



## MEDIA RELEASE

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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### **ORGANIZED LABOR IN WNY, TRACING ITS ORIGINS THROUGH CURRENT CHALLENGES**

*Next PastForward Discussion Series at Downtown Library*

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The **Buffalo & Erie County Public Library System** will host a community discussion, the *PastForward Discussion Series*, reflecting on WNY's long history of organized labor starting in the 1930s and on the changing workplace and perceptions of organized labor today, on **Thursday, February 24 from 6 - 9 p.m.** at the **downtown Central Library**, 1 Lafayette Square, Buffalo. Titled "**Our Daily Bread: Organized Labor Then and Now,**" the event is free and open to the public.

The *PastForward Discussion Series* is made possible through funding from the **New York Council for the Humanities** and the **National Endowment for the Humanities** as part of the Library's larger project *Re-Collecting the Great Depression and New Deal as a Civic Resource for Hard Times*, an initiative to identify, digitize and make accessible the WNY region's extensive Depression era resources for the first time.

Panelists participating in the program include **Alex Blair**, leading WNY labor historian; **Patty DeVinney**, field coordinator, WNY Area Labor Federation (AFL-CIO); **Dr. Todd Hobler**, vice president, 1199 Service Employees International Union; **Daniel Walkowitz**, New York University professor and nationally renowned historian of organized labor; and moderator **Michael Frisch**, professor of American Studies and History at the University of Buffalo, and co-author with late photographer Milton Rogovin of *Portraits in Steel*.

WNY's long history of organized labor began in the 1930s, invigorated by the passage of Federal legislation allowing collective bargaining. Buffalo became a natural center of the resulting wave of organizing activities and strikes because of its nationally significant steel and auto industries.

Organized labor has been a backbone of WNY's economy ever since. But the nature of our economy, workforce, employers, and public/private sector balance has changed enormously in the past seven decades. What is the legacy of that story for very different communities of workers facing our own Great Recession? As the public perception of unions becomes less favorable, what does the future hold for organized labor? What are the responsibilities of unions, business, and government in addressing the needs of workers in every sector of a struggling 21<sup>st</sup> century economy in WNY?

The evening includes a number of interactive elements that help set the historic context, share some of the rediscovered historic artifacts and stories of that era in WNY, and invigorate exploration of the topic. Lobby displays elaborating on WNY's Depression era labor history and stations at which attendees can order customized tours and posters on that history are part of the evening's experience. Attendees can share their aspect of local Depression history including artifacts, potential oral history interviewees, collections, documents, or remaining structures. That information will be captured onsite for addition to the digital database being built and for subsequent follow-up.

The last of the three *PastForward* discussion programs is planned for May, 2011, date to be announced, on WNY's Public Housing history during the 1930s. Discussion will examine decisions made then, and policy since then, that have reverberated through the community and in many cases, led to significant challenges today relating to urban poverty, neighborhood disinvestment, and segregation. Can a better understanding of that time help find solutions for struggling neighborhoods?

For more information, visit [www.buffalolib.org](http://www.buffalolib.org).

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