boston investors to help monopolize the largest land holdings in the pine belt. Later in life he was president of the National Association of Manufacturers and opposed FDR’s New Deal programs. To this day Kirby is honored via the name of a major thoroughfare in Houston, the Kirby State Park in East Texas, and the town of Kirbyville, Texas.
- <sup>5</sup> Jasper, Texas was the location of the brutal hate crime against James Byrd, Jr. in 1998 when he was chained and dragged behind a truck until death. Byrd’s lynching is a sad reminder of how the past, if not addressed, may continue to haunt the present.
- <sup>6</sup> Along with my Lutheran confirmation catechism, my mother saved my Texas History textbook for me for many years. See Anderson, A. and R. Wooster. (1971). *Texas and Texans*. Austin: Steck-Vaughn Publishers.
- <sup>7</sup> I acknowledge my colleague Dr. Leigh Benin for helping me outline a theoretic framework with labor at the center of US history.
- <sup>8</sup> For example, see “A Letter to Family and Friends from the Labor Front” in this volume.
- <sup>9</sup> Examples of the erasure of history abound, but the removal of a historic monument in Comfort, Texas illustrates the importance many place on controlling history. During the Civil War hundreds of abolitionist German-Americans in Comfort were slaughtered by Confederate soldiers. Their bones were gathered after the war and buried in the center of town under a tall monument later inscribed with the patriotic proclamation (in German), “True to the Union.” Over one hundred years after the massacre (year 2000) conservative government officials, wanting to erase this part of local history, had the monument removed from the town square.  
See <<http://www.pww.org/article/articleview/10781/>>
- <sup>10</sup> References to Texas history are ubiquitous throughout the state as thousands of historical markers dot the landscape and historical sites are incorporated into many aspects of tourism and education. There are even magazines and television shows honoring Texas history and local cultures and folkways.
- <sup>11</sup> See <<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/GG/oeg2.html>>

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