

Working Group on “Free and Unfree Labour”

The European Labour History Network (ELHN)

The founding meeting of the ELHN took place at the International Institute of Social History (IISH) on 12 October 2013. The forty scholars who gathered in Amsterdam, belonging to research institutions, archives and journals based in various European countries, felt the need to increase cooperation among labour history scholars, share knowledge and (digital) material, create a platform for future collective research and organise conferences and seminars. The Network will primarily include Europe-based scholars (professors, post-doc and Ph.D. researchers, post-graduate students) but will also seek to connect with scholars based outside Europe.

It was agreed to circulate information through Labnet (<http://www.iisg.nl/labnet/>), the Social History Portal (<http://www.socialhistoryportal.org/>) and a virtual environment electronic discussion platform (forthcoming); a meeting of the journals group in Vienna will be held during the ESSHC; a first broad conference will be organised, probably in 2015, in conjunction with another event in the field.

A provisional coordination committee was appointed, whose members are: Marcel van der Linden, Stefano Musso, Silke Neunsinger, Leda Papastefanaki, Tibor Valuch, Xavier Vigna, Donald Weber and Susan Zimmermann.

In order to structure the network and overcome fragmentation, the key role of working groups was underlined. Some working groups were proposed and are now taking shape. Among others: long-term perspectives on remuneration; pre-industrial labour; feminist labour history; factory / worksite history; industrial heritage

and structural change; workers politics and social movements; imperial labour history.

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The study of various forms of labour relations and their mutual interconnections is a key issue in labour history, truly global in its scope and appropriate for *longue durée* approaches. The conceptualisation of “free” and “unfree” labour, and of the “free / unfree” labour divide, has been the topic of one of the most lively scholarly debates in the last decades. The issue also holds a fundamental importance in contemporary global society.

The working group primarily aims to bring together scholars who study all kinds of labour relations – e.g. chattel slavery, wage labour, debt bondage, convict labour, indentured work, sharecropping, household labour, military impressment – and who are especially interested in addressing and conceptualising their mutual connections at any time, place and scale.

Within this broad framework, the working group has three goals.

The first goal is to map the field, by sharing information about who (individual and collective) is studying related topics and where, what exactly is being studied, and which publications are available and forthcoming. For this reason, a database will be built and systematically updated.

The second aim is to share knowledge and provide a forum for discussion on the forms of free and unfree labour relations, the way they are conceptualised and their mutual connections. Calls for papers, news about forthcoming events and publications will be circulated through the ELHN website, LabNet and the Social History Portal. The organisation of workshops, sessions, conferences, book presentations and other public events will be another fundamental instrument of the working group. For an easy way to share abstracts and publications, the use of the platform academia.edu is

proposed, by tagging relevant texts with “Free and Unfree Labour”.

The third goal is to act as a “hub” to organise and design new research and collective projects. Further discussion is needed on this point.

Because the aim is to include as many interested scholars as possible, organisers will decide the language to be used in each event and meeting involving some participants in the working groups. However, English will be used for general communication and general events.

In order to become acquainted with each other and discuss the future activities of the working group, the proposal is to meet during the next major continental conference, the ESSHC in Vienna. The exact place and time will be communicated some weeks before the conference.

For any comments and suggestions, please contact the provisional coordinator of the working group:

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