



**NYU**

**ROBERT F. WAGNER GRADUATE  
SCHOOL OF PUBLIC SERVICE**

**PADM-GP 4455**

**Labor Movement Advocacy**

**Spring 2021**

“The labor movement was the principal force that transformed misery and despair into hope and progress.” - Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

### **Course Description**

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the number of U.S. workers involved in work stoppages in 2018 reached its highest point since the mid-1980s. The resurgence of the use of strikes and worker activists withholding labor is set against the backdrop of enormous societal challenges like wealth and income inequality, climate change, and a lack of affordable, quality health care.

These powerful strikes also come at a time when unions themselves are facing innumerable challenges: declining memberships and dues, increasing employer offensives, a weakening of the labor law, and a changing economy that makes traditional methods of union organizing more difficult, costly and less successful.

We know that unions raise the standard of working conditions and wages for all workers, strengthen the overall economy and decrease inequality. Since the 1970s, the labor movement has seen a significant decline in strength, density and strikes - one of their key sources of leverage and expressions of power. Consequently, the decline of union density in the past forty years has coincided with and contributed to a modern economy that doesn't work for working people.

This class is an exploration of the political expression of labor unions and a discussion of where the labor movement goes from here. The class will acquaint students with the story of the U.S. labor movement and seek to examine the ways in which unions have driven social change. Furthermore, the class will analyze what conditions were necessary to successfully ignite change and seek to apply those learnings to the current labor movement and political work of unions.

With an emphasis on developing both knowledge of unions and their relationship to political change and practical skills in labor movement advocacy, this course will provide an overview of the history, recent trends, and current topics as well as provide students with a working knowledge of organizing and advocacy skills.

## **Course and Learning Objectives**

By the end of this course, students will:

- 1) Be acquainted with the history of the American labor movement including the rise and fall of unions.
- 2) Understand the role of unions in social and economic justice movements and policy change.
- 3) Assess the political role of unions.
- 4) Evaluate the current resurgence of the labor militancy and understand its relationship to today's political context.
- 5) Evaluate different policy options to strengthen unions.
- 6) Develop practical skills in organizing and advocacy necessary to participate in the labor movement.

## **Course Expectations and Requirements**

### **1. Class Participation (30%)**

The course depends on and requires active and ongoing participation by all class participants. This will occur in three ways:

- a. Class participants are expected to read and discuss the readings on a weekly basis. That means coming prepared to engage in class, with questions and/or comments with respect to the reading. Students are expected to have completed all the required readings before class to the point where they can be called on to critique or discuss any reading.
- b. In class itself, the key to quality class discussions is listening. Asking good questions is the second key element. "What did you mean by that?" "How do you/we know?" "What's the evidence for that claim?" Be reflective, thoughtful, and fully engage with the ideas of others in the class. Students should share thoughts and reactions in ways that promote critical engagement with their classmates. While engaging, remember the classroom agreements. Discussion topics will often be very personal, sensitive, and even controversial. Being respectful of everyone's opinion is essential to creating a safe and engaged learning environment.
- c. There will also be regular classroom exercises and discussions. For students who are less comfortable engaging during class, I encourage students to take full advantage of the forums on NYU Classes. Forums are a

great way to add to the participation grade and remain engaged in the conversation throughout the week. I will post a topic of discussion each week – in order to get full participation credit, please respond to two forum prompts. Participation in class exercises, discussions, and forums all go into the participation grade.

d. Quality and quantity of participation can be, but are not necessarily, closely correlated.

e. Class participation is crucial and the quality and thoughtfulness of your involvement will be reflected in your final grade. **If speaking in public is difficult for you, please talk to me early on.**

## **2. Reading & Class Reflections (30%)**

Students will have the opportunity to share thoughts and reflections on a given a topic through two written reflections. While I will provide a prompt, reflections can be based on anything that arose from the readings, class sessions or current events related to the labor movement, advocacy and politics.

For a reflection, you are to write a response to the - maximum two pages single-spaced. Each response, while reflecting rigorous and careful reading, allows you to explore what excites you intellectually and how you imagine applying what you read and discuss in class to professional areas that interest you. Along with your readings, you may also use lecture, power-point presentations, in-class exercises and the presentations of guest speakers as resources.

## **3. Final Paper & Presentation (40%):**

For the final assignment, students will choose a topic related to the course and write a final paper. Students will be asked to present the highlights from their paper during the last class on May 5th. For inspiration on paper topics, please use the overarching questions of the course. Papers should be no longer than 6 pages double spaced. Final papers will be due on May 12<sup>th</sup>.

## **NYU Classes and Readings**

1. You are responsible for checking NYU Classes for readings, announcements, and other class related documents and information. You are also responsible for regularly checking NYU email.
2. You will need Adobe Acrobat Reader in order to view some of the materials. Make sure that you have it installed.
3. Books will be placed on reserve in the library.

## **Academic Integrity**

Academic integrity is a vital component of Wagner and NYU. All students enrolled in this class are required to read and abide by Wagner's Academic Code. All Wagner students have already read and signed the Wagner Academic Oath. Plagiarism of any form will not be tolerated and students in this class are expected to report violations to me. If any student in this class is unsure about what is expected of you and how to abide by the academic code, you should consult with me.

### **Henry and Lucy Moses Center for Students with Disabilities at NYU**

Academic accommodations are available for students with disabilities. Please visit the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities (CSD) website and click on the Reasonable Accommodations and How to Register tab or call or email CSD at (212-998-4980 or [mosescsd@nyu.edu](mailto:mosescsd@nyu.edu)) for information. Students who are requesting academic accommodations are strongly advised to reach out to the Moses Center as early as possible in the semester for assistance.

### **NYU's Calendar Policy on Religious Holidays**

NYU's Calendar Policy on Religious Holidays states that members of any religious group may, without penalty, absent themselves from classes when required in compliance with their religious obligations. Please notify me in advance of religious holidays that might coincide with exams to schedule mutually acceptable alternatives.

### **Student Resources**

Wagner offers many quantitative and writing resources as well as skills workshops. The library also offers a variety of data services to students.

- [quantitative resources](https://wagner.nyu.edu/portal/students/academics/advisement/quantitative)  
(<https://wagner.nyu.edu/portal/students/academics/advisement/quantitative>)
- [writing resources](https://wagner.nyu.edu/portal/students/academics/advisement/writing-center)  
(<https://wagner.nyu.edu/portal/students/academics/advisement/writing-center>)
- [skills workshops](https://wagner.nyu.edu/education/courses/search?search_api_fulltext=&subject%5B%5D=2343&field_course_semesters_offered=All)  
([https://wagner.nyu.edu/education/courses/search?search\\_api\\_fulltext=&subject%5B%5D=2343&field\\_course\\_semesters\\_offered=All](https://wagner.nyu.edu/education/courses/search?search_api_fulltext=&subject%5B%5D=2343&field_course_semesters_offered=All)).
- [data services](http://nyu.libguides.com/dataservices) (<http://nyu.libguides.com/dataservices>)

### **Readings**

All of your readings are available online or provided under NYU Classes Resources for this course. **Readings are subject to change!** Each Thursday, I will confirm the readings for the following class.

### **Overview of the Semester**

|        |                        |  |
|--------|------------------------|--|
| WEEK 1 | March 24 <sup>th</sup> | INTRO: THE STATE OF UNIONS & THE LABOR MOVEMENT        |
| WEEK 2 | March 31 <sup>st</sup> | U.S. LABOR MOVEMENT HISTORY: THE RISE & FALL OF UNIONS |

## **REFLECTION DUE April 7<sup>th</sup>**

WEEK 3 April 7<sup>th</sup> WHEN WORKING PEOPLE FIGHT, WORKING PEOPLE WIN:  
EXAMINING VICTORIES FOR WORKING PEOPLE AND THE ONGOING CLASS WAR

WEEK 4 April 14<sup>th</sup> PERSPECTIVES ON THE ROLE OF UNIONS IN POLITICAL  
WORK & MOVEMENT BUILDING

## **REFLECTION #2 DUE April 21<sup>st</sup>**

WEEK 5 April 21<sup>st</sup> UNIONS AND ELECTORAL POLITICS

WEEK 6 April 28<sup>th</sup> THE CONTEMPORARY LABOR MOVEMENT

WEEK 7 May 5<sup>th</sup> THE FUTURE OF UNIONS & CLASS WRAP UP

## **FINAL PROJECT DUE May 12<sup>th</sup>**

### **Overarching questions to grapple with:**

1. How do unions benefit union members, working people and society as a whole?
2. Historically, what roles have unions played in political movements and advocacy and how does that compare to now?
3. What has led to the decline in union membership? What can be done to strengthen unions?
4. How do unions fight for the working class? What tactics do unions use?
5. How do unions mobilize their members in advocacy and political work?
6. How have unions hindered progress for working people?
7. What is the relationship between labor militancy and class consciousness?
8. How do union leaders and their commitment to members interact with a commitment to the public good?
9. How do different unions see their role in the labor movement, movement for social and economic justice?
10. How do organizations think about their memberships? As a base? Partner? Leader? Means to an end?
11. What would it take for working people to be politically prioritized in the US?

### **Session One: Why talk about unions? The State of Unions**

This session will give an overview of what unions are, what unions do, and the current state of unions. This session will also make a case for why learning about and building the strength of unions is essential in taking on economic inequality.

- What are unions? What is collective bargaining?
- What do we mean when we talk about the labor movement?
- What is the state of unions in the U.S.?
- What does a union do?
- How do unions serve economic justice goals?

- What is the difference between unions and other worker organizations? Advocacy organizations? Membership based/led organizations? Political organizations?

### **Required Reading:**

- [The State of Unions 2019](#), Ruth Milkman and Stephanie Luce
- Chapter 1 & 4: **Why Unions Matter**, Michael D. Yates
- [CWA Overview](#)
- [Weakened labor movement leads to rising economic inequality](#), Heidi Shierholz, Economic Policy Institute

### **Session Two: Labor Movement History**

This session will explore the roots of the modern US labor movement from the early 1900s through the PATCO strike including the rise and fall of unions:

- How did the labor movement start in the US?
- How did the strikes of the 1930s lead to the Wagner Act and enshrinement of collective bargaining?
- What other wins came during this time? What was left out?
- What were monumental moments in the US labor movement and how did they contribute to the overall strength of unions?
- Why is union density in decline?
- How has a changing economy contributed to the decline of unions?
- What roles do employers and union busting play in the decline of unions?

Special Guest: Bob Master, Assistant Vice President of Communication Workers of America District 1

### **Required Reading:**

- Ch. 1 (in full) and Ch. 3 (pgs 98-99, and 105-114), *The State of the Union*, Nelson Lichtenstein
- [The Lessons of 1934](#), Sharon Smith, *The Socialist Worker*
- [The Strike that Busted Unions](#), Joseph A. McCarthy, August 2011

### **Session Three: When Working People Fight, Working People Win: Working people victories and the ongoing class war**

This session will look at instances where the labor movement has fought and won policy change for social progress. This session will also look at the rise of neoliberalism, its ties to the republican party, and how this has led to an ongoing class war.

- What have working people fought for and won?
- How did they succeed in their campaigns?
- What led to the rise of neoliberalism?
- How has neoliberalism contributed to the class war?
- What are hallmarks of the class war?
- What have the results of the class war been?

**Required Reading:**

- TBA

**Session Four: Perspectives on the Role of Unions in Politics & Movement Building**

This session will explore legislative and political work from the perspective of a union as well as think through issues relating to developing members and engaging members in movement building and political work. This class will also expose students to practical skills of conducting a political landscape analysis and a stakeholder analysis.

- Why should unions be involved in political work?
- What roles do unions play in NY politics and legislative advocacy?
- Why is membership development important in terms of political work?
- How do you engage and mobilize members in advocacy work?
- What limitations do unions face when engaging in political work because of their membership?
- What about a labor party?

**Required Reading:**

- [Some labor unions split with Biden on 'Medicare for All'](#), ALICE MIRANDA OLLSTEIN, August 2019
- TBA

**Session Five: Unions and Elections**

This session will look at the role of unions in the 2016 and 2020 elections as well as broad electoral trends.

- How have unions and union members participated in recent elections?
- What trends can we see?
- How has the long standing alliance helped or hindered progress for working people?
- What do recent electoral outcomes tell us about unions and the future of the labor movement?

**Required Reading:**

- TBA

**Session Six: Contemporary Labor Movement**

From the Chicago Teachers Strike to GM, we've seen a surge in strikes and labor organizing. This session will explore the contemporary labor movement and try to understand why the resurgence and analyze its strengths and weaknesses - in context of the current political and economic environment. What does this mean for the future of the labor movement and for how unions should be thinking of themselves and acting in this new political context?

**Required Reading:**

- TBA

- [In Striking, Chicago Teachers Went on the Offense for Public Schools](#) ,Jacobin Magazine, Alan Maass.
- [A record number of US workers went on strike in 2018](#), Alexia Fernandez Campbell, VOX, Feb 2019.

### **Session Seven: The Future of Unions & Class Wrap Up**

At their weakest point, unions are operating in uncharted territory due to a strong union-busting industry, a weakened labor law and arguably most importantly, a changed economy. Automation, globalization, the gig economy - work looks a lot different than it used to, and its continuing to change. This session will explore factors that contributed to the decline of the strength of the labor movement and explore policy options for strengthening unions and the labor movement.

- How has the globalized, financialized, fissured economy changed the way people work, the status of labor unions, and the efficacy of the traditional labor organization?
- What other models of organizing and labor organization exist?
- What can/should be done in order to protect unions and strengthen them for the future?

#### Reading:

- [The New Labor Law](#), Kate Andrias, University of Michigan Law (PDF) – **Select sections**
- [The PRO Act is the Labor Law Reform that Workers Need and Deserve](#), Moshe Marvit, May 2019.
- [The Case for Sectoral Bargaining](#), Larry Cohen, June 2018.