Exam in Comparative Working Class History, Fall 2009

Choose one question from each of the following three sections and write an essay to answer it. Good luck!

A. Comparative:

1. Define the concept of working-class formation and apply it to two of the following societies – England, France, and the USA. Discuss the cultural and political dimensions of this process and suggest a chronological framework for each case. What role did gender play in this process? To what extent, if at all, is the USA exceptional?

2. What forms of identity were important to working men and women in the United States and Europe (using the example of one or more European countries)? What was “working class” identity and how did it intersect with other forms of identity, such as neighborhood, religion, gender, family, etc.? Which do you think was most important and why?

B. United States:

1. “Class conflict reached its high point in the United States toward the end of the nineteenth century. In contrast, the early twentieth century was characterized by an integration and a ‘taming’ of the working-class movement in both the political and industrial spheres between the turn of the century and the early 1920s. A lot of this taming of the movement can be explained in terms of the changing ethnic and racial composition of the working-class population. The state played little role.” Comment with the following categories in mind: union organization, political organization and voting behavior, strikes and other organized protest behavior.

2. To what extent and why were US workers able to build a strong labor movement and achieve some measure of political influence between the bleak situation of the early 1930s and the heady atmosphere of the post World War II period. Was this in some sense a social democratic labor movement and what happened to these aspirations between the end of World War II and the late fifties?

B. Europe:

1. Discuss the transition from “artisan” to “worker” in Europe from the mid-eighteenth century to the twentieth. How and why did this shift occur? What major debates have historians had about this shift and its effect on the working class? (use 2-3 European countries as examples)
2. How does the history of work and the working-class experience in Europe from 1750 to the twentieth century change if told from the perspective of women? To what extent was work and working-class identity defined and controlled by men in Europe and how did this change over time? What possibilities for a female work identity existed and how successful were women in defending their labor rights? (use 2-3 European countries as examples)