



**NYU**

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

**PADM-GP 4455.001**

**Labor Movement Politics, Advocacy, &  
Social Change  
Spring 2022**

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

**Instructor Information**

- Rebecca Miller
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**Course Information**

- Class Meeting Times: Wednesday 6:45pm-8:25pm
- Class Location: Silver Center for Arts and Science Room 501

**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, a lack of affordable, quality health care and exacerbated by the COVID-19 global pandemic.

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.

### **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.

### **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 ask assigned students to post at least one discussion topic each week – in order to get full participation credit, students must both post at least one topic and respond to two other student’s 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 let me know 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 Presentation (40%):**

For the final assignment, students will work in teams to choose a topic related to the course and make a final presentation. For inspiration on topics, please use the overarching questions of the course. As this is a short class, these presentations should be used to expand the topics covered in the course. Please use the opportunity to educate yourselves and classmates on ground we did not cover or express ideas on course-related topics like the future of the labor movement or policy ideas to improve union density. **Groups must get topics approved by April 20<sup>th</sup> and presentations should be no longer than 10 minutes. Final presentations will take place on the last day of class.**

### **NYU Classes and Readings**

1. You are responsible for checking NYU Brightspace 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>)
- writing resources  
(<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)).
- data services (<http://nyu.libguides.com/dataservices>)

### **Readings**

All of your readings are available online or provided under NYU Brightspace Resources for this course. **Readings are subject to change**, but will always be final by the Thursday prior to the next class.

### **Overview of the Semester**

WEEK 1      March 23<sup>rd</sup>      INTRO: THE STATE OF UNIONS & THE LABOR MOVEMENT

WEEK 2      March 30<sup>th</sup>      U.S. LABOR MOVEMENT HISTORY: THE RISE & FALL OF UNIONS

### **REFLECTION #1 DUE April 6<sup>th</sup>**

WEEK 3      April 6<sup>th</sup>      WHEN WORKING PEOPLE FIGHT, WORKING PEOPLE WIN: EFFORTS TO DIVIDE THE WORKING CLASS & THE ONGOING CLASS WAR

WEEK 4      April 13<sup>th</sup>      THE ROLE OF UNIONS IN POLITICAL WORK & MOVEMENT BUILDING AND THE COMPLICATED POLITICS OF UNION MEMBERS

### **REFLECTION #2 & PRESENTATION TOPIC DUE April 20<sup>TH</sup>**

WEEK 5	April 20 <sup>st</sup>	POLITICAL EDUCATION, ORGANIZING, MOBILIZING AND STRIKING
WEEK 6	April 27 <sup>th</sup>	THE CONTEMPORARY LABOR MOVEMENT & THE FUTURE OF UNIONS
WEEK 7	May 4 <sup>th</sup>	<b>FINAL PRESENTATIONS &amp; CLASS WRAP UP</b>

**Overarching questions to grapple with:**

1. How do unions benefit union members, working people and society?
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? And to the extent this is an intentional/strategic choice, why?
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**

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 – and the many other significant challenges of our time.

- What are unions? What is collective bargaining? What is the labor movement?
- What is the current state of unions in the U.S.? In terms of density and strength, and also how Americans feel about unions.
- What exactly 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? Why is this important?

### **Required Reading:**

- Chapter 1&4: ***Why Unions Matter***, Michael D. Yates
- **Latest data release on unionization is a wake-up call to lawmakers**, Heidi Shierholz, Margaret Poydock, John Schmitt and Celine McNicholas, January 20, 2022, EPI, <https://www.epi.org/publication/latest-data-release-on-unionization-is-a-wake-up-call-to-lawmakers/>
- **LISTEN: The Rise & Fall (and rise?) of organized labor**, NPR, November 29, 2021 <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/1059910517>

### **Optional Reading:**

- **The State of Unions 2021 in NYC, NYS and US**, Ruth Milkman and Stephanie Luce [https://slu.cuny.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Union\\_Density-2021\\_D.pdf](https://slu.cuny.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Union_Density-2021_D.pdf)
- **CWA Overview**, <https://cwa-union.org/about/cwa-overview>

### **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 and most importantly, who were left out?
- What were monumental moments in the US labor movement and how did they contribute to the overall strength of unions?

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

### **Required Readings:**

- **The State of the Union**, Nelson Lichtenstein - Ch 1 in full, and pages pgs 98-99, and 105-114 of Ch. 3.

- “**The Labor Question**,” The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980, Steve Fraser <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv131bvcc.6>
- “**The Strike that Busted Unions**”, Joseph A. McCartin, August 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/03/opinion/reagan-vs-patco-the-strike-that-busted-unions.html>

### **Optional:**

- The full Chapter 3 of State of the Union
- **The Lessons of 1934**, Sharon Smith, The Socialist Worker <https://socialistworker.org/2009/10/06/lessons-of-1934>
- **PODCAST:** When Reagan Broke the Unions, December 18, 2019 <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/when-reagan-broke-the-unions/id290783428?i=1000460023060>

### **Session Three: When Working People Fight, Working People Win: Working people victories, efforts to divide us 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?
- What role did unions and working people play in the Civil Rights Movement?
- 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?
- 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 Readings**

- Chapter 5, *The State of the Union*
- **Film:** At the River I Stand
- Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech to the AFL-CIO Convention on Dec. 11, 1961. <http://www.substancenews.net/articles.php?page=4740>

### **Optional:**



- The Powell Memo, Lewis Powell
- How McCarthyism and the Red Scare Hurt the Black Freedom Struggle, Paul Heideman - <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2020/05/mccarthyism-red-scare-civil-rights-movement>

### **Session Four: The Role of Unions in Politics & Movement Building and the Complicated Politics of Union Members**

This session will talk about how race and racism has been used to divide working people and make an argument for unionism through a race/class lens. We will also 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.

- How has racism been used to divide working people? What have the consequences been?
- What role should unions play in fighting racism?
- Why should unions be involved in political work? How does ideology play into the political role of a union?
- What is the role of union members in a union's 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:**

- TBD portions of Ch. 1 & 5, *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together*, Heather McGhee
- **Pgs 14-17** (I marked off the section to read), Chapter 1, "Building Social Movement Unionism," *Rekindling the Movement: Labor's quest for relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century*, Lowell Turner and Richard W. Hurd
- **"Why the Labor Movement Needs the Left"**, An Interview with Bob Master, Dan DiMaggio, Jacobin, August 2019 <https://jacobinmag.com/2019/08/labor-movement-bob-master-communications-workers-america-strike>
- "New Polling Data Shows Complicated Politics of Union Members", CM Lewis & Kevin Reuning, <https://www.thestrikewave.com/original-content/complicated-politics-of-union-members>
- - The Field: A Divided Latino Vote in Arizona, *The Daily*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/19/podcasts/the-daily/latino-voters-biden-trump.html?>

Optional:

- **Pages 24-27 and 131-133.** *Theories of the Labor Movement*, Simeon Larson & Bruce Nissen
- **"The Forgotten Militants"**, Charlie Post, Jacobin, August 2016. <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/08/the-forgotten-militants/> - "The Union Members who Voted for Trump Have to Be Organized - Not Ignored", Mindy Isser, December 28 2020. <https://inthesetimes.com/article/trump-voters-labor-unions-election-2020>
- "Time for Unions to Give the Democratic Party an Ultimatum" Hamilton Nolan, <https://inthesetimes.com/article/unions-election-president-biden-democratic-party-pro-act>

### **Session Five: Political Education, Organizing, Mobilizing and Striking**

Readings TBD.

### **Session Six: Contemporary Labor Movement & The Future of Unions**

Readings TBD.

### **Session Seven: Final Presentations & Class Wrap Up**

Readings TBD.