Comparative Working Class History, Fall 2011

Instructions: Choose 1 question from each of the three sections, comparative, U.S., and European. Write an essay to answer each, employing evidence from readings to support your generalizations. Relax and good luck.

A. Comparative/Global:

1. How did industrialization in Europe and the United States affect the gendered division of labor? Are the differences that emerge by looking at individual societies greater than common patterns? What accounts for the particularities and the common patterns? To what extent, if at all, was the USA exceptional in terms of labor’s responses to industrialization?

2. What new insights does a “global” perspective on labor provide that a more traditional national or comparative perspective does not? What standard categories and conclusions of labor history and its periodization are challenged by a global approach and which categories or meta-narratives seem to remain intact? Are there disadvantages to the global approach? (make sure to define what you mean by “global”)

B. US:

1. Compare and contrast two periods of class formation and militancy in the USA, the 1830s and the 1930s, with the following questions in mind: What evidence is there in each period of class (as opposed to occupational) consciousness? How was class consciousness reflected in the structure of union and political organizations, strike behavior, and what might be termed a “movement culture”? What role did a distinct working-class leadership and ideas play in each period? To what extent and why did each of these movements decline?

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?

C. Europe

1. Was class the most important determinant of identity and experience for working people in Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries? What other categories were salient and what is the most useful way to conceive of the inter-relation of class with other categories?

2. Discuss continuities and transformations from “artisan” to “worker” in at least two European countries from 1750 to 1914. What changed and what persisted in terms of identity, organization, experience or other factors during this time period? What have the chief debates been in the literature on this question and which viewpoint do you find most convincing?