Consider the following recent headlines:

“The Age of Working-Class Discontent”

“The Death of Working-Class America”

“Who Will Speak for the American Working Class?”

“US Millennials Feel More Working Class Than Any Other Generation”

As these recent headlines suggest, the term “working class” has returned to our mainstream vocabulary following an extended hibernation. During the 2016 U. S. presidential election, the “white working class” in particular became our new and noteworthy electoral demographic. In the months since, commentators and pundits have continued their quest to explain how a billionaire businessman attracted such ardent support from a substantial segment of the nation’s white workers. At the same time, the racial and ethnic composition of the U. S working class has grown increasingly diverse, a development with its own set of social and political implications.

The re-emergence of the working class as a relevant term in our public discourse warrants extended examination. This course aims to enhance our understanding of the working-class experience through a careful assessment of the past that illuminates the present and allows us to reflect thoughtfully on what the future may portend.

Class can be an elusive concept, one that is variously defined on the basis of income, occupation, education, or cultural practice. Indeed, Americans have long prided themselves on creating a society where the working class represented a mere way station on the eventual path to the middle class and fulfillment of the American Dream. Over the past four decades, however, we have witnessed a hollowing out of the middle class due to a host of converging economic and political forces. This process has evoked widespread concern about the rise of inequality and fears that the U. S. is increasingly becoming a class society.
This course will examine the multiple forces that have shaped the working-class experience in the United States over the past century. We will consider the varied strategies and tactics used by workers to enhance their bargaining power and exert social influence with a special emphasis on the role of labor unions and other forms of worker organization. We will assess the impact of race, gender, ethnic, and religious identity on working-class consciousness and probe the complex considerations that frame our thinking about social class. At the same time, we will explore the evolution of business approaches to workplace governance in response to the actions of workers, the involvement of government and the legal system in shaping labor relations, and the competitive demands of both the domestic and world economies. And we will also delve into the ideological arguments that key social actors have made about the distribution of power and the exercise of authority in the workplace.

During the latter part of the course, we will assess how the advent of globalization and the transformation of work via technological change and changes in the employment relationship (e.g., the rise of the “gig economy” and what one observer has described as the “precariat”) have affected the working-class experience. With the shift from a manufacturing to a service economy, a surge of immigration, and the flow of jobs and capital overseas, workers face new if not wholly unfamiliar challenges in their efforts to fulfill the promise of the American Dream. And the workplace itself remains an arena where both personal aspiration and social tensions play out in complicated and volatile ways.

We will use a variety of primary and secondary sources to assist us in our exploration of the working-class experience, including historical monographs, fiction, film, iconography, and oral histories. These sources will enable us to consider the working class from a variety of perspectives and allow students to evaluate the relative merits of different kinds of historical materials.

**Class Requirements**

I. 4-6 page essay due January 25

II. 5-7 page essay due February 22

III. Brief Reaction Papers (to be submitted each Thursday, except for weeks when exams are due). These are 1-page reactions to our weekly readings in which you will describe the major themes or arguments you found most significant in that week’s assignment.

IV. Take-home final exam

**Graduate Students:** Graduate students taking the class will be required to write a 12-15 page paper on a subject determined in consultation with the instructor.
Academic Honesty

Academic honesty is essential to one’s personal integrity and the integrity of the class. Plagiarism or other forms of cheating are serious offenses and are unacceptable.

Class Format

Tuesday’s class will be largely done in a lecture style. However, I welcome your questions and comments and will often provide documents for us to review during class. A segment of Thursday’s class will be reserved specifically for discussion. Film clips and videos will be used extensively throughout the term. I strongly encourage your active participation in discussions and encourage you to ask questions during the lectures.

Grading

1. 4-6 page essay 20%
2. 5-7 page essay 25%
3. Final paper 40%
4. Class participation and reaction essays 15%

*Missing more than three classes will lower your participation grade by two letters.

*Late work will be penalized by one half-letter grade for each day it is overdue.

Graduate Students

Graduate students taking this course for credit as History 563 will write a 15-20 page paper due at the end of the term as their major class assignment. A prospectus outlining your topic will due by April 17. Graduate students will also meet separately with the instructor on several occasions during the term to discuss the weekly readings.

Readings

Course readings are available in a class packet that can be purchased at the UO Bookstore.

Books for the course are available at the UO Bookstore. They are:

• Thomas Bell: Out of This Furnace
• Katherine Archibald: Wartime Shipyard: A Study in Social Disunity
• Leon Fink: *The Maya of Morganton: Work and Community in the Nuevo New South*

All class materials will also be placed on reserve at the Knight Library.

**Class Schedule**

**Week 1: January 9, 11: Reform 1.0: The Progressive Era**


**Week 2: January 16, 18: From the Progressive Era to the New Deal**

Thomas Bell, *Out of This Furnace*, pp. 3-208.

**Week 3: January 23, 25: Reform 2.0: The Great Depression, New Deal, and the Rise of Industrial Unionism**

Thomas Bell, *Out of This Furnace*, pp. 209-413.

**First Essay Due: January 25**

**Week 4: January 30, February 1: The Waning of the New Deal and World War II**


**Week 5: February 6, 8: Mature Labor Relations and Cold War (I)**

Week 6: February 13, 15: Mature Labor Relations and Cold War (II)


Elizabeth Fones-Wolf, from *Selling Free Enterprise: The Business Assault on Labor and Liberalism*, pp. 189-254.

Week 7: February 20, 22: Reform 3.0: New Faces, New Challenges, New Circumstances: The Sixties and Beyond (I)


February 22: Second essay due

Week 8: February 27, March 1: New Faces, New Challenges, New Circumstances (II)

Leon Fink, *The Maya of Morganton*, pp. 1-103.

Week 9: March 6, 8: The Transformation of Work


Week 10: March 13, 15: Back to the Future: The Working-Class Experience in the Twenty-First Century
