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Newsletter

Wisconsin Labor History Society

(Affiliated with the State Historical Society of Wisconsin)

Union role in Rock County told at annual conference

Some 50 persons attended the 24th Annual Wisconsin Labor History Society Conference at UAW Local 95 hall in Janesville in May. WLHS Board Member Clayborn Benson (left, foreground) leads a discussion by veteran African-American workers who told of their experiences in Beloit. *(See full account beginning on Page 2.)*



Drive begun to buy Zeidler portrait

The Wisconsin Labor History Society and the Public Enterprise Committee are co-sponsoring a fund-raising campaign to purchase a portrait of former Milwaukee Mayor Frank Zeidler done by Artist Thomas Pelham Curtis. This portrait was unveiled on the occasion of the 92nd birthday of Mr. Zeidler on Sept. 20, 2004.

The goal is to raise \$3,000 to cover the cost of the portrait (\$2,500) and other expenses. The portrait would be hung in a municipal building which has much public traffic, such as the Milwaukee Public Library. Please make your check out to Wisconsin Labor History Society, with a memo notation of "Zeidler Portrait Fund." Mail to Phil Blank, 4545 W. Spencer Place, Milwaukee WI 53216. For information contact Blank at 414-873-6359.

Research of Milwaukee Socialists winner

Zachary K. Lutz, a graduate student at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, was awarded the 2004 Frank P. Zeidler Academic Award in the graduate category for original research in the area of Wisconsin labor and working-class history. Lutz, a doctoral student at Northern Illinois University, won for his paper, "Militant Pragmatism: The Socialist Party and the Activist Unemployed in Milwaukee, 1929-1935."



The award, consisting of a certificate of recognition and a \$1,000 cash prize, was presented at the twenty-fourth annual conference of the society, Saturday, May 7, 2005, at the labor hall of United Auto Workers Local 95 in Janesville, Wisconsin. The Zeidler Academic Awards honor Milwaukee Mayor Frank Zeidler (in office 1948-1960) for his lifelong efforts on behalf of Wisconsin's citizens.

Judges for the award were Peter Rachleff, of Macalester College in Minnesota, and Peter Gottlieb, Wisconsin state archivist. Both are labor historians.

Unions played big role in lives of Janesville, Beloit workers

What became clear at the 24th Annual Conference of the Wisconsin Labor History Society was the importance that labor unions had in the lives of working people in Rock County.

Home of two major industrial cities – Beloit and Janesville – Rock County has a long history of unions. In the testimony of five older, now retired, unionists, their labor unions offered the means to open all jobs to women and minorities, to assure that workers would be treated with dignity and to permit most to raise their families successfully.

The stories were told at the conference held in United Auto Workers Local 95 Hall in Janesville on Saturday, May 7, by two sets of working people: two members from UAW Local 95 which represents workers at the giant General Motors plant in Janesville and three African-American former union members from Beloit where they had worked at Fairbanks-Morse Corp. and the former Beloit Corp.

Perhaps retired GM worker and Local 95 activist Ron Thomas summed it up when he said there was nothing he got that he “would have gotten without the union.” Hired off the streets in 1958, Thomas worked nearly 34 years until his retirement in 2002. Born and raised on a farm, he said he had never thought about unions until he joined the GM Janesville plant and found that his wages would easily surpass the money he earned off the farm.

He recalled that union seniority provisions helped him to post for a job where his short arm span would not be a challenge as it was in installing mufflers.

And he added the union support helped workers in his department as they sought to get an 18-minute break like others. They showed solidarity in finding excuses to “see the nurse” to finally get manage-

UAW Local 95 President Mike Sheridan introduces Doris Thom, retiree, for her story as an early woman worker at the Janesville GM plant.

ment to see the justice of their demands.

After Thomas’ retirement, he continued to be active in the union, assisting in numerous ways; it was this that helped win him the 2005 Lifetime Achievement Award of the Society, given each year by the Society to an individual who has given a lifetime of union involvement.

For Doris Thom, now 85, the union provided the support that enabled her to forge many pioneering actions in the workplace for women. She came into the workforce during World War II, being one of the first women hired at the Gilmer Engineering Co. in Janesville. Contrary to many at the time, the women

proved they could do the jobs of men in making emergency landing gear for the Grumman Hellcat Navy planes. She worked two years, until becoming pregnant, having to leave the job which was the custom of the day.

It was during this time that she learned to speak up for the rights of women. She asked for the women to be paid the same as men when they did repair work. “The company said ‘no,’” she said, and the women quit doing the repair work.

Later a foreman ordered the women, “No talking, no giggling.” She recalled telling him whether he knew of any women who didn’t talk, and he never bothered them again.

She became recording secretary of the Machinists local at Gilmer. For a woman to be a union officer was “unheard of at the time,” she said.

After leaving Gilmer, she worked at a number of jobs, such as pelting mink that involved removing flesh from mink pelts, plucking turkeys and determining the sex of day-old chicks.

She desired more rewarding employment such as that at GM, being hired April 5, 1955 and being put on the “cushion line,” the usual spot for female employees then. After some time on the job, she filed a grievance to get off the cushion line after the company would not accept her application for transfer. When the State Equal Employment Opportunities Commission (EEOC) came investigating, she said a company man told her, “Young lady do you know what you are doing? We’ll have to change the flow charts and all.” She replied: “Tough.”

Finally, she was placed in a work station called the "pit," installing weatherstripping to the bottom of vehicles. She soon found she did not have a long enough break to use the women's restroom, located far from her station. When she threatened to use the men's room, the company increased her break time.

She was the first woman to be in the "pit," and at first was not welcomed by many of the men. Thom said she brought chocolate and white birthday cakes to work. "They're all chowhounds," she said, "And that broke the ice."

Thom indicated she used the rights in the contract to help gain rights for women in the plant; she helped to form the local's women's committee and served in a number of committees.

Beloit has long been a city that attracted African-American workers, Clayborn Benson said in opening the second panel discussion. Benson, who is a member of the WLHS Board and is executive director of the Wisconsin Black Historical Society, related that Beloit had been a key stop on the Underground Railroad, which marked the route that slaves took in escaping to the North before the Civil War. Thus, Beloit was home to many black families. These families proved to lure others to Beloit, along with the industrial factories there needing workers.

The three panelists agreed that their unions helped to make it possible for them to break down racial barriers as well as to make an adequate living.

It wasn't always easy. Donnie Buggs worked 47 years at Fairbanks-Morse Co. in Beloit, and like other African-Americans was assigned to the foundry. There, he



Donnie Buggs, Herman Grady and Walter Knight recount the treatment they got as black workers in Beloit factories.

recalled, the work was "filthy with dust flying," and "you couldn't see each other." Eventually he became union steward and later a company supervisor.

Herman Grady, who later went on to be a union organizer, found when he returned home from Armed Services that African-Americans had trouble getting jobs; though he became a qualified mechanic in service, his first job was as a car washer for a dealership in Beloit.

Finally, hired at Fairbanks-Morse, he found himself in the foundry. "We did the jobs others didn't want to do," he said.

Nonetheless, he said race relations were good at the plant. "The unions have done a great job for African-Americans," he said.

Like the others, Walter Knight began in the foundry at Fairbanks-Morse when hired in 1951 at the age of 18. "That's where blacks started," he said. Nonetheless, with the help of the union he and others eventually got other jobs.

He said: "What caused the ability of these men to spread out over the plant was the Union" through the use of seniority. Knight rose from steward to union president, one of three African-Americans to lead Local 1533 of the Steelworkers.

While foundry work was tough, it

did allow the African-American workers there, he said, "to earn a living, raise a family and get kids to college." Knight has left the union and is now director of the Opportunities Industrialization Council in Beloit.

Today, Fairbanks-Morse has about 100 employees, down from 3,500 at one time.

In a sense, the three agreed that their lives were made richer through the industrial work and the unions.

Local 95 was organized and received its UAW charter in 1937, two years after the passage in 1935 of the Wagner Act, like many other unions then.



Speaking in the afternoon, Andrew Kersten, associate professor of history at the University of Wisconsin -Green Bay, traced the foundations of the National Labor Relations Act (formal name of the Wagner Act), which is celebrating its 70th Anniversary of enactment this year.

He said its roots were found in the violence that was foisted upon workers in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries through such events

Passage of Wagner Act led to unions, better living standards

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as Haymarket, the Bay View Massacre and the Ludlow incident in 1913. That created the Clayton Anti-Trust Act of 1914, which recognized that the "labor of a human being is not a commodity."



Local 95 activist wins WLHS lifetime honor

Ronnie Thomas, Local 95 retiree, was given the WLHS Lifetime Achievement Award. In presenting the Award, Amy Loasching, a Local 95 trustee, said Thomas serves actively on the Executive Board of the UAW Local 95 Retiree Chapter, on the Local's Community Service Committee and provides many volunteer hours for other organizations.

She said Thomas works these events and does it with a smile and a "how can I help" attitude. She said he was a "prime example of what leaders can do for their community."

Nonetheless, anti-worker violence continued into the 1920s, he said. With the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1932, the realization came that unions offered a means of getting more spending money in the hands of working people and a way to more peaceful labor relations, Kersten said.

The passage of the National Industrial Recovery Act in Roosevelt's first 100 days in 1933 included the basic rights of working people to organize and was succeeded by the Wagner Act in 1935, which has also been called "Labor's Magna Carta."

The impact of the Act was to energize workers to organize. Membership in unions rose from 11.9% in 1933, to 13.2% in 1935, 22.6% in 1937, 27.9% in 1941 and 35% in 1945. Unions were on the way not only to leading the way for better living standards, but also forging an ongoing progressive agenda in the United States. Conservatives, Kersten said, responded by passing

the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 that made so-called right-to-work laws possible, a weakening of labor's positions through actions of the NLRB and other actions that weakened labor's ability to organize and represent workers. Since then, labor's percentage of the workforce has dropped to 13% overall.

To the question about the future of unions, Kersten concluded: "As long as worker incomes fall behind inflation, as long as taxes on working folk are increasing at a higher rate than their raises, as long as the costs of college, health insurance and credit cards keep climbing, as long as politicians lack a brave and bold vision for the future, the reasons for labor unions will remain.

"What will change are the methods of organizing. Workers will have to in the words of AFL-CIO President John Sweeney organize despite the law. In other words the fight must go on regardless of the current status of the Wagner Act, the current composition of the NLRB. Otherwise, we are all destined to be, in the words of Barbara Ehrenreich 'nickel and dimed' to death."



Members of the UAW Local 75 Education Committee helped plan the conference. The committee chair is Barbara Duncan (right)

Victor Greene's book cites influence of music

Victor Greene's book, "A Singing Ambivalence: American Immigrants between the Old World and New, 1830-1930," has been published by the Kent State University Press. Greene, a former longtime member of the Board of the Society, retired as a professor of history

from the University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee.

His research tells how music formed a bond between the old world and the new, and helped as immigrants from many nations forged new lives.

Teamster Leader Buban: *Not everything has changed since 1886 Bay View Massacre*

Some 200 persons attended the 119th Anniversary Commemoration of the Bay View Massacre on Sunday, May 1, at the Historical Marker site in Milwaukee. The event memorializes the events of May 5, 1886 when the State Militia fired upon workers marching in an eight-hour-day rally, killing seven persons.

Principal speaker was Tim Buban, secretary-treasurer of Teamsters Local 200 in Milwaukee, a 5,000 member union. His speech is shown below:

An educator once said that the most difficult subject to teach is history. Making history relevant and meaningful, trying to explain why what happened long ago affects us today, can be a difficult connection to make.



Tim Buban, Teamsters leader, addresses Bay View Commemoration

In a way, we could say that everything has changed since 1886. In another way we could say that nothing has changed. Those honored dead whom we are here to remember today would be proud of the fact that Union members and supporters have gathered at the very spot where they were killed; they would be proud that we can do so without being threatened by an armed and hostile military force, and they would be proud that no militia is here ready to take the lives of their fellow citizens for the sake of speaking out against corporate greed. We are here to tell the story of what those men did on that day. You will notice no one is here to tell the story of the people who issued the shoot-to-kill order. That proves that not only were the strikers on the right side of justice, even more important, they were on the right side of history.

The martyrs of 1886 would be proud of that and we should be too.

There are other things that none of us should be proud of.

When we remember labor tragedies we often recall incidents such as the Triangle Shirt Company fire in New York in 1911. Before the fire, management's policy was to prohibit workers from stepping outside even for a brief moment, to get away from their work stations, to get a breath of fresh air and to give their lungs a break from the polluted environment in which they labored for 12 or 14 or 16 hours a day. For that reason the fire escape doors were kept locked. When the fire started, there was no escape, and 146 women, many of them girls really, were trapped. They either burned to death or in a scene horribly reminiscent of September 11 they jumped hundreds of feet to their death. There would be people who might say that as tragic as that occurrence was it really doesn't apply today because, after all, that was 1911. But it does apply; it is relevant, because incidents like that continue today. Let's fast forward beyond 1886, and past 1911, and look at more recent history.

In 1991, in Hamlet, North Carolina, management at the "Imperial Food" plant also had a policy of locking fire escape exits. Like the management in 1911 at the Triangle Shirt Company, management at Imperial Food would prohibit their workers from a short break outside, a few minutes away from the backbreaking drudgery of processing chickens. Therefore, when fire broke out at that company on September 4, 1991, workers were trapped no differently than they were 80 years earlier in New York. Of the 100 workers, 25 were killed and 50 were hospitalized. All because of a management policy against so-called "unauthorized breaks."

Now let's bring it even closer to home. Let's forget about 1991. Let's look to March 13 of 2005. 3 workers were killed in an explosion at a BP refinery in Augusta, Georgia. They were fined by OSHA a whopping \$141,000. \$141,000 was the penalty to one of the largest oil companies in the world, when they were found guilty of failing to correct unsafe working conditions which resulted in the death of 3 innocent workers.

I don't believe anyone could believe that such a paltry fine would serve as a deterrent to a corporate giant like BP.

That was March 13 of this year. Less than 3 weeks later at yet another BP plant, this time in Texas City, Texas,

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Corporate crimes continue -- Buban

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there was another refinery explosion. □ This time 15 workers were killed and 100 hospitalized. Following this devastation a spokesperson for BP stated, □ "These two explosions do not suggest a problem with our safety management team".

What will OSHA do about this? □ My bet is they'll probably fine them another \$141,000.

But not all crimes against workers result in physical death.

Right now, as we speak, the largest class action lawsuit in the history of the United States is being waged against Wal-Mart. 1.6 million women, □ many of them single moms. □ Denied fair pay forced to work overtime off the clock, illegally fired, □ denied had-earned promotions.

It's unfair for those women, but it's worse for their children. Children who will be denied everything from adequate health insurance to some of the little extras in life like the ability to pay for extra-curricular activities at school, □ all because Wal-Mart lacks the basic compassion towards the young that any person of decency would find incomprehensible.

As I mentioned, in one way we could say that everything has changed since 1886, □ and in another way we could say that nothing has changed.

This much, however I can promise you. This much I can guarantee. We will not be on the defensive forever.

History tells us that when things change they can change

Folksinger Larry Penn opens singing in front of the Bay View Rolling Mills Marker, site of the May 5, 1886 massacre of workers marching for 8-hour day.

quickly, □ and often when we least expect it. □ Slowly but surely the everyday citizen is coming to realize that the status quo no longer works for them.

Labor Historian Howard Zinn said this:

"If there is anything to remember about the Bay View Massacre, it is that no defeat lasts if what is behind

it is a struggle for justice and a moral cause. □ The story of social struggle throughout history is that defeats take place, but people persist. □ If there is a fundamental grievance that remains, people may remain quiet for a while, □ but people will ultimately rise up against it and things will change. That's something to keep in mind today when our country has serious problems to solve. □ What happened here in Bay View is a reminder that struggle continues and all of us have a responsibility to keep it up."

Other speakers at Bay View event



U.S. Representative Gwen Moore (D-Milw.) a welcome unexpected visitor, said: "Would you believe all these years later we're still fighting the same fight they died for on these grounds?"

State Representative Christine Sinicki told the crowd that the big issue in the State was increasing the minimum wage.



County Supervisor Marina Dimitrijevic, emcee, said it would be "unforgivable to forget May 5, 1886. The struggles continue today."

80th Anniversary marked by UW School for Workers

A Harley Davidson motorcycle "ride-in" by the executive board of Milwaukee's P.A.C.E. Local 7-209 highlighted the opening of two days of workshops and other events June 10-11 to celebrate the 80th anniversary of the University of Wisconsin's School for Workers.

The School for Workers, which began in 1925 as a summer school for industrial women workers, is the oldest, continuously-operating, university-based labor education program in the entire country. By the late 1920s, men had begun to attend as well and by the mid-1930s the typical student was older and the classes designed for the training needs of individual unions.

An extensive photo exhibit of the school's history was on display throughout the conference and a complimentary CD-ROM "80th Anniversary Photographs" went to each of the one hundred or so conference attendees. Two songs recorded in honor of the anniversary are included as a special feature on the CD of photographs: the "School for Workers Song" (music by W.T. Purdy; original lyrics of unknown authorship; additional lyrics by Anne Feeney; performed by the Pittsburgh ACORN Workers Chorus); and, "More" (music & lyrics by Anne Feeney; performed by Anne Feeney).

The conference also saw the premier of a newly-created twenty-minute-long film, "The Birth of the School for Workers" (with a script by David Nack, a member of the faculty of the School for Workers), with VHS or DVD copies being available for a \$20 donation to the scholarship fund of the School for Workers. (For more information or to order copies, contact Ann Harris at the School for Workers by tele-

phone at 608/262-3619 or e-mail at ann.harris@uwex.edu.)

Conference goers had their choice on Friday afternoon between two workshops, one featuring world-renowned Wisconsin labor cartoonists, Gary Huck and Mike Konopacki, speaking on the history of labor cartoons. Kenneth Gernanson and David Nack, president and board member respectively of the Wisconsin Labor History Society, gave the other presentation on Wisconsin labor history and the making of The Bay View Massacre of 1886, a fifteen-minute-long video produced by the labor history society. (For more information about the Bay View video, or to order copies, contact WLHS by e-mail at info@wisconsinlaborhistory.org.)

On Saturday, School for Workers' alumni and faculty spoke about the different periods of the school's history and Dorothy Sue Cobble of Rutgers University gave a keynote presentation on "Making the Next Unionism Possible." Workshop sessions conducted by current faculty gave attendees a taste of current class offerings by the school.

The banquet on the conference's final evening featured John Beck, director of the labor education program at Michigan State University, reading a selection of poems about the culture of work and workers, and a closing musical program of labor songs performed by labor troubadour Anne Feeney from Pittsburgh. Anne capped the festivities with a rousing version of the recently re-discovered song, "Evermore the School for Workers," to which she had provided an original stanza honoring the school's 80th anniversary to go with the original two stanzas of the song (see adjoining article.)

Anthem to the School for Workers

Sung to the tune of "On Wisconsin," the original two stanzas of the song, "Evermore the School for Workers," were discovered last year in a 40-page pamphlet, "The School for Workers Song Book," compiled by the University of Wisconsin School for Workers. The song book is believed to have been published during the 1940s or 1950s. The third stanza was composed by labor troubadour Anne Feeney for the 80th anniversary celebration of the School for Workers.

There is no information about who wrote the original two stanzas; any information about the song's creation would be welcome! Please contact Laurie Wermter, compiler, WLHS Bibliography (e-mail at lwermt@library.wisc.edu)

"Evermore the School for Workers" (music by W.T. Purdy; original lyrics of unknown; additional lyrics by Anne Feeney)

Here today the School for Workers
Lives to learn and ask—
Seeks today the strength and fitness
Needed for the task;
Heart and mind in eager purpose
open to the light,
Courage sufficient for the
Fight for right.

Evermore the School for Workers
As the years march on,
Everywhere the learning, striving
More that must be done:
Everyone with each united
At the people's call—
All life devoted to the
Cause of all!

Celebrating Eighty Years
As Workers lead the way
Winning justice in the workplace
Earning better pay
Obstacles will never stop us
We will never fail
Thanks to the School for Workers
Hail! Hail! Hail!

Website redesign contains migrant exhibit booklet

Take a look at our website, www.wisconsinlaborhistory.org, and you'll see new designs and a new arrangement that enables one to take in at a glance the overall contents of the site.

Newly-created webpages were also added describing the society's two musical projects (the "Images of Labor" from the American Musical Theatre program and the opera, "Esperanza") and the 1998 photography project, "The Struggle for Justice: The Migrant Farm Worker Labor Movement in Wisconsin," which documented the organizing efforts of an independent farm-workers' labor union, Obreros Unidos (United Workers), in Central Wisconsin during the 1960s.

Through the permission of Jesus Salas of Milwaukee and David Giffey of Arena, the photography webpage includes a special feature—a beautiful, high-quality PDF (portable document format) of the entire 20-page exhibit booklet, written to accompany the traveling photo exhibit, Struggle for Justice, which has toured throughout the state since 1998, when it was developed as part of the commemoration of the sesquicentennial of the statehood of Wisconsin.

Using historic photographs and text written by participants in the movement, the exhibit describes in detail the first sustained attempt to form a migrant farm-worker union in the Great Lakes Region. Co-authored by Obreros Unidos founder Jesus Salas and union photographer/journalist David Giffey, the full exhibit consists of 110 black-and-white photographs, Spanish and English text blocks, and supplementary information such as maps and news stories, mounted on free-

standing display panels. The exhibit booklet contains an abbreviated bilingual text and 20 photos from the exhibit.

For information about the availability of the exhibit for displays of one month or less for the cost of a \$250 installation/rental fee, plus travel expenses (depending on location), contact David Giffey either by telephone at 608/753-2199, or by e-mail at barnowl@mhtc.net.

Erika Lozier of Madison, the WLHS webmaster, created the new design.

Harvey Kaye's book reviewed in NY Times

Harvey Kaye's new book, **Thomas Paine and the Promise of America** (326 pp. Hill & Wang, \$25), was reviewed prominently in **The New York Times Book Review** (July 31, 2005). The reviewer, Joseph J. Ellis, an author, noted that Kaye defended Paine's legacy claiming that he brought about a liberal agenda to the early centuries of the United States.

Kaye is the Rosenberg Professor of History and Social Change at the University of Wisconsin - Green Bay. He is a longtime board member of the Wisconsin Labor History Society.

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NEWSLETTER

*For Society members
and friends*

Wisconsin Labor History Society

(Affiliate, Wisconsin Historical Society)

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