

The Struggle Over Work in New York City

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The recent exhibition, "[City of Workers, City of Struggle: How Labor Movements Changed New York](#)," at the Museum of the City of New York, offered an information-rich visual mapping of the history and plurality of labor movements in New York City. As noted by Sarah M. Henry and Steven H. Jaffe, curator, in the book accompanying the exhibition, "Labor struggles – with employees, with unions, at the ballot box and against each other – are woven throughout the city's history."

The exhibition brought the story of labor in the city to life through an assemblage of text and ephemera that included industrial equipment, historical photos and illustrations, personal artifacts, campaign buttons and flyers, and newspaper clippings. Through their exhibition, the documents widened the aperture of labor's story, allowing more light to shine on untold stories, by juxtaposing dominant labor movements alongside stories from workers, often women, people of color, and immigrants, who fought for inclusion and rights within or against those movements. The inclusion of stories from the center and periphery offered multiple readings of labor's story, avoiding a single, dominant narrative. Jaffe's exhibition text and audio recordings helped contextualize the amount of information on offer to read and see.

We can learn from the perseverance in labor's struggle to confront today's challenges in the information economy, such as the monopoly power of big tech companies, like Amazon, who practice poor working conditions. And how these companies work to silence their employee activists for speaking out on ethics, as we have seen in the 2019 Google walkouts. We can learn from the persuasion often at play in labor's struggle, such as how Uber positions itself as an information company, not a transportation company, to fight against offering their own drivers benefits and regular work. Labor struggles, such as these, have little to no end in sight and continue to challenge the dignity of today's workers.



Photo from the exhibition: Brett Wallace

To ground the exhibition, Jaffe and team mapped labor's story in New York across three significant sections, e.g., "In Union There Is Strength"; "Labor Will Rule"; "Sea Change." "In Union There Is Strength" (1830-1900), a six-foot-tall hand-wrought steel wrench next to a wall-size illustration of the city's 1882 first Labor Day demonstrated the rise of early unionizing efforts. The wrench, used by workers to fasten the bolts on the Brooklyn Bridge, signified the shift from artisanal to industrial labor and, as noted in the wall text, the labor of thousands of Irish, German, Italian, African American, and, at least one, Chinese immigrant. These workers earned \$2.00 or \$2.25 per day (\$40 in today's dollars) for dangerous work toiling on the bridge or in the East River building its foundation. As this new working class emerged, it was privileged, skilled, hard to replace artisans that had bargaining leverage. These skilled workers included printers, carpenters, and machine workers, mostly native-born men or immigrants from

northwestern Europe. These early organizing efforts excluded women, African Americans, and other new immigrant groups.

An illustration of Augusta "Gussie" Lewis Troup (1848 – September 14, 1920), founder of the Women's Typographical Union, served as an entry point in "Women Workers." By 1855 servants were the city's largest occupation—70% of whom were Irish immigrants. Nearby, a section on "Workers and Racism" included a pickled oyster jar from Thomas Downing's (1791–1866) famous Oyster House on Broad Street. Due to racism after the 1827 emancipation of New York's last enslaved people, Downing's story illuminated how black workers had to rely on churches, benevolent societies, schools, and social networks for independence and employment. It became clear from the start; this exhibition focused on giving space and prominence to figures like Troup and Downing, who led efforts in inclusion.



Photo from the exhibition: Brett Wallace

"Two Visions of Labor" contrasted Henry George, backed by the Knights of Labor and Central Labor Union (CLU) against Samuel Gompers and the American Federation of Labor (AFL). George's inclusive vision supported workers of all skill, gender, racial backgrounds. Still, he lost the 1866 mayoral race to the idea of "pure and simple unionism" by Gompers and the AFL, who narrowed organizing for highly trained workers – mostly white men. The AFL went on to become the first long-standing labor federation.

These competing visions of the future continued into "Labor Will Rule" (1900-1965), the second significant section, with a wall-size photo of International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union president David Dubinsky next to a picture of shirtwaist strikers. Garment work was the largest occupation in the city for over a century. Inspired by various socialist, anarchist and communist groups and mobilized by the dehumanization and exhaustion from the industrial sewing machine, on November 22, 1909, 15,000 shirtwaist workers walked out in the most massive women's strike in U.S. history. These workers proved the power of organized labor and created a new template by assembling a diverse array of ethnic cultures, skills, and integrating radical politics into unionism. We see the influence of such movements in how today's labor protests are made up of many loosely connected coalition groups, alongside workers from many paths and parts of the world. Specific community-based organizations also developed during this period. I learned about the Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance (CHLA), formed in 1933–34 by 3,200 immigrants. These workers opened small business hand-laundries to escape racism in other forms of employment, relying on their networks to share resources, and organizing to fight against discrimination. A display showed the personal identification cards of Egbert Jap-Ngie, a merchant seaman and member of the National Maritime Union, which overcame discrimination against black, Latino, and Asian American workers.

"Riot at Union Square," a 1930 painting by Peter Hopkins, depicted nightstick wielding policemen rushing into a crowd. This painting signified the leftist riots, rising from the 1929 Wall Street crash and Great Depression (1929–41), that encouraged the American public to reject capitalism for Russia's utopian ideologies. A colorful ILGWU banner and a hefty personal Rolodex belonging to Albert Shanker, the president of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), and American Federation of Teachers (AFT), demonstrated the power of union persuasion. Shanker's Rolodex, opened to liberal Republican Governor Nelson Rockefeller's card, showing the political leaders at his fingertips and how power prides itself on "connections." During this

time, unions, which now made up a quarter of New York City's workforce, achieved essential goals such as collective bargaining, arbitration, rent control, a free university, and other milestones that improved living standards. But, their power was not equally distributed. The inclusion of a portrait of activist Ella J. Baker referenced those who worked to shift union power towards racial change and inclusion.



Picketing ILGWU members outside Macy's department store urge shoppers not to buy Judy Bond blouses. Circa 1965. Courtesy Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation & Archives, Cornell University.

A wall-size image of DC 37 Local 371 members protesting the city's doomsday budget in 1991 opened "Sea Change" (1965–2001), the third major section, while a nearby poster read, "REAGAN CUTS...PEOPLE BLEED!" "Sea Change" represented a period marked by opportunities for recognition of women, African Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Asian Americans in the labor movement. Unions such as DC 37, 1199, District 65, the Transit Workers Union (TWU), and the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), all advocated for marginalized workers,

and inclusive opportunities arose in the service and government sectors. A 1966 brochure read, "We Won," marking the victory of the 35,000 transit workers (TWU) after a 12-day strike that brought the city to a halt. The unionization victory ushered in success for other city workers, including sanitation and teachers.

"Sea Change" also signified jobs lost as factory work moved overseas to lower-cost ports. Between 1960 and 2000, New York City lost 650,000 manufacturing and port jobs. When the economy eventually bounced back for some in the 1980s and '90s, new jobs in finance, professional services, and real estate dominated the economy.

In the fourth section, "New Challenges" (since 2001), photos documented the alliances of unions with new alt-labor movements and actions, from the Occupy Wall St to the fights for equal pay and a \$15 minimum wage (2018). In a video, "Amazon in a Union Town," Essimae Skinner, a former Amazon worker, discussed the harsh conditions at Amazon's Staten Island warehouse. The fight for better conditions continues led by current and former Amazon workers, supported by many autonomous, coalition groups, unions, and local officials. While a company like Amazon remains vehemently anti-union, in NYC, 24 percent of workers are unionized, compared to the national average of 11 percent.

This last section felt truncated and smaller in size and scope. In a room exiting the show was a video on labor's present and future, and while it was a message I wanted to hear, it demanded more attention than I had left in my tank. I missed the living archives earlier in the exhibition that could have stood in for the rise of worker centers, tech walkouts, Amazon's continued expansion in the city, the emerging unionization within cultural institutions, new co-op movements, the rise of workplace surveillance, etc. A back wall of large photos juxtaposed delivery riders and Amazon warehouse workers with factory workers, but these images read more like stock photos than stories (and, some were). A future extension to this show could also go more in-depth on work within today's cultural institutions, including museums, who often rely on independent contractors, such as community educators, curators, artists, etc.



Photo of the exhibition: Brett Wallace

On a long table dividing the main room, you could try your hand at garment work on a device or connect lines as a switchboard operator. I tried the garment work, guiding an online sewing machine along its thread line. This game was challenging and felt more like an adjacency, taking me momentarily out of the moment, than allowing me to become more rooted within the exhibition's story. I did find the introduction to new figures engaging in "Who Is A Labor Activist," where turning over wooden flaps revealed worker photos and their quotes, such as Errol Scott, a guard at the Museum, and a member of DC37.

With its insightful curation, wide aperture, and thoughtful placement of objects and stories, Jaffe and his team succeeded in providing a compelling, multi-dimensional account of the complexity of labor's history and plurality. Seeing labor's story come to life gave me some hope and energy as workers from all paths fight for an inclusive and just future of work.