

## James Green, 1944-2016



James Green, one of the leading historians of U.S. labor, died at age 71 on June 23, 2016. Professor of History at the University of Massachusetts Boston and a core faculty member of the Harvard Trade Union Program for close to thirty years, Green created masterworks that are taking their place as classics in the field.

Over the decades, Green inspired organizers to understand what he called the power of the past in building labor and social movements. He spoke of uncovering the remarkable stories that fulfill what the novelist Wallace Stegner declared in *Angle of Repose* (1971) as “our need for a sense of history: our need to know what real injustice looked like.”

For labor leaders in the Harvard Trade Union Program, Green took them from the classroom out to the streets of Boston where he gave historical walking tours including places memorialized in his pamphlet *A Working Peoples' Heritage Trail: Guide to a Driving Tour of Labor History Sites in Boston*. He observed that “Boston is a city of monuments, but until 1987,

there were no statues dedicated to workers or union members.” So he loved to start his tours at the statue of the African American labor leader A. Philip Randolph. Dedicated at Back Bay Station in 1987, the Randolph statue later was adorned with a panel carrying “the kind of words rarely, if ever, seen on public monuments.” Beaming with joy, James Green would recite Randolph’s words on this panel, “The essence of trade unions is social uplift.”

James Green had many formative influences on his historical craft: the civil rights, student, and women’s movements. He spent part of 1975 and 1976 in Great Britain as a visiting lecturer in labor studies at the Centre for the Study of Social History at the University of Warwick. The Warwick Centre was then led by the legendary social historian E.P. Thompson, whom Green recalled as “a dramatic-looking white-haired figure” reminding him of “the English actor Peter O’Toole.”

In travels to Ruskin College in Oxford, Green discovered the History Workshop movement, which taught historians how to collect the stories of working men and women in the U.K. He brought the idea back home and started a Massachusetts History Workshop. This allowed Massachusetts workers to tell the stories of great upheavals such as the Bread and Roses strike of 1912 in Lawrence and the deindustrialization of the city of Lynn, once called “the shoe hub of the world” and a place where “160 factories hummed.”

In his early academic career, Green and his allies faced taunts from even some left historians such as Eugene Genovese, who denounced their mixture of scholarship with activism. Asserting that “being a good historian” is “full-time work,” Genovese accused those melding scholarship with activism of suffering from “neurotic indecision as a political principle.” Green had to endure his department chair at Brandeis University telling him during his first year as an assistant professor that E.P. Thompson, author of the classic *The Making of the English Working Class*, simply did not write “real history.”

Despite having to fend off such dismissive rebukes, Green soon received numerous awards for his outstanding scholarship and service to the labor movement: the Chancellor’s Award from the University of Massachusetts, the Bryant Spann Award of the Eugene Debs Foundation, the Sol Stetin Prize for Labor History from the Sidney Hillman Foundation, and the Labor and Working Class History Association’s Award for Distinguished Service. The Harvard Trade Union Program gave him Excellence in Teaching honors in 1988.

Regarded by many as the preeminent U.S. labor historian at the time of his death, Green accomplished several notable milestones in his historical work:

- in *The Devil is Here in These Hills* (2015), he recovered knowledge of what was the largest and most violent uprising since the American Civil War, the mine wars

of West Virginia in the early decades of the twentieth century. This had been largely erased from U.S. historical memory;

- in *Death in the Haymarket* (2006), he provided a historical synthesis showing the significance of this turning point of 1886 in U.S. labor history and then the slaughter of the Pullman strikers of 1894 in which thirty-four Chicago workers were killed and hundreds wounded;
- in *Grass-Roots Socialism: Radical Movements in the Southwest, 1895-1943* (1978), he broke from traditions highlighting the reactionary and retrograde features of Southern politics and instead demonstrated that there had been vigorous pro-farmer currents and labor movements in the Southwest. Though again largely forgotten, Oklahoma was indeed one of the peak places of support for labor organizer Eugene V. Debs for President. Green documented working class struggles in Louisiana and Texas in a paper for the premier journal of social history *Past and Present* (August 1973) called “The Brotherhood of Timber Workers, 1910-1913: A Radical Response to Industrial Capitalism in the Southern U.S.A.”

In his last article, “The Price of Life,” written for *Jacobin* magazine online (April 21, 2016), Green reminded Americans how often they had blanked out memories of the mass deaths of workers. In December 1907, an explosion at the Monongah mines in West Virginia resulted in “the corpses of nearly four hundred men and boys – mostly immigrants.” In 1906, 135 men and boys were killed in two explosions at the mines of “King Samuel” Dixon, a Yorkshire-born magnate who, despite many mine safety violations, escaped indictment. More than three thousand miners died in the West Virginia pits during the first twelve years of the twentieth century. West Virginia’s Governor G.W. Atkinson had reassured Americans at the turn of the century (January 9, 1901), “It is but the natural course of mining events that men should be injured and killed by accidents.” James Green’s scholarship stands as a powerful repudiation of the apologists for workplace deaths as just a “natural” feature of industrial civilization.

Green’s work as a public historian lives on in major film productions such as the documentary “The Mine Wars,” the opening film for “The American Experience” on PBS in 2016. His greatest legacy is restoring the place of worker struggles in the expansion of American freedom.

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