

# Unions & the City

UEP 270

Fall 2024

Prof. Claire Cahen

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T/R: 1:30-2:55 pm

Room: Treehouse N

Office Hours: Tues/  
Thurs 3-5 pm (UEPI  
307)



Women worker “sit down strikes” of the 1930s. Women were a tiny minority in unions at the time, which is no longer true today.

## Course Description and Objectives

In this course, we explore the intersection of labor organizing and urban politics.

You will learn what labor organizing is; who works in cities; and study the myriad challenges that workers in cities face, including the loss of “good jobs” due to the gig economy, automation, and artificial intelligence; the transition from an extractive to a green economy; and a cost-of-living crisis that makes even union jobs seem underpaid and insecure. You will develop ways of thinking aspirationally about what 21st century jobs in cities could look like. You will spend significant time out of the classroom and in “the

field.” To practice thinking and acting like a policymaker, union organizer, and urban planner, you will visit an oil refinery and talk to union workers on the plant; shadow and help out street vendors and gig workers; and hear from union organizers and corporate leaders about what they think of the urban economy. You will chart solutions for a more sustainable and equitable urban future.

We will explore questions such as: What makes a job “good”? What explains the bifurcation of our cities into richer and poorer? What does the future of urban work look like, given the pace of technological change and the climate and

affordability crisis? How do unions successfully organize the workers in their ranks, given that they don’t get to choose their members?

### What’s in this syllabus?

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### required texts

1. MacDonald, I. 2017. *Unions and the City: Negotiating Urban Change*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
2. All other readings on Canvas.

### How to take this course

It's not what you "get" in this course, it's how deep you go. Yes, some models project the future of work and help break down urban economic problems into more manageable chunks. But relying on formulas may also get in the way of thinking more aspirationally about a better future. This class is about organizing for a social otherwise. You can think of this course as operating on three levels. Imagine you are standing at the city's edge. The course is the city. Enter and go as deep as you dare...

### Passersby

You need a surface-level knowledge of how cities function, who works in them, the problems that workers face and potential solutions. You can follow along as workers take you through the city and not feel lost.

"Passersby" assume that the course texts, fieldwork, and professor are mutually reinforcing, telling basically the same story. Passersby are mainly concerned with describing the WHAT of the world of work and labor organizing in cities.

### Saunterers

You have a grasp of the basics and are willing to risk getting lost. You don't just notice workers in the city: you ask questions and do your own research. You want to know HOW & WHY things are the way they are.

"Saunterers" are attuned to power relations and inequality; they respectfully challenge policy orthodoxy through lively debate. They never stop asking questions.

### Movers & Shakers

You want to go deeper into city life. You want to talk to more workers and see more industries-in-action.

You are well aware that both cities and work are rapidly changing. You see unexplored challenges and opportunities ahead.

"Movers & shakers" don't take any of the course's structure or content as natural or inevitable. They see (and then fill) the course's gaps. They are curious, passionate, and concerned with WHY worker-led organizing matters for cities and indeed for freedom.

## COURSE REQUIREMENTS

This course involves reading, writing, fieldwork, and group discussion and role plays.

**Participation:** You will be expected to absorb the course material and respond thoughtfully and critically to it in classroom discussion and role plays. You will sometimes be asked to conduct fieldwork (e.g. have a conversation with workers) and report back in class.

Active participation is critically important to this course. Role playing scenarios will require you to try on different hats—that of the union organizer, the "left-behind-worker," and the elected official. This means you will have to practice new skills and modes of speaking/persuading. Please do not be intimidated. We are all learning and will support one another. However, note that silent attendance will not earn you full credit.

This is a small, discussion-based seminar. I will occasionally use slides and post these to Canvas. But, unless otherwise noted, you will not need laptops, tablets, or smartphones to take notes. Please use pen and paper. Please refrain from using technology in class. It is distracting and undermines the quality of discussion. The only exception is on days where we will be conducting online research in class. I will let you know when research sessions are scheduled so that you can bring internet-connected devices that day.

### Short Papers and Assignments:

Rather than a few long assignments, this class asks you to turn in seven short papers throughout the semester. These will be no more than 2 pages. You may take one-five day extension on any of these papers without penalty.

The point of these assignments is to  
1) prepare for class discussions; 2)

practice research and writing skills. The first of these assignments will ask you to take notes on the *9/10 presidential debate*. How is each candidate talking about workers, cities, and unions? Are their statements accurate? Why or why not? The second assignment will tackle the question of *colleges as major employers and economic engines*. You will observe workers for 1 hour in any unit of the campus (e.g. the Green Bean, the dining halls, the quad) and turn in your fieldnotes. Your third paper will be for the unit on the *petroeconomy*. You will take a stance on Mitchell's contrarian argument that oil is democracy, as it has existed in "modern times." Your fourth paper will be for our class on "what counts as work." You will reflect on who gets to define work and skill and who does not. You will reflect on whether things have changed since the radical feminist moment of the 70s/ 80s, when women were calling for *wages for housework*. For a fifth paper on

*Platform Capitalism*, you will write fieldnotes comparing and contrasting your observations shadowing and talking to 1) street vendors; 2) delivery drivers working for a big tech platform. What were their respective workloads? How about the overall feel on the job? How did each relate to the city? You will also turn in a map of routes and miles traveled by both. During advising week, you will pick four classes that you are interested in taking next semester and write a short blurb on what interests you about each class. This will help us answer the question, *in the new economy, what is a college degree for?* Finally, in a seventh paper on violence at work and in the world, you will consider Gage's argument that casting immigrants as terrorists is a long American tradition, one closely associated with anti-communism. Do you see parallels between what Gage is discussing in *The Day Wall Street Exploded* and contemporary political discourse? What has changed? What has stayed the same? How have immigrant workers fought back? Assignment prompts and due dates are found on Canvas.

### Final Paper: (due 12/6)

You will work in pairs or in three's on one of two assignments:

- 1) Read this platform worker manifesto: <https://www.workerinfoexchange.org/>

manifesto. Using it as an example, write your own manifesto on the future of urban work. You can make this manifesto broad and treat multiple issues that we have discussed in class, including the green transition, women and the workplace, and the gig economy. Or you can zoom in on one issue. Establish five priorities to fix a broken urban economy and back your recommendations with research and credible sources (you can and should draw from course material). You will publish this manifesto on a Wordpress site. More instructions to come.

- 2) Read Senator Booker's letter to the EPA on the future of plastics: [https://www.booker.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/letter\\_to\\_epa\\_on\\_plastic\\_crisis\\_actions1.pdf](https://www.booker.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/letter_to_epa_on_plastic_crisis_actions1.pdf). Using it as an example, write a letter to Occidental College's Hameetman Career Center. This letter should highlight what you believe all college students should know about the future of urban work. Provide facts and background about what you see as the major challenges and opportunities. Offer recommendations as to how the Career Center can best prepare Oxy grads for the job market. More instructions to come.



**The University of Pittsburgh Medical Center tower. The Medical Center is Pittsburgh's economic powerhouse and major employer. Yet, in a 2013 legal dispute, the Center claimed that because its workers technically were employed in subsidiary companies, it "had no employees." How is that no one is technically employed at a place where 85,000 people go to work every day?**

### Grading

Participation 20%

Bonus: 2%

Papers 70%

Final Paper 10%

A: 93-100; A-: 90-93; B+: 87-90;  
B: 83-87; B-: 80-83; C+: 77-80;  
C: 73-77; C-: 70-73; D+: 67-70;  
D: 60-67; F: 0-60.



## Course Schedule

Date	Topic	Readings/ Viewings	Short Paper
T 8/27	Introduction		
R 8/29	What are unions? What is work? What defines good jobs/ bad jobs?	Yates, <i>Why Unions Matter</i> Marx, <i>The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts</i> Braverman, <i>Labor and Monopoly Capital</i>	
T 9/3	Managing workers at home and on the job	Hoschchild, <i>Managed Heart</i> , Ch6 Marwick, <i>Status Update</i> , Chapter 4	
R 9/5	Workers, Unions, and Elections	Vance, <i>Hillbilly Elegy</i> NYT, Will Biden Cede White Working Class?	
T 9/10	Workers, Unions, and Elections	Debate Watch	Yes (due next day)
R 9/12	Colleges as workplaces and economic engines	Baldwin, <i>Ivory Tower</i> Winant, <i>The Next Shift</i>	
T 9/17	Colleges as workplaces and economic engines	Blogs on Highland Park	Yes
R 9/19	The Green Transition: The Petro-Economy	<i>Carbon Democracy</i> , Intro & Ch 1	
T 9/24	The Green Transition: Field Visit	<i>Carbon Democracy</i> , Conclusion	Yes
R 9/26	The Green Transition	<i>California High Road</i> Complexity of workers	
T 10/1	What counts as work? What counts as skill?	<i>Wages against Housework</i> Born in Flames	Yes
R 10/3	Teacher Unionism & the City	<i>When We Fight</i> (Documentary) Shelton, <i>Teacher Strike!</i> , Ch 2	
T 10/8	Gig Work and Platform Capitalism: Food Service	vanDoorn & Badger, <i>Platform Capitalism</i> Wolf, <i>The City is Ours</i>	
R 10/10	Gig Work and Platform Capitalism: Food Service	Field Visit Wolf, <i>Pandemic Revolt</i>	
T 10/15	Fall Break	No Class	
R 10/17	Gig Work and Platform Capitalism: Food Service	Rojas, <i>The Enacted Environment</i>	Yes

Cont'd next page

## COURSE LEARNING OUTCOMES

Upon successfully completing this course, students will be able to:

1. Highlight the key policy challenges of work in U.S. cities.
2. Explain how workers make change, how they have imagined freedom, and how they have transformed U.S. society.
3. Think about how race, nationality, and gender have shaped, and been shaped by, work.
4. Understand how firms construct the labor process and how this process, in turn, shapes workers' experiences of their jobs, collective action, and city life.
5. Write and speak succinctly and persuasively about the future of work in a range of formats

Date	Topic	Readings/ Viewings	Short Papers
T 10/22	Advising Week: What's the purpose of a college education?	<i>Reskilling America</i> , Intro & Ch2	Yes
R 10/24	Gig Work and Platform Capitalism: Hollywood	<i>Unions and the City</i> , Ch 3	
T 10/29	Election Endorsement Debate	Candidate Platforms	
R 10/31	The Future of Labor: A Panel	Winant, Who works for the workers?	
T 11/5	Knowledge Work and the Tech and Financial Booms	Ho, <i>Liquidated</i>	
R 11/7	Union Negotiations: A Role Play	<i>Rules to Win By</i> , A flood of first contracts	
T 11/12	Violence at work, violence in the world	Gage, <i>The Day Wall Street Exploded</i>	Yes
R 11/14	The Digital Revolution: Liberation or Damnation?	Benjamin, <i>Race after Technology</i> Doctorow, <i>The Internet Con</i>	
T 11/19	An Affordability Crisis	Durand, <i>The End of Financial Hegemony</i>	
R 11/21	Workshop		
T 11/26	Presentations		

### Course Format

The class is structured as a discussion- and practice-based seminar. I encourage you to bring your whole self to class. Memories, feelings, hunches, & direct observations are all welcome in this course. Your attendance is key—and I hope you will be physically and mentally present. However, life issues arise unexpectedly. You may miss up to three classes without penalty.

UEP 270 is both reading- and fieldwork-intensive. It is a 4-unit course. On average, you should expect to spend 12hrs/ week on this course. Please note that skimming readings will not be enough to do well in the class: make sure to give yourself the time to read closely and take notes.

At the start of every class, I will leave the floor open for you to: 1) make brief announcements; 2) for 2 bonus points, share with the class a picture you have taken of something you saw in L.A. that represents one of the topics we are discussing.



Silicon Valley has changed all major U.S. cities. What are the tradeoffs of big-tech disruption?

### Submission Guidelines

Please submit all assignments via Canvas.

# COURSE POLICIES

## Academic Integrity

Academic Integrity is a shared community value. It is built around trust and respect between members of the Occidental Community, and embodies a commitment to honesty and integrity in every aspect of one's academic life.

All members of the Occidental community are committed to uphold the highest degree of academic integrity. Unless stipulated otherwise, the academic work done for all assignments is expected to be the student's own, and students give proper credit to the ideas and work of others.

Signing the Academic Integrity Commitment at matriculation and at the beginning of every semester represents a student's affirmation to uphold the shared values of honesty and integrity. When signing the Integrity Commitment associated with work in a course, students are affirming that they have not cheated, plagiarized, fabricated, or falsified information; nor assisted others in these actions.

Please familiarize yourself with the college's policies regarding academic honesty and plagiarism. We take these issues very seriously and so should you. Students are expected to comply with the Student Handbook, in particular the section on [Academic Ethics](#) and [Academic Misconduct](#).

I recognize that AI and ChatGPT are complicating issues of academic integrity. You may use ChatGPT or other AI tools to help you write your assignments. However, you should know that by design AI works to create an average of all the information and prose styles that it can scan through. This means that the prose it will generate will be just that: average. Moreover, early studies of ChatGPT show that, when asked questions that require nuance, it equivocates. It is also frequently factually inaccurate and hallucinates citations. I, therefore,

recommend that if you use AI, you use it as a starting point, not a finished product. I also encourage you to make sure that the ideas you defend are ones you believe in and can substantiate, and not something AI has come up with as an average of all statements on the internet, which, as well know, can be a pretty grimy, problematic place. Finally, I require that if you use ChatGPT you 1) cite it; 2) write a one-page reflection on the process. Please fact-check what it states and iterate upon answers to make sure they are in your own voice. For more on information literacy and AI please see [here](#). The field is rapidly changing and we encourage you to revisit and continue this conversation throughout the semester.

## Civil Rights & Title IX Statement

Based on the federal [Title IX](#) law, in the event that you choose to write or speak about having experienced sexual or interpersonal violence, including sexual assault, dating violence, domestic violence, stalking, sexual exploitation or any other form of sexual harassment, as a designated Responsible Employee, we must notify the Title IX Office. They will contact you to let you know about accommodations and support services at Oxy and reporting options both on and off-campus. If you do not want the Title IX Office notified, instead of disclosing this information to your instructor, either through conversation or a class assignment, you can speak confidentially with the following people on campus:

- Oxy's Survivor Advocate, Project SAFE ([survivoradvocate@oxy.edu](mailto:survivoradvocate@oxy.edu))
- Emmons Counseling (For appointments, call: 323-259-2657)
- Rev. Dr. Susan Young, Office of Religious and Spiritual Life ([young@oxy.edu](mailto:young@oxy.edu))
- Oxy 24/7 Confidential Hotline (323-341-4141)

The college's civil rights policies, along with additional resources, can be found at: <http://www.oxy.edu/sexual-respect-title-ix/policies-procedures>. If you would like to contact the Title IX Office directly, you can email Title IX Coordinator Alexandra Fulcher at [afulcher@oxy.edu](mailto:afulcher@oxy.edu) or call 323-259-1338.

## Accommodations for Reasons of Faith and Conscience

Consistent with Occidental College's commitment to creating an academic community that is respectful of and welcoming to persons of differing backgrounds, we believe that students should be excused from class for reasons of faith and conscience without academic consequence. While it is not feasible to schedule coursework around all days of conviction for a class as a whole, faculty will honor requests from individual students to reschedule coursework, to be absent from classes that conflict with the identified days.

Information about this process is available on the ORSL website: <https://www.oxy.edu/office-religious-spiritual-life>

## Students with Disabilities/Learning Differences

All academic and housing accommodation requests are managed by Disability Services & Student Support (DSSS). It is a student's responsibility to contact DSSS if they need accommodations or additional support. Any student who has, or thinks, they may have a physical, learning, or psychological disability may contact Disability Services at [accessibility@oxy.edu](mailto:accessibility@oxy.edu) to learn about available services and support. More information is available at <http://www.oxy.edu/disability-services>.

If you need accommodations, you have a right to have these met. Any student requiring an accommodation should notify us in the first weeks of the course. If you need accommodations, you have a right to have these met. Please do not hesitate to contact us if learning in this class is excluding you in any way. Students with documented disabilities and learning differences who are registered with Disability Services will need to present their accommodation letter to the instructors at the beginning of the semester or as soon as possible thereafter.

### **Late Work Policy**

Timely submission of assignments is important for UEP 270. That said, I understand that unwelcome events crop up without warning, and every student in this course is automatically granted a 5-day, penalty-free extension on one assignment. All other late work will be marked down one letter grade (e.g., from B to B-) for each 24-hr period that it is late. If you find yourself struggling to keep up with your work and assignments, please communicate with me as soon as possible and we will work out a plan.

### **Academic Support Services**

The College has a wide range of [Student Academic Support Resources](#). If you'd like to take advantage of the College's Academic Coaching resource, which offers one-on-one sessions focused on supporting your time management skills, online learning strategies, and other study skills, you may schedule an academic coaching meeting by sending an email to [academiccoaching@oxy.edu](mailto:academiccoaching@oxy.edu). Share what you'd like to work on, and an academic coach will schedule an appointment with you within a few days.

The Library's Teaching, Learning, and Research Support (TLRS) offers [library research consultations](#). It also offers offer peer-to-peer support for learning technologies in the Critical Making Studio on the ground floor of the library (contact [dcoaguila@oxy.edu](mailto:dcoaguila@oxy.edu) for more information).

Peer Tutors are available to assist students on [discipline-specific peer tutoring for coursework](#), and content review and study skills support in a variety of academic departments. Information about tutoring for all subject, including languages, can be found at: <https://www.oxy.edu/academics/student-success/peer-learning>

The Writing Center offers opportunities to work on all forms of writing for any class or other writing tasks such as personal statements, proposals, senior comprehensives, etc. We offer peer-to-peer consultations with knowledgeable Writing Advisers and sessions with Faculty Writing Specialists. For Fall 2023, most appointments will be synchronous in-person sessions, with some availability for Zoom virtual meetings and asynchronous feedback. The Writing Center is located on the ground floor of the Academic Commons. See the [Writing Center website](#) for more information about our hours and how to sign up for appointments. Please contact the Writing Center Director, Prof. Prebel ([jprebel@oxy.edu](mailto:jprebel@oxy.edu); x1307) for more information on how the Writing Center can work with you.