

The New York Times

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Teach-ins played a crucial role in the civil rights, antiwar, and feminist movements in the 1960-70s.

They also played a key role in reviving energy in the labor movement in the 1990s after John Sweeney's election to the AFL-CIO presidency in 1995.

Labor and Academia In a Campus Meeting

By STEVEN GREENHOUSE

The buzz was undeniably there, although no one expected it to be.

It was a standing-room-only crowd. Another 500 people were packed into nearby rooms to watch on closed-circuit television. And outside stretched a 200-yard-long line of people who were turned away.

It was not a Mike Tyson fight. Nor was it the latest Pearl Jam concert. The crowd was there for a panel discussion with professors of philosophy, law and religion, a feminist author and a labor leader.

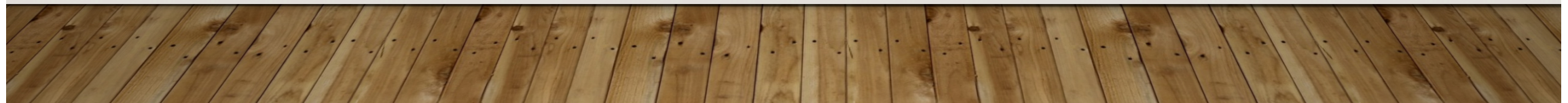
Far exceeding the organizers' expectations, some 1,700 people thronged to an auditorium at Columbia University on Thursday night for the Fight for America's Future, billed as "a teach-in with the labor movement." With an electricity that was rare for both labor and academic events, there were repeated standing ovations for the speakers, who included Cornel West, the Harvard professor of religion and Afro-American studies, and John J. Sweeney, the A.F.L.-C.I.O. president.

Speaking under the rotunda of Low Library, Betty Friedan, the feminist author, said: "I have a pretty good historical Geiger counter. Thirty years ago, my Geiger counter was clicking about the beginning of the women's movement. My historic Geiger counter is clicking again."

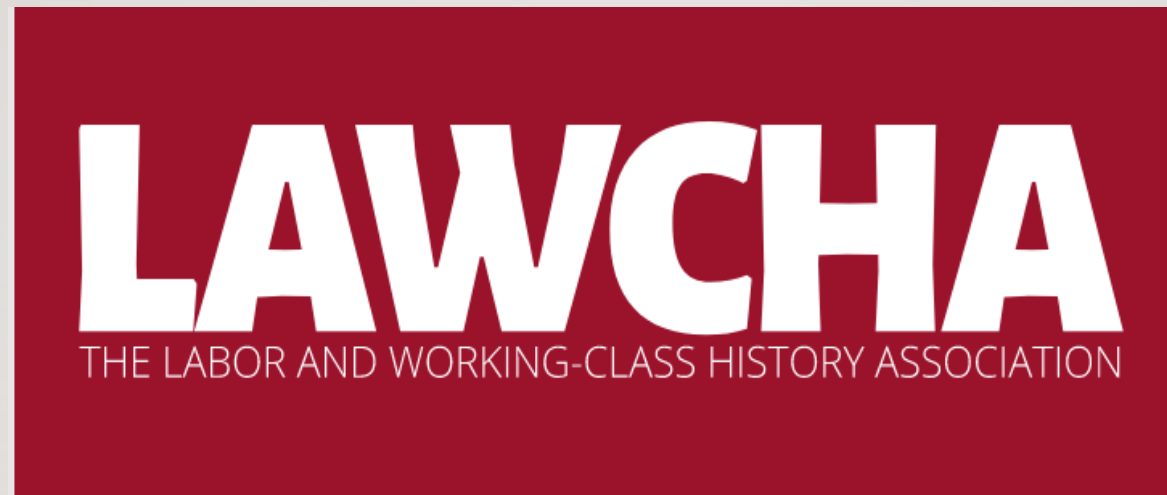
The Columbia teach-in was the flagship of 10 such events scheduled around the nation this month, at sites including Eastern Illinois University, the University of Texas at El Paso, and Wayne State University in Detroit. The events — modeled and named after antiwar conferences of the Vietnam War era — are being organized by various groups of academics, not only to renew ties with unions but also to teach students more about the labor movement and to get more students and professors to devote their intellectual energies to helping working Americans.

The 1996 labor teach-in helped sow seeds for multiple new growths, including:

United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS), **founded in 1998**, which organized students to demand that their campuses cease allowing the production of university logo-bearing goods in sweatshops



... and:



LAWCHA grew out of conversations among labor historians in the wake of the 1996 teach-ins who discussed the importance of giving labor history greater visibility nationally in both academic circles and public arenas. Its constitution and bylaws were approved at a meeting of the organizing group at the North American Labor History Conference (NALHC) in **October 1998**.

...and campus labor organizing:

The United Auto Workers (UAW) won representation elections for TAs at UCLA, Berkeley, and six other University of California campuses in 1999, following a systemwide strike in **December 1998**. In **May 1999**, the UAW filed a petition for a representation election for TAs at New York University.

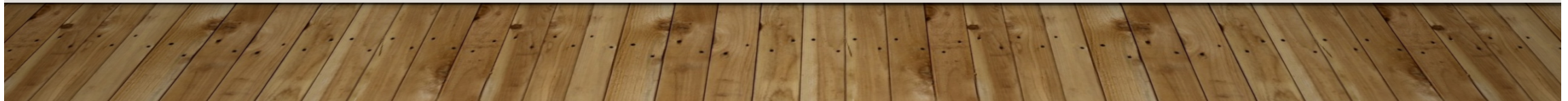
Striking TAs, Dec. 2, 1998



BART AGAPINAN/ DAILY NEWS
Angry TAs picket in front of Davidson Library on Tuesday in an effort to gain acceptance for their union from the University of California.

How do conditions today compare to those of 1996?

- Union favorability is much higher today: 71% today (highest since 1965) v. 60% in 1996
- Campus union presence is much higher today (e.g., grad assistants had no unions at private universities then, and many fewer on public campuses)
- Mobilizing organizations and networks exist today that were lacking in 1996: e.g., LAWCHA, Bargaining for the Common Good, Higher Education Labor United (HELU), and Scholars for a New Deal in Higher Ed (SFNDHE) to name a few
- Active campaigns on and off campus are much more abundant today (union fights on campuses; Starbucks, Amazon, Apple and many other campaigns off campus)
- A more promising political climate for labor exists today than existed at the height of neo-liberalism's influence in 1996; today the fight for labor rights is tied up with the fight to preserve and extend democracy



What is happening this spring?

- 86 events at nearly 70 institutions during March and April 2023
- Very wide geographic scope and a broad variety of institutions, including Ivy Leagues, HBCUs, and many state universities.
- Biggest events are on campuses with ongoing labor struggles
- Active support from many unions and independent labor organizations, such as the Labor Network for Sustainability
- Widespread support from students, teachers and faculty, labor-based academic networks, worker organizations, labor unions, faith leaders, policy experts, global labor activists, workers, young people, philanthropists, elected leaders and more.
- Full event listing [here](#).

