GEOG/INTL 8355: LABOR, CLASS AND POLITICS
Fall Semester 2023
W 1:50 pm-3:50 pm

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OFFICE HOURS: by appointment.

COURSE DESCRIPTION: Within capitalist societies, the nature of economies and consequently the world of work have undergone a quite remarkable transformation in the past two to three decades. Many elements of work have changed as the workplace has seen the erosion for many of standard, assembly line mass production by full-time “blue-collar” workers and its replacement with “white-collar” service sector jobs and “flexible” production, performed by an increasingly insecure part-time and temporary workforce. At the same time, trade unions, which have been important class organizations representing and defending workers since at least the mid-19th century, have gone into eclipse in many places.

This seminar explores the nature of work, workers, and labor representation in advanced capitalist societies. Given the scope of the subject matter, the course is something of a sampler, offering an introduction to a large range of topics, with some left out and many more only briefly covered. The course starts by focusing upon how we think about studying matters of work, workers, and class and then proceeds to examine some historical and contemporary questions and issues concerning (amongst others) the nature of work, class and identity, power relations in the workplace, the potential for collective action, and efforts to develop a “green economy” and what this means for the nature of work and for those who do it. This includes questions of comparative industrial relations, globalization, power and work, the role of the state, and different ways in which working people are organizing to protect and further their interests.

The course is run as a seminar in which all of us will discuss and analyze a set of readings for each of the weeks. Students should come to class fully prepared to discuss the assigned readings.

There are five requirements for the class:
   i) attendance, completion of the reading assignments, and participation in class discussions;
   ii) for each class, you should prepare an approximately two-page summary of three important arguments/observations drawn from the week’s readings and offer an assessment of their validity. You will find this exercise particularly useful when you begin to prepare your written assignments. This will be graded as a S/U option;
   iii) submission of a research paper outline (approx. 2 pages) that is due in class on October 11;
   iv) submission of a research paper. It will be graded on an A-F scale;
   v) presentation of your research topic to the rest of the class.
**Research Paper:** This may be a more conceptual/theoretical piece or it may be a more empirical, though nevertheless conceptually situated, piece. The paper should be about 6,000 words in length, excluding bibliography. This should be considered a first draft of a paper that could be sent to a refereed academic journal for publication.

**Student presentation of research:** Each student will be expected to present a research paper to the rest of the class. You will each have 15 minutes to make your presentation (this is the time you will have at most conferences at which you will present, so it’s good practice!). This will be followed by a brief question and answer session. Presentations will take place on November 8 & 15.

**A note on Artificial Intelligence:** Artificial intelligence-based technologies, such as ChatGPT, must not be used to generate responses for student assignments. Use of artificial intelligence or word-mixing software to complete assignments is considered unauthorized assistance in this course.

**REQUIREMENTS:**
- Class Participation – 20%
- Outlines – 10%
- Final Paper – 70%

**READINGS**

**Week 1 (8/16): Introduction to the class, expectations, etc.**

**Week 2 (8/23): Thinking about Labor, Class, and Politics**

_This week’s readings get us to think about how we think about studying work and workers._


**Week 3 (8/30): Work, Class, Economy**
This week’s readings focus upon how we think about the objects of our analysis, such as “the economy” and “the labor process.”


Week 4 (9/6): Thinking Geographically About Workers

This week’s readings challenge us to think about work, workers, and the economy from an explicitly geographical perspective and to ponder how space is actively engaged with by social actors. In turn, this requires us to think about how spatiality and our need to engage with it transforms models of social understanding.


Week 5 (9/13): Theorizing Globalization

Globalization became a watchword in the 1990s. This week’s readings all consider how we theorize globalization and what this means for how we understand it.


Week 6 (9/20): Global Production Networks, Commodities, and Global Destruction Networks

A central element of globalization has been the growth of planetary-wide production networks. Equally, capital accumulation has increasingly come to rely upon the planned obsolescence of commodities, raising questions as to how they might shift from being “waste” to becoming inputs into new commodities as part of a “circular economy.” This week’s readings therefore focus upon understanding how commodities are put together and how they are taken apart in some of these space-transcending networks.


Week 7 (9/27): The i4.0 Revolution, Platform Capitalism, and the Rise of Gig Work

Recent years have seen the rise of what is called “platform capitalism” and the growth of gig work. Much of this has been presented in some literature as marking the emergence of a Fourth Industrial Revolution, one in which everything is becoming digitalized and such digitalization is reshaping the nature of production and consumption. This week’s readings explore some of the arguments concerning digitalization and automation in the economy and how we think about these developments.


**Week 8 (10/4): Neoliberalism, Contingent Workers, and the Laboring Body**

*This week’s readings examine the impact that neoliberalism has had upon the nature of labor markets and upon workers’ bodies.*


**Week 9 (10/11): Power at Work**

*This week’s readings consider questions of power in the workplace, especially how workers exercise that power and/or perhaps create alternative models of work organization.*


**Week 10 (10/18): Labor Agency and Working-Class Consciousness**
This week’s readings follow on from last week’s to explore how workers have creatively used space in the pursuit of their goals.


**Week 11 (10/25): Child Labor**
This week’s readings all focus upon issues of child labor, especially how it is conceptualized and how it relates as a practice to the broader economy.


**Week 12 (11/1): Labor and the “Green economy”**
Climate change is one of the most important challenges that we face today. Often, actions to limit environmental destruction have frequently been counterposed against narratives about job loss should these actions be acted upon. This week’s readings consider some of the ways in which workers and their organizations have attempted to undermine this narrative and some of the challenges they face in trying to implement policies designed to facilitate a transition to a “green(er) economy.”


Week 15 (11/29): Turn in your papers.