Over 250 people from around the world gathered to participate in the How Class Works – 2014 conference at the State University of New York at Stony Brook June 5-7, sponsored by the Center for Study of Working Class Life. This seventh in the series of bi-annual How Class Works conferences was the largest and most international yet.

Among nearly two hundred presenters, the Conference welcomed thirty-eight people from twenty countries outside the United States: Argentina, Australia, Austria, Canada, England, France, Germany, Hungary, India, Ireland, Italy, Lebanon, Nepal, Nigeria, Norway, Philippines, Portugal, Singapore, South Africa, and Turkey, as well as from across the United States. Twenty-five graduate students presented work, joining senior academic scholars, community and union activists, artists and independent scholars in the rich and diverse community of working class studies. The conference also had the largest number of non-presenter participants in the history of the series.

In response to the original call for proposals, we received over three hundred submissions. The peer-review program committee (Michele Fazio; Fred Gardaphe; Christie Launius; Jack Metzgar; Gregory Rosenthal; Michelle Tokarczyk; and Michael Zweig) accepted just under seventy percent of them, making this the most selective conference yet in the series. The resulting 55 sessions over three days engaged participants in a wide range of issues involved in working class studies – economics, ethnography, history, literature, music, pedagogy, politics, religion, sociology, and more.

The complete program is on the conference Website:

For the first time, we video-recorded all conference sessions. By fall 2014 we will link each session in the conference program to its video record (taking care to exclude those few presenters who, for various reasons, asked that their presentations not be made public). We will also link to individual presentations in their written form where panelists have submitted them for posting.

The opening conference plenary session, part of the Provost Lecture Series, featured Saket Soni, Executive Director of the New Orleans Worker Center for Racial Justice and the National Guestworker Alliance. Soni highlighted changing forms of worker organization required to address the complicated supply chain of contingent workers increasingly characteristic of U.S. manufacturing and service sectors. Other plenary sessions addressed “New Directions in the U.S. Labor Movement”; and “The African-American Experience of Class,” organized by Stony Brook PhD Aldon Morris, now a professor of sociology at Northwestern University.

The Friday evening banquet provided the opportunity for the Center for Study of Working Class Life to present its Award for Lifetime Contributions to Social Justice for Working People to long-time labor activist Fred Hirsch and civil rights and labor veteran
Rosalyn Pelles. We were honored to have Roger Clayman, executive director of the Long Island Federation of Labor, present at the banquet with a delegation from the L.I. Fed. The Award presentations and remarks by recipients will be available on line, linked from the conference program.

The conference also hosted the annual meeting of the Working Class Studies Association (WCSA), the best-attended such meeting in the ten-year history of the Association. The WCSA also hosted a first-time “meet and greet” for graduate students and young scholars on Wednesday afternoon before the conference officially opened. The Center hosted a Wednesday evening party with music and poetry for early arrivals. Both events were well attended and got the conference off to a lively start. New York City’s Playback Theater provided a powerful interactive performance on Saturday that illuminated some of the challenges working class people face when entering academic life, based on stories told by conference-goers in the audience.

The conference was able to expand its tradition of financial aid, making it possible for thirty-six people to come to the conference who otherwise would not have been able to attend. Almost all were graduate students or people coming from abroad.

Seventeen Stony Brook faculty and staff from ten departments and programs* helped host the conference by chairing sessions in their areas of interest. The campus bookstore once again set up a highly successful and much appreciated store in the midst of the conference session meeting rooms on the third floor of the Student Activities Center, featuring books by presenters and other titles addressing the broad interests of those attending. Thanks to generous support from Graduate School Dean Charles Taber, the conference was able to hire eleven graduate students to work as conference staff; they also had the opportunity to attend sessions. Additional support for the conference came from Provost Dennis Assanis, Vice-President for Student Affairs Peter Baigent, College of Arts and Sciences Dean Nancy Squires, Dean of International Studies William Arens, and Dean of the School of Professional Development Tom Sexton, as well as the department of economics. Special thanks go to Ann Brody of the Office of Conferences and Special Events, who did an extraordinary job. Gregory Rosenthal, graduate assistant at the Center, provided invaluable logistical assistance, as did Jenille Johnson and Domenica Tafuro in the economics department.

We have already reserved space for the How Class Works – 2016 conference, scheduled for the Stony Brook campus June 9-11, 2016. A call for presentations will go out in spring 2015. We hope once again to host an international conference that will unite the campus and the community, academic inquiry and social engagement, across all the disciplines of working class studies, in a relaxed but intellectually challenging environment.

- Michael Zweig, Director, Center for Study of Working Class Life; June 2014
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* biochemistry, facilities design, economics, EOP/AIM, Hispanic languages and literature, history, library, philosophy, sociology, and technology & society.