

OBITUARIES

David H. Bensman, influential Rutgers labor studies professor, dies

Steve Flamisch Special to Home News Tribune

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David H. Bensman, a respected professor and labor historian who retired in June as the longest-serving active faculty member in the Rutgers School of Management and Labor Relations, died on July 25. He was 70.

“David made a major contribution to scholarship on labor history specifically and the labor movement more broadly,” Dean Adrienne Eaton said. “But most importantly, he was a caring mentor and friend to dozens of labor studies students over the multiple decades of his career at Rutgers and made a significant difference in many lives.”

An award-winning scholar with a passion for the printed page and a deep respect for workers and the dignity of work, Bensman wrote or co-authored seven books and countless articles. His 1987 book, "Rusted Dreams: Hard Times in a Steel Community," co-authored by Roberta Lynch, examined how the decline of the American steel industry decimated one South Chicago neighborhood. It was nominated for a National Book Award.

“I was fortunate to have Dr. Bensman as my professor in the late eighties,” said Angelica Santomauro, executive director of the American Labor Museum. “David Bensman is truly one of the reasons why I fell in love with labor history, which changed my life’s course.”

In recent years, Bensman’s research focused on the misclassification of employees as independent contractors. His 2009 report, "Port Trucking Down the Low Road: A Sad Story of Deregulation," revealed the challenges facing owner-operator truck drivers.

“Twelve-hour days without compensation for overtime have become the norm,” he wrote in *The American Prospect*. “Drivers skimp on maintenance, which causes their engines to emit excessive cancer-causing diesel particulates. An owner-operator may gross around \$80,000, minus costs averaging \$52,000, and take home perhaps \$28,000 before taxes.”

Putting his research into action, Bensman helped to organize the Coalition for Healthy Ports, which is fighting to make the ports of New York and New Jersey more sustainable.

But Bensman's greatest contributions may have come in the classroom, where he helped to shape two generations of labor activists, organizers, and scholars. He mentored Analilia Mejia, who went on to serve as executive director of the New Jersey Working Families Alliance and as national political director for Bernie Sanders' 2020 presidential campaign and now his Senate office.

"He had the most gentle way to push me to do more, to be better, to ask all the questions and do the work," Mejia said. "When I began my career as an organizer, he served as a source of information and counsel and years later, it was always empowering to have him treat me with greater equity; recognizing that I was advancing in my work but still generous enough to continue to teach and counsel."

Susan Bisom-Rapp, a professor at Thomas Jefferson School of Law, described Bensman as "brilliant, passionate, warm, and very kind." She recalled the last conference they attended together, in 2016.

"I was struck by how much time David took to speak with the young scholars who were present," Bisom-Rapp said. "He was encouraging about their work, interested in everything they had to say. This is the hallmark of a true scholarly mentor."

David Harlan Bensman was born in Syracuse, New York in 1949 and grew up in Great Neck. He completed his undergraduate work at the University of Chicago, where he helped to recruit the Rev. Jesse Jackson to give a speech in the late 1960s.

He earned a doctorate in history at Columbia University in 1977 and joined the Rutgers faculty the following year. He served as professor, chair, and director of the department's labor studies programs during his 42 years of service. He retired on June 30.

Bensman is survived by his wife of 35 years, Josephine; a son, Joseph; three step-children, Jessie, Jean, and José; and two sisters, Rhea and Miriam.

Many of his writings are even more relevant today than when they left his fingertips, as the COVID-19 pandemic has brought workers' struggles into stark relief. He summed up labor's challenge in 2014.

"Workers find themselves in an ill-defined borderland, a grey zone, where confusion reigns, standards are shifting, decreasing or disappearing, and abuse is rampant," Bensman wrote.

“While the increasing flexibility of work is creating new opportunities for innovation and entrepreneurship, the result for most workers is a retreat to conditions prevailing before regulation began, a jungle of insecurity and exploitation.”