



International Conference of Labour and Social History

Internationale Tagung der HistorikerInnen der Arbeiter- und anderer sozialer Bewegungen
Conference internationale d'histoire ouvrière et sociale

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Call for Papers

61st ITH Conference

Working nature – exploring intersections of labour history and political ecology

Linz/Upper Austria, 17–19 September 2026

Conference Languages: English / German

CALL FOR PAPERS

Ever since the 19th century, the “social question” has been the fundamental cornerstone of labour and many other social movements. While the “social question” has by no means been conclusively solved – to the contrary, recent years have seen a return of its urgency (Bremen et al. 2019) – the “ecological question” has arisen as an equally fundamental predicament from the 1970s on. Social movements have responded quickly to this new challenge, although those representing labour retained an ambivalent position, often adhering to the imperatives of “growth”. Meanwhile, official acknowledgement by states and other institutional actors of the ecological question has been much slower, more uneven and fluctuating (at best). By now, the bundle of human-made ecological crises have reached a point where most earth scientist see an actual breaching of ecological thresholds, not only in relation to climate change but also six of nine processes for which “planetary boundaries” have been defined.

In this context, the interdisciplinary field of political ecology (which dates to at least the 1970s) has experienced a spectacular boom. In a certain sense, it has become *the* interdisciplinary critical social science of our days, a field in which both academic and political concerns converge. In the English-speaking world, political ecology has proved to be strongly inflected by historical reasoning, with authors such as Timothy Mitchell, Jason Moore, or Andreas Malm highlighting the entanglements between material extraction, energy carriers (particularly fossil ones), ecological over-use, capitalist economic development, and exploitation.

While the history of work and labour relations have a place in these studies, many commentators have noticed an ongoing non-communication between labour history and political ecology. Indeed, the relationship between labour and ecological perspectives reveals several tensions. One of the reasons for this complicated relation is the long-standing reservation that has seen studies related to “labour” as fraught with an undue nature–society dualism and an obsession with “the industrial” and “production”. Nevertheless, substantial scholarship has emerged at the intersection of “labour” and “environmental history” as well as “political ecology”: Recently, for instance, the unintended consequences of focussing the ecological question on “consumption” was criticized, calling for re-centering the analysis on the interplay of the use of nature (including animals) and the exploitation of workers with both converging in (and creating resistance around) the work-process (Schaupp 2024). Others called for the need to include unpaid reproductive and care work in any analysis of the ecological implications of labour, and at the same time suggested to pay more attention to those moments in which labour activism has brought up ecological concerns, thus creating a kind of “labour environmentalism” (Barca 2024). The “commodity frontier” approach, in turn, has called for merging the perspective of global labour history with those of ecological economics, commodity chain analysis and other fields to pinpoint the complex interplay of factors at the sites of (mainly) agrarian commodity production (Beckert et al. 2021).

It thus seems both timely and necessary to bring global labour history and historical political ecology into a more structured and fruitful dialogue, to assess existing research at the intersection of both and to explore further avenues of research. This conference will insist on a differential, and thus politicized view of the major referents of past and current ecological predicaments (such as “global warming”) with “labour” appearing as one major category of differentiation. We welcome proposals on all historical periods and all world-regions as long as they relate historical labour studies to recent concerns of political ecology (and vice versa). While no definite list of possible topics can be established, papers might explore one of the following themes:

- Conceptual and theoretical discussions about the ways of bringing labour history and the different strands of political ecology into dialogue, including the debates about “anthropocene vs. capitalocene” (or “plantationocene”), social metabolism, climate and earth science vs. the humanities, differential time-scales, unequal ecological exchange, yet also “energy” as a foundational “conceptual connector” that has, from the 19th century, allowed translating work, heat, and (fossil-fuelled) into one another.
- The bio-physical properties of primary or semi-processed materials – from bio-mass through ores and non-metallic minerals to fossil and other energy carriers – and their implications for work processes and logics of labour resistance.
- Animals and/as “workers”: Papers might explore conceptual and historical intersections between animal labour and human labour, and the role of animals in production processes. Contributions might address theoretical questions about the boundaries of “work,” historical transformations in animal-human work relationships, or contemporary debates about animal labour rights in the context of ecological crisis.
- Labour relations and labour struggles in the first transition towards fossil fuels (19th century), both in local constellations and in relation to unequal relations between world-regions. The role of labour relations and labour struggles in subsequent shifts in primary energy provision (from coal to oil to atomic energy to alternative energy carriers) and the primary technology of propulsion (combustion, electricity).
- The interplay between labour relations and labour struggles, on the one hand, and ecological factors, on the other, in the extraction of energy carriers like coal, oil/gas, and radioactive ore. This can include both localized studies and perspectives that focus on the inter-regional and colonial entanglements in the extraction and production of energy carriers.
- The effects of environmental degradation and ecological crises on work and workers’ activism. This includes: the impact of “climate” and its concrete experiential dimension (heat, cold, extreme weather events) on work and workers; and “Labour environmentalism” and other instances in which labour and environmental struggles have intersected, including contention over issues of health hazards in workplaces and workers’ communities as well as struggles for urban renewal vis-à-vis the impact of industrial production. Here again, a focus on experiences with a transnational aspect as well as on the scalar tensions between the planetary, the global, the regional, and the local are particularly welcome.
- Discussions of temporality and futurity that examine notions like “energy/green transition” or timelines of projected catastrophe, analyzing how workers and labour movements orient themselves toward these horizons of expectation or contest them. This includes investigating intersections between planetary futures and discussions about the future of work, both conceptually and materially.
- Ecological changes and labour migration: examining the carbon footprint of labour migration patterns and the connection between the geopolitics of remittance economies and environmental degradation. Papers might explore historical and contemporary cases of environmentally-induced migration, the ecological consequences of remittance-based development, and the uneven distribution of environmental harms along migration corridors. Contributions addressing the intersection of climate justice and migrant labour rights are particularly welcome.
- The interplay of work and ecology in agrarian production both in localized subsistence agriculture, regionalized peasant production and globally connected cash crop production in the context of dynamic “commodity frontiers”. Beyond the classical cash crops such as stimulants (coffee, tea), sugar, tropical fruits, or grains, this may also include studies about livestock farming, forestry, drugs, flowers, etc. Also, studies about labour and labour struggles in the further processing of agrarian produce are welcome, for instance about meat processing.

- Intersections of species extinction/biodiversity loss and work, as evidenced in occupations like beekeeping or changes in rice, coffee, and other agricultural production systems. Papers might examine how biodiversity loss transforms labour processes, how workers adapt to or resist these transformations, and how labour movements engage with broader biodiversity conservation efforts.
- The work of geoengineering (intentional or not) as a field of ecological intervention with significant implications for labour. Papers might address the labour requirements of proposed large-scale geoengineering projects, the forms of expertise and manual labour involved, etc. Contributions that situate geoengineering within longer histories of human attempts to engineer environments through labour are especially encouraged.
- Following the French approach of *collapsologie* (Servigne/Stevens 2020), the potential of a future civilizational devolution through an unfettered ecological crisis and its implications from a labour history perspective, e.g. in terms of workers coping with situations of extreme environmental precarity. In a similar vein, papers could explore the labour-related dimensions of either “mitigation” or “adaptation” as well as the labour politics of “environmental emergency”.

SUBMISSION

Proposed papers should include:

- Abstract (max. 300 words)
- Biographical note (continuous text, max. 200 words)
- Full address and Email address

The abstract of the suggested paper should contain a separate paragraph explaining how and (if applicable) to which element(s) or question(s) of the Call for Papers the submitted paper refers. The short CV should give information on the applicant’s contributions to the field of labour history, broadly defined, and specify (if applicable) relevant publications. For the purpose of information, applicants are invited to attach a copy of one of these publications to their application.

Proposals to be sent to our conference manager Laurin Blecha: conference@ith.or.at

CONFERENCE PUBLICATION

The ITH aims, depending on the coherence on quality of the conferences paper, to publish edited volumes arising from its conferences. Since 2013 the ITH conference volumes have been published in Brill’s [Studies in Global Social History Series](#), edited by Marcel van der Linden. The ITH encourages the conference participants to submit their papers to this publication project. High-quality papers will be selected by the volume’s editors.

TIME SCHEDULE

Submission of proposals:	30 January 2026
Notification of acceptance:	2 March 2026
Full papers or presentation version:	14 August 2026

PREPARATORY GROUP

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THE ITH AND ITS MEMBERS

The ITH is one of the worldwide known forums of the history of labour and social movements. The ITH favours research pursuing inclusive and global perspectives and open-ended comparative thinking. Following its tradition of cooperating with organisations of the labour movement, the ITH likewise puts emphasis on the conveyance of research outside the academic research community itself. Currently ca. 100 member institutions and a growing number of individual members from five continents are associated with the ITH.

Information on ITH publications in the past 50 years:

<https://www.ith.or.at/en/publications/>

Online ITH membership application form:

<https://www.ith.or.at/de/mitgliedschaft/>