



Political Economy and Labor

Spring 2026

Lecture Times: Monday, Wednesday, Friday 1:25-2:15pm

Machmer Hall E-37

4 credits

Instructor: Sara Gia Trongone saratrongone@umass.edu (she/her)

Office Hours: Mondays and Wednesdays 12:00-1:00pm or by appointment

Office Location: 818 Thompson Hall

Course Overview

Course Description: What is the current state of the U.S. economy, and how did we get here? How do our feelings about work, investments, and consumption affect U.S. politics and social movements? This class will encourage you to develop your own answers to these questions. All are welcome! No prior background in or exposure to these concepts is needed; I encourage students to bring other disciplinary perspectives or interests to bear on class discussion and reflective assignments.

Student Learning Objectives: Labor Studies 290E is a four (4) credit course designed to sharpen students' critical thinking and evaluation skills, broaden their experiences, and prepare them for community engagement, informed citizenship, and lifelong learning. This course meets General Education goals through the following student learning objectives:

- Foster critical reflection about society (including scrutinizing “the economy” as a set of social relationships);
- Assess the health and trajectory of the American economy from the lens of its workforce, rooted in empirical research and core theoretical texts;
- Analyze how race, class, and gender structure work and labor markets; and
- Deepen oral and written communication skills, including practicing journalistic/oral history interviews.

Expectations & Assignments

Late Work & Informal Accommodations: If you are facing mental health challenges, experiencing periods of unexpected illness or other life events that may affect your performance in the course, I encourage you to contact me. I want everyone to have a positive learning experience and are here to make a plan with you that accommodates your needs.

I understand that some of you are juggling multiple responsibilities and priorities (e.g. paid work, unpaid work caring for family and loved ones, community organizing commitments and/or internships). All students may use “Space to Breathe Pass”¹ for **one** assignment if things get tough and you do not think you will be able to turn in an assignment on time. Please email me and your TA no later than the day of

¹ Thanks to Jennifer Gaddis for this wonderful idea

the deadline for a given assignment with the subject line “Space to Breathe” and the name of the assignment. **You will have a 2-day extension for that assignment (due by 11:59pm on the second calendar day after the listed due date), no questions asked.** Unfortunately, due to grading deadlines, you cannot use the Space to Breathe Pass for the in-person final exam or final assignment.

Formal Accommodations: The University of Massachusetts Amherst is committed to providing an equal educational opportunity for all students. If you have a documented physical, psychological, or learning disability on file with Disability Services (DS), you may be eligible for reasonable academic accommodations to help you succeed in this course. If you have a documented disability that requires an accommodation, please notify us within the first two weeks of the semester so that we may make appropriate arrangements. For further information, please visit Disability Services (<https://www.umass.edu/disability/>)

Course Materials: All readings for this course are available on the Canvas course page and linked to Perusall, a free collaborative digital reader and annotation tool, which we will use for reading annotations (see description below). There is no need to purchase any texts. Please see the weekly course schedule on page 5 for a complete list of readings.

How Grades Are Assigned: Your final semester grade will be determined using a weighted average of the following required elements of the course:

Assignment	Percentage of Final Grade
Perusall Reading Annotations	20%
Oral History Project <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Oral History Interview #1 = (5%) ● Oral History Interview #2 = (5%) ● Short Reflective Essay = (25%) 	35%
Final Exam OR Creative Project	35%
Participation & Attendance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Leading Two Discussions = (5%) ● Attendance & Engagement = (5%) 	10%

See below for brief descriptions of each assignment. Additional details can be found on Canvas under the “Assignments” tab.

1. **Perusall Reading Annotations (20%):** Students are expected to post comments or questions on course readings and interact with their classmates on Perusall, a free collaborative digital reader and annotation tool.
 - **Please post two (2) thoughtful comments or questions on all course readings before class at 12:00 PM.** Students may receive partial credit for annotations made by 11:59 PM on the evening of class. **You have three (3) free skips to use as you wish.**
 - Please try not to make both annotations on the same page.
 - We will do a trial run on the first day we have a reading assignment so that students can see how it works. The first annotation scores will not count.
 - *Perusall annotations will end on the third-to-last week of class (April 24th) to give you extra space to deal with the stress of the end of the semester.*
 - *As long as you make a good-faith effort to engage with the text and say something (even something like "I don't understand what this passage is saying"), you will receive full credit.*

Why are we doing this? Learning is especially powerful when it's done collaboratively. Perusal functions like a shared Google Doc: You can see your classmates' comments and questions in real time and engage with each other. Hopefully this makes the readings feel more like living documents. Providing comments and questions before class also helps me figure out what we should spend additional time on in class. Where are people feeling stuck? What's confusing? If you tell me in an annotation that a particular paragraph was difficult or that you disagreed with it, that's really useful information for me! Let's try this out for a few weeks. If everyone hates it, the class can collectively bargain with me to reallocate this portion of the grade to another activity/assignment.

2. **Oral History Project (35%):** Students will conduct **two oral history interviews** with two different people working in the same industry or occupation and ask them a series of questions about their jobs, their perceptions of the economy, and how their work has changed over time. Students may interview friends or family members; interviewees may be actively employed or retired, as long as at least one interviewee has been employed in their job (or a similar one) for at least one year. This assignment will be broken into several parts, to be completed during the first half of the semester:
 - Students will submit a draft questionnaire before completing their first oral history interview. There will be separate due dates for each interview, by which time the interview must be completed via Zoom, phone, or in-person. Students must then **upload the audio recording and a clean transcript of their interview.** (We will discuss how to do this in class.)
 - After both interviews are complete, **students will write a short reflective essay (6-8 pages)** connecting core interview themes to course content.

Why are we doing this? Interviewing people is a skill used in a number of different professions, from journalism to market research. If you're pursuing a certificate in labor studies, it's important to build comfort with talking to people about their jobs and encouraging them to reflect on how power is exercised in the workplace and what they think they deserve, however awkward it might seem at first. This forms the backbone of any organizing conversation.

3. **Final Exam OR Creative Final Project (35%):** For the final assignment, students may choose to **either a) sit for an in-person written exam during the scheduled exam period or b) propose a creative project** (e.g. a podcast, educational zine, curricula for a workshop geared towards high school students, etc.) offering your analysis of the present moment, drawing on readings and concepts from the course. Please consult with me or your TA if you would like to pursue this alternative option. We will ask you to submit a project plan by no later than April 17th. Students who do not submit a project plan by this date should expect to sit for the in-person final exam.

Why are we doing this? The default option for this course is a traditional written final exam. If you're not someone who gravitates towards creative projects of any kind and the idea of having to record your own voice (or do something else like design a zine, etc.) makes you want to drop the course and run away, don't despair! Why think about pursuing a creative final project? (1) A staggering number of people now rely on podcasts, zines, and social media for news and analysis. This is your chance to contribute to that educational ecosystem! (2) If you are conducting local organizing work, I encourage you to pursue a creative final project that connects your work to themes in the course and produces something tangible for your RSO/organization. I would love to talk to you about this in office hours.

4. **Participation and Attendance (10%):** This class is designed to be discussion based and responsive to students' interests. Participation and attendance are key to success in this class. If you know you will be late or absent for a class, please email us.
 - **Students will generate 3 discussion questions and facilitate discussion twice during the semester.** Students should be expected to sustain discussion for 10-15 mins. We will circulate a sign-up sheet with dates and topics on the first day of class.

- **You may miss up to three (3) classes** over the course of the semester without any penalty to your participation grade. (However, you may still need to complete a reading annotation for days you miss.) If you are having a hard time getting to class, please reach out to us for additional support.

Why are we doing this? Leading discussion is your chance to shape what we talk about in the classroom. What resonates with you? What are the real-world implications of a particular theory or concept? Depending on your career goals, you can also think of this as an opportunity to practice facilitating and running a meeting.

Grade Scale

96-100- A+
93-95- A
90-92- A-
86-89- B+
83-85- B
80-82- B-
76-79- C+
73-75- C
70-72- C-
66-69- D+
60-65- D
Below 60- F

Resources and Policies

Support with Writing: The Writing Center is located in the library and provides free support on any writing you do while at UMass. Trained tutors are available to work with you as you plan, draft, and revise your writing. For hours and info about making appointments, see www.umass.edu/writingcenter.

Academic Honesty: Since the integrity of the academic enterprise of any institution of higher education requires honesty in scholarship and research, academic honesty is required of all students at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Academic dishonesty is prohibited in all programs of the University. Academic dishonesty includes but is not limited to: cheating, fabrication, plagiarism, and facilitating dishonesty. Appropriate sanctions may be imposed on any student who has committed an act of academic dishonesty. Instructors should take reasonable steps to address academic misconduct. Any person who has reason to believe that a student has committed academic dishonesty should bring such information to the attention of the appropriate course instructor as soon as possible. Instances of academic dishonesty not related to a specific course should be brought to the attention of the appropriate department Head or Chair. Since students are expected to be familiar with this policy and the commonly accepted standards of academic integrity, ignorance of such standards is not normally sufficient evidence of lack of intent (http://www.umass.edu/dean_students/codeofconduct/acadhonesty/).

Title IX Statement: In accordance with Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 that prohibits gender-based discrimination in educational settings that receive federal funds, the University of Massachusetts Amherst is committed to providing a safe learning environment for all students, free from all forms of discrimination, including sexual assault, sexual harassment, domestic violence, dating violence, stalking, and retaliation. This includes interactions in person or online through digital platforms and social media. Title IX also protects against discrimination on the basis of pregnancy, childbirth, false pregnancy, miscarriage, abortion, or related conditions, including recovery. There are resources here on campus to support you. A summary of the available Title IX resources (confidential and non-confidential) can be found at the following link: <https://www.umass.edu/titleix/resources>. You do not need to make a formal report to access them. If you need immediate support, you are not alone.

Free and confidential support is available 24 hours a day / 7 days a week / 365 days a year at the SASA Hotline 413-545-0800.

AI Tools: This course requires that all work submitted by students will be generated by the students themselves, working individually or in groups. Students should not have another person/entity do the writing of any substantive portion of an assignment for them, which includes hiring a person or a company to write assignments and using artificial intelligence tools like ChatGPT. For this course, ChatGPT is not permitted for use, unless indicated for a particular assignment by the instructor; using AI unless specifically permitted will be a violation of the Academic Honesty Policy. In any case where use of AI tools is allowed, to adhere to our scholarly values, students must describe how the AI tool was used and clearly attribute any text generated by it (e.g., AI-generated text appears in a different colored font, quoted directly in the text, or use an in-text parenthetical citation).

Important Dates:

- **Friday, February 20th at 11:59 PM** - Oral History Question Guide Due
- **Friday, March 6th at 11:59 PM** - Oral History #1 Due
- **Friday, March 27th at 11:59 PM** - Oral History #2 Due
- **Friday, April 10th at 11:59 PM** - Short Reflective Essay Due

(For those pursuing final projects): **Friday, April 17th at 11:59 PM** - Project Plan Due

- **Week of May 11th** - In-class Final or Final Project Due by Scheduled Exam Date



Weekly Schedule

(subject to change, based on the class's needs and interests)

PART 1: THE CONTEMPORARY U.S. ECONOMY (Where Are We?)

Week 1 – Introduction

January 30th – Syllabus review & course introduction

Week 2 – Popular Perceptions & The Rise of Service Work

February 2nd – Is the U.S. Economy Broken?

- Jaffe, Sarah. 2021. *Work Won't Love You Back*. Hatchette Books (pp. 1-7; bottom of 10-top of 12)
- Video on David Graeber's book "Bulls**it Jobs" <https://davidgraeber.org/videos/6168/>
These are both polemics against modern work that are meant to be provocative. Whether or not you agree with their analyses, try to understand the arguments they're making and how they fit together—or contradict each other.

Perusall Annotation Trial Period

Last day to add or drop a course, February 4

February 4th – Is the U.S. Economy Broken? (Part II)

- Gordon, Robert J. 2017. *The Rise and Fall of American Growth*. Princeton University Press (pp. 1-6; 18-23; and 641-644)

Robert Gordon is considered a “mainstream” macroeconomist. Skim the final pages of the postscript to get a sense of his policy recommendations for future economic growth.

Graded Perusall Annotations Begin

February 6th - Deindustrialization & Service Work

- Winant, Gabriel. 2021. *The Next Shift*. Harvard University Press (pp. 1-7; 16-bottom of 19)

PART 2: FORCES SHAPING CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL ECONOMY (How Did We Get Here?)

Week 3 – Globalization: Definitions & Case Studies

February 9th – Definitions & Challenges

- Sparke, Matthew. 2012. *Introducing Globalization*. Wiley Blackwell (pp. 1-17)

February 11th – Case Study (Agriculture in Baja California, Mexico)

- Zlolniski, Christian. 2019. *Made in Baja*. University of California Press (pp. 3-14; skim the rest of the chapter to see how the author navigated research ethics and was able to build trust with farmworkers)

February 13th – Case Study (Agriculture in Baja California, Mexico)

- Zlolniski, Christian. 2019. *Made in Baja*. University of California Press (selections from Ch 1 & 2, 17 pages total)

Week 4 – Globalization Case Studies contd.

February 16th – No Class: Presidents’ Day

February 18th – Case Study (Domestic Work)

- Salazar Parreñas, Rhacel. 2015. *Servants of Globalization*. Stanford University Press (pp. 1-4; 28-33; 38-top of 44)

February 19th (University follows a Monday class schedule) – Case Study (Domestic Work)

- Salazar Parreñas, Rhacel 2015. *Servants of Globalization*. Stanford University Press (bottom of 44-52; 117-126)

February 20th – No Readings: Oral History Project Prep

Oral History Question Guide Due Friday, February 20th at 11:59 PM

Week 5 – Fissuring & Risk Shifts: Definitions

February 23rd – **Chris Smalls Class Visit (Activist-in-Residence with the Ellsberg Initiative)**

- To prepare for Chris’s visit, choose between readings posted to Perusall on organizing Amazon or participating in the Gaza Freedom Flotilla

February 25th – Fissuring

- Weil, David. 2014. *The Fissured Workplace*. Harvard University Press (pp. 1-19)

February 27th – Fissuring (contd.)

- **Watch:** Stanford Center on Poverty & Inequality Video with Jacob Hacker
<https://inequality.stanford.edu/publications/media/details/great-risk-shift-jacob-hacker>

- **Read:** Weil, David. 2014. *The Fissured Workplace*. Harvard University Press (pp. 43-bottom of 46, skim the section on private equity; we will revisit it in a few weeks, 48-52; bottom of 61-63)

Week 6 – Fissuring & Risk Shifts: Case Studies

March 2nd – Case Studies: Private Sector (Trucking)

- Viscelli, Steve. 2016. *The Big Rig*. University of California Press (1-10; 58-59; skim 72-75; 85-86; 95 & 100 on collective action)

March 4th – Case Studies: Private Sector (Low-wage gig work)

- International Labor Organization (ILO), 2021. “The Role of Digital Labour Platforms in Transforming the World of Work”
https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/%40dgreports/%40dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_771672.pdf
- Mason, Sarah. 2019. “Chasing the Pink.” *Logic(s)*
<https://logicmag.io/play/chasing-the-pink/>
The ILO report is a little dry; feel free to skim it. For those of you interested in policymaking, reading reports from UN agencies is good exposure, and you might want to spend more time on it. The Sarah Mason piece is a fun and very readable first-person account of what it’s like to work on the apps.

In class: [What DoorDash Doesn’t Want You to Know](#)

March 6th – Case Studies: Public Sector (Education)

- **Read:** Ewing, Eve. 2018. *Ghosts in the School Yard*. The University of Chicago Press (Introduction, pp. 1-10)
- **Watch:** Jitu Brown (Organizer, Kenwood Oakland Community Organization) & Pauline Lipman (Professor, University of Illinois- Chicago) on Democracy Now!
https://www.democracynow.org/2010/3/26/a_look_at_arne_duncans_vip (start at 28:54 and watch until the end)

Oral History #1 Due Friday, March 6th at 11:59 PM

Week 7- Financialization: Definitions & Case Studies

March 9th – Financialization

- Krippner, Greta R. 2011. *Capitalizing on Crisis*. Harvard University Press (pp. 1-16; bottom of 23-26)
Confused? Try this short video where Krippner explains her key takeaway:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N9X1hD1aGsQ>
This is dense, but try your best. No need to absorb all the details, just try to understand her definition of financialization, how she measures it, and the fundamental argument she’s making about the role of the state.

March 11th – Private Equity

- Greenwell, Megan. 2025. *Bad Company: Private Equity and the Death of the American Dream*. Dey Street Books (Introduction)

March 13th – Private Equity in Retail

- Greenwell, Megan. 2025. *Bad Company: Private Equity and the Death of the American Dream*. Dey Street Books (Chapter 5: “Liz”)

March 15th: Spring Break- No Class

Week 8- Financialization: Case Studies

March 23rd – Private Equity in Hospitals

- Pomorski, Chris. 2021. “The Death of Hahnemann Hospital.” *The New Yorker Magazine*
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/06/07/the-death-of-hahnemann-hospital>

In class: Steward Health Care Bankruptcy in MA

March 25th – Private Equity & Retirement

- **Listen:** Interview with Megan Greenwell, July 3rd, 2025, *Behind the News* podcast (start at 41:07, end at 45:30 at the break)
<https://kpfa.org/player/?audio=453621>
- **Watch:** Interview with Eileen Appelbaum, September 15, 2025, *Broadcast Retirement Network*
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3rkPQDc8mds>
Now that we’ve spent some time on private equity, can you make sense of the interview with Eileen Appelbaum? Don’t worry about getting all of the details, just see if you can keep up with the general tenor of the conversation. Make sure you listen to the very short interview segment with Megan Greenwell first. It provides some crucial background information.

March 27th – Capital Strategies (Safeway Grocery)

- Webber, David. 2018. *The Rise of the Working-Class Shareholder*. Harvard University Press (pp.1-11; 35-41)
Confused? Try this short video where Webber explains the main thesis of his book:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WahSAHos7ng>

Oral History #2 Due Friday, March 27th at 11:59 PM

Week 9- New Tools and Technologies – Algorithms & Big Data

March 30th – How Algorithms Control Workers

- Rahman, Hatim. 2024. *Inside the Invisible Cage*. University of California Press (Introduction)

April 1st – How Algorithms Control Workers

- Rahman, Hatim. 2024. *Inside the Invisible Cage*. University of California Press (Chapter 8)

April 3rd – Big Data & Surveillance Capitalism

- Zuboff, Shoshana. 2019. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*. Public Affairs Books (Introduction)

Week 10- New Tools and Technologies – Case Studies

April 6th – AI

- Bender, Emily and Hanna, Alex. 2025. *The AI Con*. HarperCollins (Introduction & Chapter 3)

April 8th – AI & Labor Resistance

- Press, Alex. 2024. “How the U.S. Labor Movement is Confronting AI.” *New Labor Forum*
<https://newlaborforum.cuny.edu/2024/10/09/how-the-u-s-labor-movement-is-confronting-ai/>

April 10th – Worker-to-Worker Organizing

- Blanc, Eric. 2025. *We Are the Union*. University of California Press (Chapter 1)

Short Reflective Essay Due Friday, April 10th at 11:59 PM

PART 3: LABOR & RESISTANCE

(How Does the Economy Shape Politics & Social Movements?)

Week 11- Labor Resistance

April 13th – Taking on Multinational Corporations

- Smiley, Erica and Gupta, Sarita. 2022. *The Future We Need*. Cornell University Press (Chapter 8)

April 15th – Bargaining for the Common Good

- Givan, Rebecca Kolins and Lang, Amy Schragger. *Strike for the Common Good*. University of Michigan Press (Introduction)
- Bargaining for the Common Good Network, “Concrete Examples”
<https://www.bargainingforthecommongood.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Bargaining-Demands-Memo-Long-12.2020.pdf>

April 17th – Citywide Strategies - The Minnesota Model

- **Read**
 - Jaffe, Sarah. 2024. “The Minnesota Model is Transforming Organizing as We Know It.” *In These Times*. <https://inthesetimes.com/article/minnesota-model-labor-economy>
 - Feliz Leon, Luis. 2025. Will ICE Ignite a Mass Strike in Minnesota?” *Labor Notes*. <https://labornotes.org/2026/01/will-ice-ignite-mass-strike-minnesota>
- **Watch:** [The Free State of George Floyd](#) (Arizona State University’s Center for Work & Democracy) (5 mins)

In class: [Interview with Marcia Howard, VP Minneapolis Federation of Teachers Local 59](#) (20:32 -26:50)

Final Project Check In (for those pursuing this option) Due Friday, April 17th at 11:59 PM

Week 12- Political Parties

April 20th – No Class: Patriot’s Day

April 22nd – Geismer, Lily. 2022. *Left Behind: The Democrats’ Failed Attempt to Solve Inequality*. Public Affairs Press (Introduction, other short selections)

April 24th – Hiedeman, Paul. 2025. *Rogue Elephant: How the Republicans Went from the Party of Business to the Party of Chaos*. Verso (Introduction, other short selections)

Last Day of Graded Perusal Annotations

Week 13- Film: “The Hand that Feeds” / Contemporary Developments of Your Choice

Students will generate a list of topics they’d like to explore during the last week to round out the semester, and the class will vote on which we pursue. I will then generate course readings and invite guest speakers as appropriate.

April 27th – In class: Ranked-Choice Voting on Topics & Part I of [“The Hand that Feeds”](#)

April 29th – In class: Part II of [“The Hand that Feeds”](#)

May 1st – TBD by ranked-choice vote

Week 14- Contemporary Developments of Your Choice/ Guest Speakers

May 4th – TBD by ranked-choice vote

May 6th – TBD by ranked-choice vote

May 8th – No Readings: Podcast Workshop & Final Review

Final exam: Wednesday, May 13th at 3:30pm (creative project option also due by scheduled exam date)