

GREATER NEW HAVEN
LABOR
HISTORY
ASSOCIATION

267 Chapel Street | New Haven, CT 06513

www.laborhistory.org | 203 777 2756 | info@laborhistory.org

VOLUME 7, NUMBER 4

December 2011—January 2012

IMPORTANT UPCOMING EVENTS IN EARLY 2012

Wednesday, January 4, 2012: 4-5:30 p.m. Meeting of Labor History in the Schools Legislative Task Force, 267 Chapel Street, New Haven

Saturday, January 28, 2012: 1-2:30 p.m., Memorial Service for David Montgomery, Battell Chapel, New Haven

February 24—March 14, 2012: Committee hearings on proposed legislation; will include public testimony about the Labor History in the Schools legislation; State Capitol, Hartford

Saturday, March 3, 2012: 2-4 p.m., Book signing and discussion with Jeremy Brecher, author of Save the Humans? Common Preservation in Action, New Haven Public Library, 133 Elm Street, New Haven

The Board and Staff of the Greater New Haven Labor History Association wish all of our members and friends a peaceful holiday season and a New Year filled with hope, justice and peace.

DAVID MONTGOMERY December 1, 1927—December 2, 2011

It was with great shock and sadness that members of the Greater New Haven Labor History Association learned of the passing of our life member, David Montgomery, on the day after his 84th birthday. We mourn his loss and will always cherish the memory of this exceptionally gifted and giving teacher, writer, historian, activist and friend.

David began his career as a union organizer while working as a machinist in various shops in Minnesota and New York. He was fired from a number of jobs because of his activism and turned to academia, earning his master's and doctoral degrees in history from the University of Minnesota. His dissertation, Beyond Equality: Labor and the Radical Republicans 1862-1872, a study of the labor movement during the time of Reconstruction, was published as a book in 1967. Several other books followed, including the highly influential Workers' Control in America: Studies in the History of Work, Technology and Labor Struggles and The Fall of the House of Labor: the Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865-1925. In his writing and in his teaching, he not only told the story of labor struggles, but painted vivid pictures of workers' lives on the job.

David first taught at the University of Pittsburgh and then at Yale University, where he became Farnam Professor of History. At both universities he earned teaching awards. He began at Yale in the late 1970s, and he and his wife, Martel W. Montgomery, became part of the fabric of life not only at Yale but in the broader New Haven community. Known as an intellectually rigorous proponent of the "new labor history," along with colleagues E.P. Thompson, Herbert Gutman and David Brody, David remained an advocate for the struggles and aspirations of workers, supporting Yale's clerical workers in their 1984 strike and the efforts of the Graduate Employee Student Organization (GESO) at Yale to achieve recognition as a union for graduate student workers.

David was a life member of the Greater New Haven Labor History Association and he participated in many GNHLHA events.

In 2005, after his retirement from Yale and shortly before he and his wife moved to Kennett Square, PA., he helped lead GNHLHA's River Street Walking Tour, and held a remarkable roundtable discussion afterward at Fair Haven Woodworks, attended by about 75 people.

The Board and Staff of GNHLHA extend deepest sympathies to his widow, Martel Montgomery, their sons and their families. David Montgomery will be missed sorely and long remembered.

There will be a public memorial service for David Montgomery on Saturday, January 28th, 2012, at Battell Chapel in New Haven from 1 to 2:30 p.m. with the Rev. Frederick J. Streets officiating.

SCHOOL LABOR HISTORY LEGISLATION GAINS MOMENTUM

By Steve Kass

**GNHLHA Executive Board Member and Coordinator,
Labor History in the Schools Legislative Initiative**

With a special task force set up by the GNLHA meeting biweekly this fall, momentum has picked up for holding a public hearing on this legislation during the "short session" of next year's legislative assembly. Endorsements by the AFL-CIO, AFT, CEA, UAW, AFSCME, CSEA, the Connecticut Working Families party, and others are getting the attention of statewide legislators to make this bill a top priority.

The bill calls for “including the history of organized labor, the collective bargaining process and existing legal protections in the workplace” in the Connecticut public school curriculum. Many labor and educational groups are excited and enthusiastic about finally having labor’s untold story told.

This bill comes at time when the Shankar Institute recently released their report (September, 2011) called “How Labor’s story is distorted in high school history textbooks.” The investigation highlights the “spotty, inadequate, and slanted” coverage of the labor movement in the four major textbooks that account for most of the market in U.S. history textbooks in this country. The textbooks “present labor history in a biased, negative way; for example focusing on strikes and strike violence while neglecting labor’s role in bringing generations of Americans into the middle class.” The textbooks at other times simply ignore many of labor’s contributions in helping to create some of the following social reforms: the eight-hour work day, the forty hour work week, minimum wages, health care benefits, social security, Medicare, and unemployment insurance.

Unfortunately, most people don’t know or remember how crucial labor was in pushing Depression-era politicians to codify the basic features of American work that are now taken for granted.

With the inspiring Occupy movement sweeping the nation, there has never been a more important time to learn (or relearn) working/middle class and labor history: the history of the 99%.

OCCUPY NEW HAVEN
By John Magnesi
GNHLHA Member

“Top 1 % - Y U N O Pay Taxes ? !”; “I’ll Believe Corporations Are People When Texas Executes One”;
“Lost My Job, Found an Occupation.”

Those are just a few of the types of sentiments reflected on signs that have been seen in the “Occupy Movement” that has swept this country and that has seeped into New Haven’s own “Occupy” encampment. This breakthrough uprising has changed the political dialogue in the country and has given new hope to progressives who envision a better future and who recognize the need to challenge unresponsive entrenched elites in a time of great economic turmoil.

The Occupy Movement seemed to start almost spontaneously in a gathering on Liberty Square in Manhattan on September 17, 2011. An encampment of the dispossessed arose at Zuccotti Park right there in the heart of American corporate capitalism, New York City’s financial district. One big difference between this sudden and unexpected uprising and the protests of the past, is that many of the assembled activists chose not to leave the park where they had staged their protest but instead they brought their tents and sleeping bags and attempted a permanent takeover of a tiny piece of ground in a city and by extension in a nation where the social, economic, and political hierarchy had abandoned them. They used their First Amendment rights to assemble and to voice their concerns in a non-violent manner about the betrayal of the American people by those at the top of the economic pyramid.

About one month after the initial Wall Street protests in New York City, our own New Haven activists launched a march on the Green in New Haven on October 16, 2011. Estimates by some suggested that at least 1000 people came out to protest the current financial and political crisis. They too echoed the sentiments of those encamped in New York City and in other cities around the country about the economic polarization afflicting this country. They too were fed up with the corporately dominated social and political system and by the obscene concentration of wealth in this country. The income and assets of those at the top of the income stream among the top 1% has so distorted our politics and our economy that the vast majority of Americans-- the so-called 99%-- have been forgotten and left behind with no life raft at all.

So what do the New Haven activists encamped on the Green want? According to information displayed on their website, they seek rights for the vast majority of the American people, the so-called 99%, to convene, to speak freely, and to demand social and economic justice from a system that is unresponsive. On any given day they have posted signs, conducted marches, engaged in street demonstrations and other protests dealing with a wide range of social, political, and economic concerns. They have expressed their anger at everything from outrageous multi-million dollar corporate bonuses paid to executives (while their workers struggle to pay for health insurance), to police misconduct associated with the arrest of Occupy protesters in other cities where activists have been unjustifiably pepper sprayed, subjected to excessive police force and even shot during efforts to destroy Occupier's encampments.

The Occupy New Haven group has expressed solidarity with the Occupy Hartford protesters whose encampment was torn down by the Hartford Police Department at the behest of the Police Chief and the political leadership in that city. The New Haven group has also declared its opposition to the upcoming Defense Authorization Act. (It is alleged that the legislation may allow for the imprisonment of United States citizens without charge or trial in still one more example of misguided legislation and twisted values associated with President Obama's continuing War on Terrorism.)

Recently, the New Haven Occupy group joined in yet another march and demonstration. In conjunction with the New Haven Central Labor Council, Unite-Here, and other community groups, the Occupiers and others held a rally at City Hall followed by a march to key locations on New Haven's own Wall Street, calling for more jobs for local residents in a city where the jobless rate is stratospheric.

The Occupy New Haven movement operates in a manner similar to other Occupy groups around the country. There are no official leaders or official spokespeople. Instead, movement members decide on their course of action in community gatherings called a "General Assembly." Everyone has a right to be heard following a procedure agreed to by the group. Decisions are made in a democratic manner. Assembly events are open to all and meetings are held regularly -- usually on Wednesday evenings and on Sunday afternoons and there may also be other days when General Assembly gatherings occur.

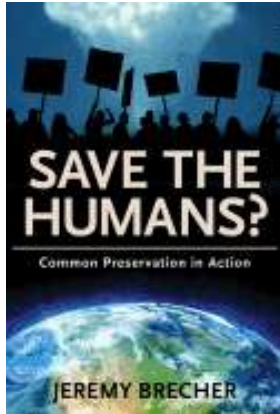
The process and conduct of Occupy New Haven is transparent and relies on direct democracy. Their actions are non-violent but intended to change and disrupt a system that no longer responds to the needs of the people. The group is supported by donations from numerous sources including individuals, the community, student groups, social justice organizations, and by trade unions.

Occupy New Haven shows that history is once again being made on the Green in New Haven. To learn more, go to the group's web site, www.OccupyNewHaven.org.

NEW BOOK BY JEREMY BRECHER: SAVE THE HUMANS: COMMON PRESERVATION IN ACTION—SIGNING AND DISCUSSION MARCH 3

"In a Reed College history survey course in 1965, I heard a brief mention of some big strikes in late 19th century America. I was intrigued and started looking in the college library for books on labor history. There was a short shelf of them, few less than twenty-five years old...

"I had of course heard about the sit-down strikes and the great industrial union organizing campaigns of the 1930s, though there was actually very little historical writing about them available in the 1960s. I had heard of the 'Haymarket riots,' but I didn't know that more than half a million workers struck in 1886, many of them in a nationwide general strike for the eight-hour day. I had heard of labor leader and socialist candidate Eugene Victor Debs, but I didn't know anything about the huge strikes in all basic industries—steel, coal, and railroads—in the mid-1890s. Nor did I know anything about the big strike waves during and after World War I and World War II. And I couldn't find a single book or article dealing with such periods as a general phenomenon...



“Such actions called up for me a vision of how ordinary people might liberate themselves from those who oppressed them. They showed people who had been divided and apparently powerless coming together for what I would later call common preservation. It showed them confronting and sometimes defeating the greatest powers in the land. Could that story, I wondered, still be relevant?”

In his newest book, historian, activist, writer (and member for life of the Greater New Haven Labor History Association), Jeremy Brecher answers that question with a resounding “Yes!” Save the Humans is a multi-layered, nuanced tour de force through the history of 20th and early 21st century movements for “Common Preservation,” as well as an earnest plea that we apply the lessons learned from them to confront today’s global threats.

Join Jeremy and the Greater New Haven Labor History Association on Saturday, March 3rd from 2-4 p.m. for a discussion and book-signing at the main branch of the New Haven Public Library, 133 Elm Street, New Haven.

THE FAMILY WORK HISTORY PROJECT, PART TWO: FALL 2011

This fall, Paula Panzarella reprised and expanded the Family Work History Project in the New Haven Public Schools initiated by Outreach Coordinator Christine Saari last spring. She offered an introductory session to 12 classes and presented each teacher with a full set of curriculum materials for their own future use in the classroom.

The introductory sessions offered students an opportunity to practice interviewing subjects about their lives at work. Participating were Lula White, Dorothy Johnson and Lt. Gary Tinney of the New Haven Fire Department.

Paula, Lula and Dorothy share their reflections about the process:

PAULA PANZARELLA: THE FAMILY WORK HISTORY PROJECT FALL 2011: AN OVERVIEW

Introductory classes were given at Worthington Hooker, Nathan Hale, Clinton Avenue, Katherine Brennan Schools and the Columbus Family Academy. All the teachers to whom I presented the curriculum were enthusiastic about the introductory class with interviewees. Teachers are looking for ways to inspire their students to want to learn. They were happy that the introductory class involved interviewees so the students could practice that skill.

I began the introductory class with a few words about labor history and the value of work through all societies, in all countries. I showed a few photos of child laborers from 100 years ago (textile millworkers, miners, farmworkers) and talked about how people demanded labor laws, the end of childhood labor, safe working conditions, benefits, etc. I played two segments from Mabel Batts' oral history interview about her experience as a garment worker.

Having two interviewees per class provided an opportunity to involve all the students who wanted to ask questions. Most classrooms had between 24 and 27 students. Some teachers said their quietest students or more difficult students participated by asking questions. Many students took copious notes and may be writing essays based on the practice interviews.

Questions from students varied. Some groups focused on the personal (How many brothers and sisters do you have? What did you like to do when you were a kid?); some groups focused on work (What was your first job like? Was it scary being on strike? What was school like when you taught?); and some wanted details about going to jail (because of the Freedom Rides and the teachers' strike). The questions asked of Lt. Tinney included "What was the scariest thing that happened to you?" and "Why do you want to have such a dangerous job?"

Being scared on the picket line, being scared about saving someone in a fire, being scared of getting beat up in Mississippi: all three interviewees were asked about their fears. It was a very valuable experience for students to realize that fear is not something only children feel, but that adults are in situations where they have to deal with their emotions. For students who may have felt a generational divide from adults, I think through the GNHLHA project they learned more about the common humanity we share.

LULA WHITE: "THE RIGHT THING TO DO"

In the future, students will hopefully be able to interview their parents, grandparents, and other relatives and neighbors about their work history. For practice, they had a chance to interview Dorothy Johnson (former Circuit Wise employee and president of her United Electrical Workers Local 299 chapter), Lt. Gary Tinney of the New Haven Fire Department, and I. I am a laundry worker, hospital worker and public school teacher.

Paula Panzarella accompanied the interviewees. We spoke about working conditions for children one hundred years ago; played a tape of a woman about her work in the garment industry in the 1920s—1940s and showed slides of child laborers from the early 20th century. Panzarella emphasized the laws that outlawed child labor.

Lt. Tinney talked about fire department hiring qualifications and overcoming fear of heights. He also explained that most of the department's work dealt with medical calls and community services.

I spoke about my first job at age sixteen as a summer employee at Majestic Laundry, where labor laws protected me from hazardous work like working in the boiler room or pressing hot laundry items.

I was also asked about my experiences as a Freedom Rider: "When you got to Mississippi and saw how scary it was, did you think you made a mistake and want to go back home?" I answered, "When you

decide that you have to do something, even if you're scared, you go ahead and do it because it's the right thing to do."

DOROTHY JOHNSON: "JOIN A UNION FIRST"

I will admit I was a little nervous when we had our first appointment at Worthington Hooker School on Whitney Ave. I am usually the one during the interviewing, but this time it would be different.

But the children greeted us with warmth and excitement. Paula Panzarella began with an introduction of my past work experience at Circuitwise Electronic Facility previously located in North Haven and my organizing the union and the strike that took place there.

The class was divided up into two groups. There was no need to worry about shyness. Hands went up quickly and the interviews were in full swing.

I must share some of the questions that were asked. Where was I born? Birmingham Alabama. How long did I live there? Only about one and a half years, then my family moved to CT for better opportunities.

What type of fun did I have growing up? They enjoyed these answers. Bowling, roller skating, heading to downtown New Haven to the local movie theatres, bicycle riding --and I was queen of double dutch jump rope in my neighborhood. The children could really relate to these activities.

Questions started moving toward my organizing a union at Circuitwise. I remember one student asking me if I was afraid during this process. "Yes," I responded. I thought I would get into serious trouble. They couldn't fully understand why we went out on strike if it wasn't about the money. Explaining took a little time.

Workers voted for the union and won but still the company felt that they could get rid of the union. Of course workers want better benefits and better working conditions, but we were seeking justice and dignity for everyone. I had to be truthful to the children about the strike. The union did a lot of preparation before the strike started, set up strike kitchens, gas vouchers, and energy funds to pay our bills.

The next questions were: How did we stay on strike for 17 months? Didn't you ever think about giving up?

I answered that it was very hard to be out for that long but if you believe in something which is right you fight to the finish. We also had a good core group of strikers who came everyday to the picket line.

When the interviews were winding down, they wanted to know what it was like to be President of my local union. I said that I found it to be a very valuable experience of helping others to gain the knowledge of educating or organizing and mobilizing others to speak up and stand up for what is right for workers.

Before ending the interviews one young fellow who was excited about the strike asked, "Can I go out on strike?" I responded swiftly, "You must join a union first."