

## Call for Papers: Histories of Labor in Electricity Industries (Journal Special Issue)

Abstracts Due by October 1, 2025

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Electricity has transformed the modern world, but histories of the *labor* of electricity are few and far between. This special issue of *International Labor and Working-Class History* charts a new direction in the entangled histories of energy and labor by exploring the much-overlooked theme of labor within electric power systems in a global context.

Historians have long understood changes in the social organization of labor and class conflict as pivotal experiences in global history. Increasingly, they also understand energy transformations in a similar manner. Whilst energy history and labor history stand at a crucial interface, they have often failed to engage with each other, even—at times—obscuring each other. Outside a few well explored topics, like coal mining and, to a lesser extent, oil production, the labor of energy systems remains poorly understood. Electricity is perhaps the most understudied of all these areas, despite its global reach and centrality to histories of statecraft, international development, and technological change.

Since the emergence of commercial power generation in the late nineteenth century, electricity use has increased rapidly and unevenly. As electric intensification proceeded across the twentieth century, its generation and application transformed social and political relations. Electric infrastructure building projects helped forge contested visions of modernity. Systems of electricity supply emerged as domineering local, regional and national networks, dispersing electricity workers across countries, and furnishing systems of technological exchange across national borders.

We seek to examine the relationships of work which made electric power systems operable. We define work broadly to include—for example—waged labor for electric companies and related industries, the mining and manufacture of electric power system components like wires, waged and unwaged labor in homes (and the forms of industrial and home economics education that shaped this labor), forms of unfree and coerced labor, the work of maintenance and repair, and the information and service labor of the power sector. This list is by no means exhaustive. By the nature of dispersed systems that stretched into the home but were also subject to the technological ambitions of national governments, electricity workers were subject to myriad connections. These extended beyond their employers, to the state and the citizenry and customers, often made direct and personal through systems of connection and collection. These dynamics create strong potential for social hierarchies of class, gender and race to shape the electricity sector in diverse contexts.

The special edition will integrate varying political and economic circumstances which shaped electricity labor across differing global contexts. We are keen to record examples from post-colonial, Global South, and socialist settings. While proposals from any region of the world will be considered, regions of particular interest include East Asia, South Asia, West Africa, and

SWANA/MENA. Following a workshop on these themes, we are particularly interested in the following subjects:

- Labor demands of varied system quality and maintaining supply
- Domestic and informal labor, both waged and unwaged
- Workers in renewable energies and supply chains, especially critical minerals
- Safety and danger as a contested facet of historical electricity labor
- Disconnection and living off-grid
- Electricity intensive forms of work
- Cultural representations of electrical labor and electricity workers
- The labor of rural electrification
- Parameters of essential labor and how it shapes and limits workplace mobilization

Please submit abstracts to the co-editors [trish.kahle@georgetown.edu](mailto:trish.kahle@georgetown.edu) and [ewan.gibbs@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:ewan.gibbs@glasgow.ac.uk) by October 1, 2025. A first draft of the essay (for internal review by the co-editors) will be due by February 1, 2026. Essays will also undergo doubly-anonymous peer-review through the journal. The special issue of *ILWCH* is slated to appear in early 2028.