

American workers and left the American working class divided by race, gender, sexuality, region, skill level, and employment sector. Workers and their allies built significant, if highly problematic, reformist and radical movements that broke from the social Darwinism and laissez-faire ethos of the late 19th century, but most American workers did not directly share the more romantic experiences of such labor activism. Labor and working-class history, therefore, does not necessarily promise to offer a usable past for those seeking to build contemporary movements, but it does open the door to greater understanding and empathy with the complex lives and struggles of working people in previous eras of globalizing inequality.

Primary Sources

The main research problems for students of labor and working-class history are, first, to sift through the nearly limitless supply of relevant sources and, second, to find ways to include the voices of working people themselves. Because the state plays such a key role in shaping law and society, labor historians regularly consult municipal, county, state, and federal records, as well as court cases.⁴⁰ Many historians of labor radicalism also make use of Freedom of Information Act requests to access the files that government agencies have collected while spying on activists.⁴¹ Records of unions, labor leaders, and the labor press are, of course, also critical. They are available in archives across the country, with major concentrations in New York City, Detroit, Chicago, Pittsburgh, and Los Angeles. The papers of civil rights and black nationalist organizations, as well as groups and leaders of the women's movement and immigrants' rights movements, are all essential, because the labor movement typically overlapped with other forms of social activism.⁴² Labor scholars also delve deeply into oral histories, often doing interviews of their own, but also by reading the transcripts of interviews with workers completed by previous scholars, as well as by social work agencies, congressional investigations, journalists, and more. Historians interested in the culture of class, and working-class culture, examine everything from songs, plays, novels, poems, and television shows to housing, clothes, and even the sounds and smells of working people's communities in the past.

Links to Digital Materials

Frank B. Gilbreth, **"The Original Films of Frank B. Gilbreth," 1910–1924.** Presented by James S. Perkins in Collaboration with Dr. Lillian M. Gilbreth & Dr. Ralph M. Barnes.

Further Reading

Brody, David. *Workers in Industrial America: Essays on the 20th Century Struggle*. 2d ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

Find this resource:

Commons, John R. *A History of Labor in the United States*. New York: Macmillan, 1935.

Find this resource:

Dubofsky, Melvin. *We Shall Be All: A History of the Industrial Workers of the World*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988 [1969].

Find this resource: