

“German Labour History is Back” – Announcing the Foundation of the German Labour History Association

Stefan Berger
Ruhr-Universität Bochum



When the curtain closed on the first conference of the German Labour History Association (GLHA) that dealt with the topic “Freedom of Labour under Capitalism” and took place at the Institute for Social Movements, Ruhr-Universität Bochum, from February 6 to 8, 2020,¹ the sixty plus members that had been in attendance were agreed: “German Labour History is back.” This was a statement that was repeated on the banner of the GLHA

International Labor and Working-Class History
No. 97, Spring 2020, pp. 185–189

© International Labor and Working-Class History, Inc., 2020
doi:10.1017/S0147547920000095

proudly presenting its logo and summarizing its ambitions to unite all labor historians across German-speaking areas.

It may be surprising for anyone who knows Germany as the archetypal home of the association (*Verein*), where we find wonderful word creations such as “*Vereinsmeierei*,”² but the country never before had a labor history association. Whilst most labor history associations in the English-speaking world have their origins in the heydays of labor history during the 1960s and 1970s,³ German labor history also experienced a veritable boom in those decades, yet without ever creating an association.

Like labor history elsewhere it slipped into a deep crisis in the 1980s and 1990s. There were political and scholarly reasons for this: First, as Eric Hobsbawm noted in 1978, the “forward march of labour” had been “halted.”⁴ With the rise of neo-liberalism came a political disillusionment that affected also labor history. It had arguably thrived under a strong dose of political left-wing activism coming out of the heady 1960s—with many labor historians also being labor activists and some at least hoping to contribute to the socialist revolution that seemed, again at least for some, just around the corner. When these hopes were dashed, the history that went alongside it was less attractive to a new generation of historians. Next to political reasons there were, secondly, also scholarly ones: The rise of labor history had been part and parcel of the postwar rise of social and economic history in the western world. Strongly inspired either by Marxist or Weberian theories of modernization, its master narratives came under increasing criticism from poststructuralist theories resulting in the cultural turn of the historical sciences from the 1980s onward, which also brought attacks on the teleologies of labor history.

Labor history never entirely disappeared, but during those dark years for labor history, only a few institutions held up its banner. Foremost among them was the International Institute of Social History (IISG) in Amsterdam, under its academic director Marcel van der Linden. It was the only remaining superpower in labor history in those years. In Germany, in a much more limited way, the Institute for Social Movements at Ruhr-Universität Bochum, which had started life as Institute for the History of the German Labour Movement in the early 1970s, was also attempting to carry the torch.⁵ Together, with a handful of other institutions in different parts of the world, they form institutional continuities between the first wave of labor history and its current revival. During the 1980s and 1990s, many voices now championed comparative and transnational global labor history as a solution to the crisis. Indeed, especially the IISG became one of the foremost institutions representing the global turn in labor history that did contribute to the revival of its fortunes from the 2000s onward. This story of the globalization of labor history (at a time of intense globalization processes) already indicates that what returned was significantly different from what had been there in the 1960s and 1970s.

The new labor history was not only more global, it was also much less inspired by hopes of imminent political revolution. Whilst many labor historians have been and continue to be activists, and whilst this is a cherished tradition in labor history circles, its political ambitions have been more modest—at a time when labor across the world has been struggling to make its political voice heard. Hence, the new labor history was much less about the labor movement and much more about labor regimes and the worlds of work. Whilst the older labor history was more inward-looking, attempting to forge labor history as a separate sub-discipline of historical writing, the new labor history has been keen to link in with other sub-fields of history and emphasize its relevance for and synergies with a wide variety of other fields of historical writing.

This is true for cultural history, where the new labor history has explored issues of popular and class cultures and has ventured into the field of memory history to ask to what extent memory was used as a resource for labor movements. This is equally true for the history of the development of civil societies that has been booming since the 1990s. Here scholars have been asking, among other things, how labor contributed to this development. Questions around the connectedness of labor and the public sphere also led to studies on the relationship between workers and members of other social classes. The new labor history powerfully explored issues of intersectionality of class with issues of gender, race, and religion. Labor historians, for example, made a major contribution to the rediscovery of the German history of colonialism from the 1990s onward. Social movement studies that often excluded labor and focused almost entirely on the new social movements from the 1970s onward, benefitted from an expansion of the social movement concept that included labor movements. Histories of education have also benefitted from the work of labor historians exploring diverse issues of working-class education. So have histories of capitalism that thrived after the financial crisis of 2007, and that have highlighted the vulnerability of labor under capitalism in different parts of the world. The history of work has arguably been the central field on which a revival of labor history has taken place. In Germany the Re:Work Centre at Humboldt University Berlin, led by Andreas Eckert and Jürgen Kocka and in existence as a Käthe-Hamburger Kolleg of the German Ministry for Education and Research between 2007 and 2019, has been a decisive player in Germany for its decade-long existence.⁶ But no field of labor history has been more successful as that of global labor history—not the least as it coincided and in some ways championed and preceded the turn to global history that is a truly global phenomenon. Labor historians have played a pioneering role here.⁷

Whilst new intellectual agendas have played a vital part in reviving the fortunes of labor history, institutional reasons also were important. In Germany, the latter include the existence of powerful political foundations on the left of the political spectrum that have been willing to put their weight behind labor history. These include the Hans-Böckler Foundation, a foundation of the German trade union movement that fosters academic research that is in line

with the aims of trade unionism.⁸ It also incorporates the Friedrich-Ebert and Rosa-Luxemburg Foundations that are closely associated with the Social Democratic Party of Germany and Die Linke, respectively,⁹ both funding, among other things, academic research on the labor movements. Thus, the context in which the German Labour History Association was founded was the context of the biannual workshops on the history of worlds of work that are sponsored by the Hans-Böckler Foundation, in conjunction with the Friedrich-Ebert Foundation.¹⁰ It was here that a group of scholars came together to discuss and plan the foundation of the GLHA, and subsequently the additional support of the Rosa-Luxemburg Foundation has further helped to put the first congress of the association into practice.

The GLHA aims to promote research on the history of work, the labor movement, and left-wing social movements in global perspective among German-speaking scholars in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland.¹¹ It is also keen to promote educational work on labor history and help with the preservation and promotion of the documentation related to labor history. It invites not only scholars but all people with an interest in labor history, especially activists, to become members. Apart from organizing a biannual conference, it also promotes the work of PhD students and postgraduates, offering additional tutoring and advice by more seasoned scholars active in the association. A working group of PhD students, led by the students themselves, is active within the society. The association also awards a prize for the best PhD thesis in Labour History at its biannual conferences. The society that has just organized its first congress and awarded its first dissertation prize to Melina Teubner from the University of Berne for a study on cooks on slave ships and street vendors in Rio de Janeiro during the “second slavery” in the South Atlantic.¹²

The GLHA already has well over a hundred members, many of them PhD students and postdocs, indicating that younger scholars are turning to labor history again. The society expects further vigorous growth over the coming years. Overall then, the foundation of the GLHA has been the result of the conjuncture of a range of intellectual developments in the field of history writing with a range of institutional reasons that have encouraged its foundation. It is in favor of a very broad understanding of labor history and of championing a wide variety of theoretical and methodological approaches to labor history. Furthermore, it is keen to link up with a wide variety of different sub-fields of historical writing. Institutionally it looks forward to playing an active role in the European Labour History Network¹³ and the Global Labour History Network.¹⁴ And it reaches out to other Labour History associations and societies across the globe in the hope of many joint undertakings in the future. Rebuilding labor history as an integral part of the historical and social sciences and as a resource for labor and left-wing social movements is a common aim that I know is shared by many of those active in labor history around the world today.

NOTES

1. On the conference itself see <https://germanlabourhistory.wordpress.com/2020/02/21/437/> [accessed 5 April 2020].
2. Meaning: taking yourself too seriously as member of one or several associations.
3. The UK’s Society for the Study of Labour History was founded in 1960; the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History followed suit in 1961. In the United States, the New York Labor History Society was founded in 1976 and the North American Labor History Conference followed three years later, but interestingly, a national association, the Labor and Working Class History Association, was founded only in 1998. In Canada, the Committee of Canadian Labour History was founded in 1976.
4. Eric Hobsbawm, “The Forward March of Labour Halted,” in *Marxism Today*, September 1978, 279–86.
5. On the Institute for Social Movements at Ruhr-Universität Bochum, see <http://www.isb.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/isb/index.html> (accessed February 16, 2020).
6. On the role of the Kollegs in German higher education, see: <https://www.bmbf.de/de/kaete-hamburger-kollegs-5182.html> (accessed February 16, 2020).
7. For recent trends in German labor history that fit this pattern, see the special issue on German labor history published in *German History* 17: 3 (2019), guest edited by Stefan Berger.
8. <https://www.boeckler.de/36912.htm> (accessed February 16, 2020).
9. <https://www.fesdc.org/about/friedrich-ebert-stiftung/> and <https://www.rosalux.de/en/> (accessed February 16, 2020).
10. <https://socialhistoryportal.org/news/articles/309110> (accessed February 16, 2020).
11. See the website of the GLHA: <https://germanlabourhistory.wordpress.com/about/> (accessed February 16, 2020).
12. Melina Teubner, “A Arte de Cosinhar”: Sklavenschiffsköche, Ernährung und Diaspora im südlichen Atlantik (ca. 1800–1870), PhD, University of Cologne, 2018.
13. <https://socialhistoryportal.org/elhn> (accessed February 16, 2020).
14. <https://socialhistoryportal.org/glhn/about> (accessed February 16, 2020).