

Indiana University School of Social Work

Department of Labor Studies

L205

Contemporary Labor Problems

FALL 2026

August 24, 2026 – December 20, 2026

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course examines the major challenges facing workers, communities, and the labor movement in the United States today, and asks students to do something about them. The first strand of the course explores how long-term economic transformations such as globalization, deindustrialization, the rise of the service sector, the expansion of the gig economy, and the acceleration of automation and AI, have reshaped work, family life, and economic security. We analyze how shifting trade policies, environmental pressures, and changing government regulations affect job quality, worker rights, and the distribution of power in the workplace.

The second strand of the course introduces students to social action as a practical tool for change. Students will develop, plan, and carry out a real campaign targeting a problem in their school, campus, or community. These two strands are not separate: each labor problem we examine is paired with real examples of how workers, activists, and communities are organizing and responding to that problem today and the social action project puts students in that same position. Students will leave this course with a better understanding of contemporary labor problems and be equipped with the skills and confidence to do something about them.

COURSE LEARNING OUTCOMES

Upon completion of this course, students should be able to:

1. Analyze how economic, political, and technological changes shape the conditions of work and workers' lives.
2. Evaluate the social, racial, gendered, and community-level dimensions of contemporary labor issues, identifying how different groups experience work and precarity in unequal ways.
3. Assess the impacts of deindustrialization, shifting employment patterns, and changing work–family dynamics on job quality, economic security, and worker well-being.
4. Examine the strategies workers, unions, labor organizations, and other non-profits use to respond to current challenges, including organizing, policy advocacy, and new forms of collective action.
5. Develop and carry out a social action campaign targeting a real problem in their school, campus, or community.
6. Reflect critically on their own experience as social actors, connecting their campaign to broader labor movement strategies and long-term systemic change.

REQUIRED TEXTBOOK

You may purchase the book or ebook according to your preference.

Myers-Lipton, S. (2023). *CHANGE! A student guide to social action*. Routledge.

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003359791>

Myers-Lipton, S. (2023). *CHANGE! A student guide to social action* (eBook ed.). Routledge.

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003359791>

All other readings, videos, and course materials are provided within the Canvas modules.

TECHNICAL REQUIREMENTS

You will need the following to participate in this course:

- Desktop or laptop computer
- Reliable internet connection
- Webcam
- External microphone or headset with built-in microphone
- Some way to make and post a simple video (e.g., using a webcam or smartphone)
- Access to Canvas using a supported web browser

Technical Support:

- University Information Technology Services (UITS) — human support
- IU Knowledge Base (IUKB) — documentation for IU applications and services
- Canvas Student Guide
- IUware — download free software

COURSE DESIGN

This course is delivered in an asynchronous online format and organized into 16 weekly modules across two integrated strands:

Labor Problem Weeks (odd weeks: 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, 13, 15) introduce a major contemporary labor problem through readings, lectures, and case studies. Each module includes an applied activity and a discussion assignment.

Social Action Bridge Weeks (even weeks: 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, 16) connect the labor problem to social action concepts and advance your semester-long campaign project. Bridge weeks include campaign milestones, reflection prompts, and skill-building exercises.

Your campaign project runs all semester. Each bridge week, you complete a milestone that builds your campaign from idea to action to reflection. By Week 12, you will launch a real campaign action. In Week 16, you will present your campaign to the class.

COURSE ASSESSMENT AND GRADES

Assignment Type	Points	Description
Weekly Applied Activities (×8)	20 pts each / 160 pts total	Core analytical assignment for each labor problem module

Assignment Type	Points	Description
Weekly Discussion Posts (×8)	10 pts each / 80 pts total	Reflective and application-based discussion for each labor problem module
Bridge Week Activities (×6)	15 pts each / 90 pts total	Skill-building and reflection exercises in bridge weeks (Weeks 6, 8, 10 include graded bridge activities)
Campaign Launch — Issue Statement (Week 2)	30 pts	Team formation, issue identification, target, and first demand
Portfolio 1: Issue Development (Week 4)	50 pts	Refined issue statement, stakeholder map, and power analysis
Campaign Plan (Week 8)	75 pts	Full timeline, tactics, roles, and at least one planned action
Campaign Action Documentation (Week 12)	75 pts	Documentation of real campaign action taken and initial reflection
Campaign Evaluation (Week 14)	50 pts	What happened? What worked? What changed? What did you learn?
Final Presentation and Reflection (Week 16)	100 pts	Team presentation of campaign + individual final reflection essay
TOTAL	710 pts	

GRADING SCALE

Percentage Range	Letter Grade
100–93%	A
92–90%	A-
89–87%	B+
86–83%	B
82–80%	B-
79–77%	C+
76–73%	C
72–70%	C-
69–67%	D+
66–63%	D
62–60%	D-

Percentage Range	Letter Grade
59% and below	F

COURSE SCHEDULE

Week	Dates	Module Title	Social Action Focus	Key Due Dates
1	08/24 – 08/30	Labor Problem: What Counts as a "Labor Problem"?	Introduction to Social Action — what it is, why it matters, what this course asks you to do	Discussion + Applied Activity
2	08/31 – 09/06	Social Action Bridge: Issue Development	Campaign Launch — identify your issue, form your team, name your target, draft your first demand	Campaign Launch / Issue Statement due (30 pts)
3	09/07 – 09/13	Labor Problem: Automation, AI, and Precarity	Connection: How gig workers, warehouse workers, and tech employees are organizing in response	Discussion + Applied Activity (<i>Note: Labor Day 09/07</i>)
4	09/14 – 09/20	Social Action Bridge: Building Power	Power mapping — who has it, who wants it, who your campaign needs to reach	Portfolio 1: Issue Development due (50 pts)
5	09/21 – 09/27	Labor Problem: International Trade and Global Competition	Connection: Supply chain activism, consumer campaigns, cross-border solidarity	Discussion + Applied Activity
6	09/28 – 10/04	Social Action Bridge: Coalition Building	Mapping allies, opponents, and fence-sitters; reaching beyond your immediate network	Bridge Activity due (15 pts)
7	10/05 – 10/11	Labor Problem: Environmental Problems and Climate Labor	Connection: Farmworker heat campaigns, just transition organizing, environmental justice coalitions	Discussion + Applied Activity
8	10/12 – 10/18	Social Action Bridge: Developing Tactics	Choosing and designing your tactics — petition, meeting, rally, letter, press release, or other	Campaign Plan due (75 pts) + Bridge Activity (15 pts)

Week	Dates	Module Title	Social Action Focus	Key Due Dates
9	10/19 – 10/25	Labor Problem: Inequality, Rights, and Community Conditions	Connection: Domestic worker campaigns, immigrant worker organizing, community-labor coalitions	Discussion + Applied Activity
10	10/26 – 11/01	Social Action Bridge: Tactics in Practice	Rehearse and refine your campaign action; practice your message and your ask	Bridge Activity due (15 pts)
11	11/02 – 11/08	Labor Problem: Changing Government Policies and the Future of Work	Connection: Policy advocacy, public comment, lobbying days, rulemaking processes	Discussion + Applied Activity
12	11/09 – 11/15	Social Action Bridge: Campaign Launch	Action Week — execute your campaign action and document it	Campaign Action Documentation due (75 pts)
13	11/16 – 11/22	Labor Problem: Unions, Organizing, and Collective Power	Connection: Starbucks, Amazon, grad student unions — what the new labor movement looks like and what your campaign has in common with it	Discussion + Applied Activity
<i>Thanksgiving Break</i>	<i>11/23 – 11/29 — No class</i>	<i>Rest, reflect, and prepare for your final campaign push</i>	—	
14	11/30 – 12/06	Social Action Bridge: Evaluation and Reflection	What happened? What worked? What changed? What did you learn?	Campaign Evaluation due (50 pts)
15	12/07 – 12/13	Labor Problem: The Future of Work and the Future of Activism	Connecting your campaign experience to long-term systemic change and the ongoing labor movement	Discussion + Applied Activity
16	12/14 – 12/20	Final: Campaign Presentations and Final Reflection	Team presentations + individual final reflection essay	Final Presentation and Reflection due by 12/20 at 11:59 p.m.

Week	Dates	Module Title	Social Action Focus	Key Due Dates
				Eastern Time (100 pts)

CAMPAIGN PROJECT

The campaign project is the backbone of this course. You will work in a small team to identify a real problem in your school, campus, or community, develop a campaign to address it, execute at least one real action, and reflect on what you learned.

This is not a hypothetical exercise. The problem you choose should be real, the target should be a real decision-maker, and the action you take should be something that actually happens.

Choosing Your Issue

Your issue should be a specific, actionable problem, something that affects people you know or a community you are connected to. It does not need to be a "big" problem. A parking fee that burdens student workers, a campus food pantry that needs more funding, a local employer with unsafe scheduling practices — all of these are legitimate targets for social action. The key is that there is a decision-maker who could change the situation, and that you can realistically reach them.

Campaign Milestones

Each milestone builds on the last. Full milestone descriptions and grading rubrics are posted in Canvas.

Campaign Launch / Issue Statement (Week 2 — 30 points): Introduce your team, your issue, your target, and your first demand. This is your campaign's foundation.

Portfolio 1: Issue Development (Week 4 — 50 points): A refined version of your issue statement, a stakeholder and power map, and a summary of what you have learned about your issue so far.

Campaign Plan (Week 8 — 75 points): A complete plan including your timeline, the tactics you will use, roles within your team, and at least one concrete action you commit to taking.

Campaign Action Documentation (Week 12 — 75 points): Documentation of your campaign action — what you did, who was involved, how people responded, and your initial reflection.

Campaign Evaluation (Week 14 — 50 points): A thoughtful evaluation of your campaign. What worked? What did not? What surprised you? What would you do differently?

Final Presentation and Reflection (Week 16 — 100 points): A team presentation of your campaign shared with the class (video format), plus an individual final reflection essay connecting your experience to the labor movement themes of this course.

Teams and Individual Work

Campaign milestones are submitted as team assignments. The final reflection essay is individual. All team members are expected to contribute equitably; peer evaluation is included in the final presentation grade.

WEEKLY MODULE ACTIVITIES

Applied Activities (30 points each)

Each labor problem week includes an applied activity — a structured analytical assignment asking you to apply the week's concepts to a real-world example, case study, or current event. Applied activities are submitted individually through Canvas.

Discussion Posts (10 points each)

Each labor problem week includes a discussion prompt asking you to engage with the week's material and respond to at least one classmate. Discussion is graded on both substance and style. Please do not attach your response as a document — post directly in Canvas. Be thoughtful and respectful of perspectives different from your own.

Bridge Week Activities (15 points each, Weeks 6, 8, and 10)

Selected bridge weeks include a graded activity tied to your campaign development. Full instructions are posted in each week's module.

COURSE POLICIES

Submitting Assignments

All assignments are submitted through Canvas. Weekly due dates are clearly posted within each module.

How Will I Know How I Am Doing?

Assignments will be graded and posted within seven days of the due date. You may view your grades and feedback in the Canvas Gradebook at any time. Questions about grades should be directed to me through Canvas email.

Late Work

Student submissions document class attendance and participation. Late assignments will be accepted but will lose points. Late work is accepted for one week past the due date unless other arrangements are made in advance.

If you experience a family or medical crisis, work emergency, or military posting, please contact me as soon as possible. Life happens to us all, flexibility will always be given when needed and not abused. In all other circumstances, grades will be reduced for late submissions.

Campaign milestone submissions that are more than one week late may jeopardize your team's ability to progress to the next milestone. Please communicate early if your team is struggling.

AI Policy

Your submissions should be your own. You must clearly cite any AI assistance with a disclaimer explaining how you used the tool, just as you would any other source material. Be prepared to share your AI interactions if requested. If I believe you have submitted work as your own that was written by AI with no citation, I will flag the submission for plagiarism, and we will have a conversation about the assignment.

This is a 200-level course. There is no expectation that you are experts in this subject matter. AI may make connections you will not, it is quite easy to spot the difference. When in doubt, ask for clarification. Uphold honesty and integrity in all your work, be cautious about sharing personal data with AI tools, and understand that AI models can have inherent biases and may create sources that do not exist. Always verify AI outputs with reliable sources.

Students experiencing writing difficulties are advised to seek assistance at the University Writing Center on their respective campus.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

You are expected to cite all outside sources in your written work, including assigned readings. Citation form must make it reasonably clear what you are citing, though it need not conform to a particular style such as MLA, APA, or Chicago. Please do not cheat. The integrity of your work and of the social action campaign you are carrying out with real people in a real community depends on your commitment to honesty.

The Labor Studies Program follows the Indiana University policy on plagiarism:

Plagiarism is defined as presenting someone else's work, including the work of other students, as one's own. Any ideas or materials taken from another source for either written or oral use must be fully acknowledged, unless the information is common knowledge.

In addition to the University statement on plagiarism, the IU School of Social Work, Labor Studies Department takes the following position: any student caught cheating or plagiarizing will fail the course. Failure of a required social work or labor studies course will result in automatic dismissal from the social work or labor studies program. A student has the right to appeal such dismissal as outlined in program policy.

Grade of Incomplete

The grade of Incomplete indicates that a substantial portion of the course work has been satisfactorily but not entirely completed as of the end of the semester. The grade of Incomplete may be given only when the completed portion of the student's work is of passing quality, and only upon a showing of hardship that would render it unjust to hold the student to established deadlines. The faculty member may set a specific date (up to one year) by which all unfinished work must be completed. For the complete policy, check the website for your respective campus.

Course and Instructor Evaluation

Consistent with the School's academic policy, a formal evaluation of the course and its instructor will be completed at the end of the course.

Grade Appeal

If, at the end of the semester, you believe you did not receive the grade you deserve, and you have discussed the matter with your instructor, you may appeal your grade to the Labor Studies Department Chairperson.

AMERICANS WITH DISABILITIES ACT POLICIES

In compliance with ADA guidelines, students who have any condition, either permanent or temporary, that might affect their ability to perform in this class are encouraged to inform the instructor at the beginning of the semester. It is highly recommended that students discuss their situation with the instructor within the first three weeks of class. Adaptations of teaching methods and class materials, including text and reading materials or testing, will be made as needed to provide equitable participation.

NOTE ON COURSE CHANGES

Changes in course assignments and/or due dates may occur during the semester based on student questions, the pace of campaign development, or unforeseen circumstances. When changes are made, they will be announced clearly in Canvas with adequate notice.

L205 Contemporary Labor Problems and Social Action | Indiana University School of Social Work, Department of Labor Studies | Fall 2026