

Newsletter

Wisconsin Labor History Society

(Affiliated with the Wisconsin Historical Society)

For more information, visit <http://wisconsinlaborhistory.org>

JEREMY SCAHILL TO SPEAK AT FIRST ZEIDLER LECTURE

Jeremy Scahill, an independent journalist who reports frequently for the national radio and TV program Democracy Now!, will be the speaker at the first Zeidler Lecture to be held at 7 p.m. Tuesday, March 25, at Centennial Hall at the Milwaukee Public Library. A Milwaukee native, Scahill has spent extensive time reporting from Iraq and Yugoslavia. Scahill is the author of "Blackwater: The Rise of the World's Most Powerful Mercenary Army."

The Zeidler lecture is co-sponsored by several groups, including the Wisconsin Labor History Society. Donations to sponsor the lecture series may be made to International Institute, 1110 N. Old World Third St., Milwaukee 53203. Put "Zeidler Lecture" in Memo Line on check.

BAY VIEW TRAGEDY EVENT MAY 4

The 122nd Anniversary Commemoration of the Bay View Tragedy of May 5, 1886 will be held on Sunday, May 4, at the Bay View Rolling Mills Historical Marker Site along Milwaukee's lakefront. The event, which has been held annually since 1986, will begin at 3 p.m.

BILL WOULD CALL FOR TEACHING LABOR HISTORY IN SCHOOLS

Strong support is developing in favor of a bill requiring every school district in Wisconsin to teach labor history and collective bargaining in the schools.

Five State Senators have introduced Senate Bill 108 which would call for schools to follow an educational goal to provide "knowledge of state, national, and world history, *including the history of organized labor in America and the collective bargaining process.*" The bill proposes adding the words shown in italics to Sec. 118.01 (2) (c) 6 of the State Statutes, a section that provides guidance on educating children in preparing them for citizenship.

This is the fifth time in the last 15 years that efforts have been made to pass a measure requiring the teaching of labor his-

Senator Dave Hansen (D-Green Bay) offers labor history proposal.



tory in the schools. All previous attempts have failed, usually due to almost solid opposition of Republicans who controlled one or both houses of the Legislature. (Note: The measure has passed the State Senate in the past, with some Republican support, only to be stalled and never brought to a vote in the Assembly.)

SB 108 was given wide support in testimony at a December 6 hearing of the Senate Education Committee, chaired by Sen. John Lehman (D-Racine). Testimony in support of the bill came from Phil Neuenfeldt, secretary-treasurer of the Wisconsin State AFL-CIO, who told the committee: "Senate Bill 108 is here because of what union leaders have told us over the years. They see younger workers coming into the workforce without any knowledge of the labor movement they are about to join. Labor history is really the greatest story never told."

Don Garner-Gerhardt, government affairs director of

(Continued on Page 3)

STATE'S HISTORY IN IMMIGRATION TOPIC OF WLHS 2008 CONFERENCE

Are there lessons to be learned from history as the U.S. grapples with the immigration problem?

The 27th Annual Conference of the Wisconsin Labor History Society will look at how vital immigrants were to the creation of our Wisconsin

society and economy.

John Gurda, prominent Milwaukee historian, will open the conference on Saturday April 26, 2008, with a discussion on 19th Century immigration, followed by discussions on the contributions of Finns in northwest

Wisconsin and Italians in the stonecutting industry.

The issues facing recent immigrants will be discussed, as well. For information on the conference, to be held at Golda Meir Library at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, see page 2.

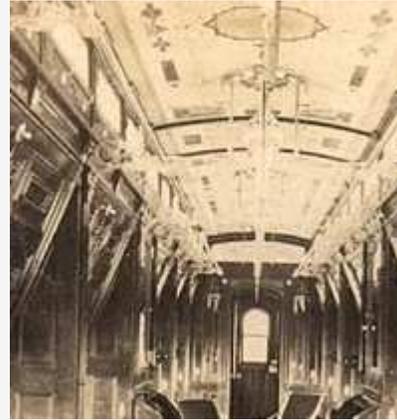
PULLMAN PORTERS STORY HIGHLIGHTS GREEN BAY RAILROAD MUSEUM

The National Railroad Museum will look at the Pullman porters who served passengers on U.S. trains in the past. The Museum, located at 2285 S. Broadway, Green Bay, will open an exhibit, "Pullman Porters: From Service to Civil Rights" in July.

The series begins Feb. 9, 2008 with a lecture on "Railroad Labor: A look at the force that changed history," presented by Eric

Arnesen, professor of history and African-American studies at the University of Illinois—Chicago. The program will be held at the Fuller Hall Theater at 2 p.m. and is open to the public free of charge.

The exhibit and lectures are funded in part by a grant from the Wisconsin Humanities Council. The Wisconsin Labor History Society donated \$300 to the project.



The interior of a Pullman railroad sleeper in the 19th Century. The overhead compartments pull down for sleeping.

2008 WLHS Annual Conference

9 a.m., Saturday, April 26, 2008

**Golda Meir Library, UWM Campus
2311 E. Hartford Ave., Milwaukee**

An Historical Perspective on Immigration and the Impact on Workers, Unions:

How early ethnic groups were key to the industrial growth and quality of life in Wisconsin and what lessons are offered for today's new immigrants

- 9 a.m. Registration.** Coffee and Refreshments
9:30 a.m. Immigrants and Industries in 19th Century Wisconsin
 John Gurda, Milwaukee historian
10:30 a.m. The Finns and the Socialist Movement in Northern Wis.
 Richard Hudelson, Univ. of Wisconsin – Superior
11:15 a.m. Italian Stone Workers in Wisconsin
 Randy Croce, Univ. of Minnesota Labor Education Service
12:15 p.m. Lunch
1 p.m. Awards Presentation
1:30 p.m. Post World War II Immigrations
 Marc Rodriguez, Notre Dame University
 Chia Vang, Univ. of Wisconsin - Milwaukee
3 p.m. Annual Meeting
3:30 p.m. Adjournment

WLHS 2008 Conference REGISTRATION FORM

Registration -- \$25.00 (Includes Luncheon, Materials)

_____ Reservations @ \$25.00 Amt. \$ _____

Unemployed, students - \$10.00

_____ Reservations @ \$10.00 Amt. \$ _____

Name _____

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W. Blue Mound Rd., Milwaukee WI 53213

STATE SOCIETY GETS GOMPERS COLLECTION

In October, the Wisconsin Historical Society gained an exciting addition to the labor history collections: previously unknown papers from AFL president Samuel Gompers. The Society already preserves the American Federation of Labor (AFL) Records, 1888-1955, a very significant collection documenting the early years of organized labor in the U.S. that includes the papers of Samuel Gompers. This new addition was found in the collections of New York University's Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives and consists of two boxes of previously unknown correspondence with Gompers dating from the late-19th and early-20th centuries. In the interest of having all the Gompers papers in a single location, Tamiment Library graciously contacted the Society and arranged for the donation.

Samuel Gompers founded the AFL in 1886 and is one of the most significant figures in American labor history. The Gompers addition consists primarily of correspondence, scattered pamphlets, and newspaper clippings. Topics covered in the correspondence include women's suffrage, international labor movements, African-Americans in organized labor, and relations with AFL officials and unions. Notable correspondents include women's rights leaders Susan B. Anthony and Carrie Chapman Catt, and British labor leader Tom Mann.

Much of the Gompers addition was in poor physical condition when donated, so the Society's Conservation Lab will begin an intensive conservation effort to ensure that these important documents will be available to researchers. The Gompers addition will be available for public use by summer 2008.

LABOR HISTORY BILL (FROM PG. 1)

Teamsters Joint Council 39, said the history of labor is “seminal” in teaching about the history of Wisconsin.

Others testifying in support were State Senator Dave Hansen (D-Green Bay), the key sponsor of the bill; Russell R. Retzack, retired member of Operating Engineers Local 139; and Jim Cook, NECA-IBEW Apprenticeship Program. Fourteen others registered in favor of the bill.

The only persons registering against the bill represented school management interests, the School Administrators Alliance and the Wisconsin Association of School Boards. On

the other hand, representatives of the Wisconsin Education Association Council, the American Federation of Teachers and AFSCME registered in support.

Bill sponsors (all Democrats) include Senators Hansen, Lehman; Bob Wirch of Kenosha, Jeff Plale of South Milwaukee, Fred Risser of Madison and Jim Sullivan of Wauwatosa; and Representatives Josh Zepnick of Milwaukee, Mike Sheridan of Janesville, Chris Sinicki of Milwaukee, Gary Hebl of Sun Prairie, Spencer Black of Madison, Andy Jorgensen, of Fort Atkinson, Mark Pocan of Madison, Bob Turner of Racine, Terese Berceau of Madison, Tamara Grigsby of Mil-

waukee, and Amy Sue Vruwink of Milladore.

THE NEXT STEPS

The future of the Bill rests on action during the final weeks of the current Legislature, which ends in March. With the Democrats in control of the Senate, it is expected there will be action on the measure; however, in order for it to be scheduled for a vote in the Assembly, some Republicans will need to support the bill. “Now is the time for those who care about teaching our school children about labor to contact their state senators and state representatives,” commented Ken Germanson, WLHS President.

SOME REASONS WHY WE NEED SB 108 . . .

The State Legislature needs to require every school district in Wisconsin to include the teaching of labor history and collective bargaining in its curriculum because:

Teaching about labor has been largely ignored in our schools. An examination of text books in history and the social sciences finds barely a mention about the contributions of workers and their unions in the making of our nation.

It's time to balance the scales. Most school children readily hear about the corporate leaders and politicians of our nation's history; rarely do they hear about the heroes among our working people who struggled to bring equity and justice into the workplace and into our communities.

Trade unions in Wisconsin and throughout the nation have contributed to our way of life. Such contributions include: the 8-hour day, health care insurance, vacations and holidays, a fair wage scale, safe and healthful working conditions, Social Security and Medicare, unemployment and workers compensation, plus civil rights, including voting rights laws. Our nation's public education system, including its universities, is a product of the constant support of labor unions and their members.

Labor unions are part of Wisconsin's heritage. The state has always been at the forefront of worker struggles, including the Bay View Tragedy of 1886 during the 8-hour day movement, the Great Oshkosh woodworker strike of 1898 involving historic participation of Clarence Darrow in conspiracy trials, the creation of labor-management cooperation in the Wisconsin River valley that brought prosperity and labor peace to that area, the organizing among our industrial plants during the 1930s and 1940s, which brought about a good standard of living to our workers.

Most Wisconsin families have a labor tradition. By the 1950s, more than 35% of Wisconsin workers had joined unions. Their stories were “front page news” daily.

Cost to School Districts will be minimal. The proposed law leaves it up to each district to develop its own method of teaching about labor history and collective bargaining. Teaching materials are readily available, and can be inserted within existing curricula. (To get “Lessons in Labor History,” a DPI curriculum, go to the following website: http://dpi.state.wi.us/pubsales/global_9.html)

The story of labor and workers can provide more excitement in the classroom. The need to make history alive and interesting to students is critical in today's schools. The struggles of working people will prompt many students to look back upon their own families and backgrounds, making history more relevant.

PRESIDENT'S COMMENTS: CIVIL RIGHTS IN THE 1960S: LESSONS FOR TODAY

Forty years ago, on the morning of April 5, I sat in a hotel coffee shop in Decatur, Illinois, reading the morning Decatur Herald-Review with the headline proclaiming the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. A grizzled longtime representative of our union walked by, saw the headline, and said, "They finally got the bastard," or something very similar to that.

Those remarks remain clear to me today, since they reflected the feelings of perhaps the majority of union members during the 1960s, even though by then the most prominent of U. S. labor leaders at the time, including AFL-CIO President George Meany, UAW President Walter Reuther and Teamsters Leader Jimmy Hoffa, openly supported the cause of equality for blacks and other minorities.

Such support was not always apparent on the workshop floor, at the construction sites and in the local union halls all over America where the cloud of racism hovered. Many white workers challenged the AFL-CIO's support of the voting rights act of 1965 and the civil rights act of 1964; many also challenged President Lyndon Johnson's "War on Poverty" since it seemed, in their minds, to be aimed at aiding blacks disproportionately. Even the assassination of Robert Kennedy two months later (June 5, 1968) seemed to do little to lessen the feelings of disenfranchisement that many working class and poor whites felt over the attention given to the cause of civil rights. To be fair, white workers, union and nonunion alike, were facing their own deprivations and lack of economic fortunes in the era, struggling to make ends meet. It was ripe territory for a demagogue to appear, and Alabama Gov. George Wallace filled the role to perfection, running as a Third Party candidate in opposition to the Democratic nominee, Hubert H. Humphrey, whose open support of civil rights was legendary. In October of 1968, I gave a speech to a packed hall at a local union banquet in Avon Lake, Ohio, outlining our union's reasons for backing Humphrey, only to be heckled by ranks of members yelling out "Wallace, Wallace, Wallace," over and over again.

Union leaders have often been criticized by liberals and civil rights leaders through the years, sometimes being accused of being racist and often charged with being too timid in their support of equal rights. Some have deserved that criticism, but it is also historical truth that both union leadership and rank-and-file members were vital to the passage of the equal rights legislation of the 1960s and the real progress in equal rights that followed through the years.



Dr. King marched with striking sanitation workers on the day before his death.

Meany, a union plumber by trade, for example, enforced the AFL-CIO's position on school-busing as a tool to achieve integration by threatening to pull the charter of a Kentucky labor council which sought to oppose that position; Reuther spoke at the "March on Washington" in August 1963 just before King's memorable "I Have a Dream" speech and the UAW leader also worked to end racism in the auto plants; Jimmy Hoffa's wife marched in the South.

Meanwhile, black workers fought hard to win equality. At our Society's 1999 conference, several black workers told of their struggles to get jobs in Milwaukee, often in spite of their own union's reluctance. William Patterson, now deceased, told of becoming the Transit System's first black streetcar conductor in 1945 and finding other conductors or drivers shunning him; Bill Johnson, retired business manager of the Laborer's Union Local 113, said blacks were restricted to handling shovels and rakes in asphalt paving while whites drove the equipment; Mary Jo Avery of the Communication Workers said that blacks first were hired in custodial jobs and that the first black telephone operator was harassed, only to have her job saved by the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission.

Dr. King understood that worker rights and civil rights were linked. Remember, he was assassinated while in Memphis to support striking sanitation workers. Fortunately, today most union members who would be disgusted at hearing the remarks I heard 40 years ago in a Decatur, Illinois, hotel restaurant. — **Kenneth A. Germanson**

SCOUTS LEARN ABOUT UNIONS, HISTORY



UAW Local 95 in Janesville hosted some 30 Boy Scouts at a training session for the Scout Labor Merit Badge. Another 40 Scouts were trained at IBEW Local 2150 in Milwaukee. A major portion of the training involved labor history conducted by WLHS.



Mike Sheridan (above left), president of UAW Local 95 opened the sessions. Members of the Local's Education Committee assisted in the training.



NELLIE WILSON, UNION PIONEER, DIES

Nellie Wilson, 91, a pioneering African-American woman who was longtime activist at DALU 19806 in Milwaukee, died Jan. 23 in Milwaukee.

A onetime member of the board of the Wisconsin Labor History Society, Sister Wilson also received the Society's Lifetime Achievement Award in 1999. During World War II, she was hired into the old A. O. Smith Co. as one of the early African-Americans to be employed there.



Her life was related in "Like Our Sisters Before Us: Women of Wisconsin Labor," (WLHS-1998). In 1960, she was elected steward in her department, and in 1964, she became the first African-American woman elected to the large local union's executive board. She also became active in committees of the Milwaukee County Labor Council and Wisconsin State AFL-CIO supporting women's and minority rights. After leaving A. O. Smith, she worked 12 years until 1983 as a representative of the Human Resources Development Institute, working to place unemployed workers into jobs. Sister Wilson served on numerous board and committees.

She is survived by two daughters and six grandchildren.

HENRIETTA YURCHENCO, FOLKLORIST

A woman who scoured union halls and immigrant groups to find authentic music died at age of 91 in December. She was Henrietta Yurchenco, a radio producer and announcer who gave early exposure to Woody Guthrie and Bob Dylan. She died in New York. Pete Seeger said that Ms. Yurchenco was able to find music in places no one else would think possible.



Each October, the Society sets up a booth at the Wisconsin Education Association Council conference. Board Member Jim Reiland and his wife, Joyce, traditionally staff the booth, along with others, including Paul Cigler, Jr., this year. Thousands of teachers visit the exhibits; WLHS distributes information on labor history.

WE'RE ON THE WEB: HTTP://
WISCONSINLABORHISTORY.ORG



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**Dedicated to preserving the
history of Wisconsin workers
and their unions**

Wisconsin Labor History Society
(Affiliate, Wisconsin Historical Society)

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