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Silver Screen Tarnishes Unions

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Abstract

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Keywords

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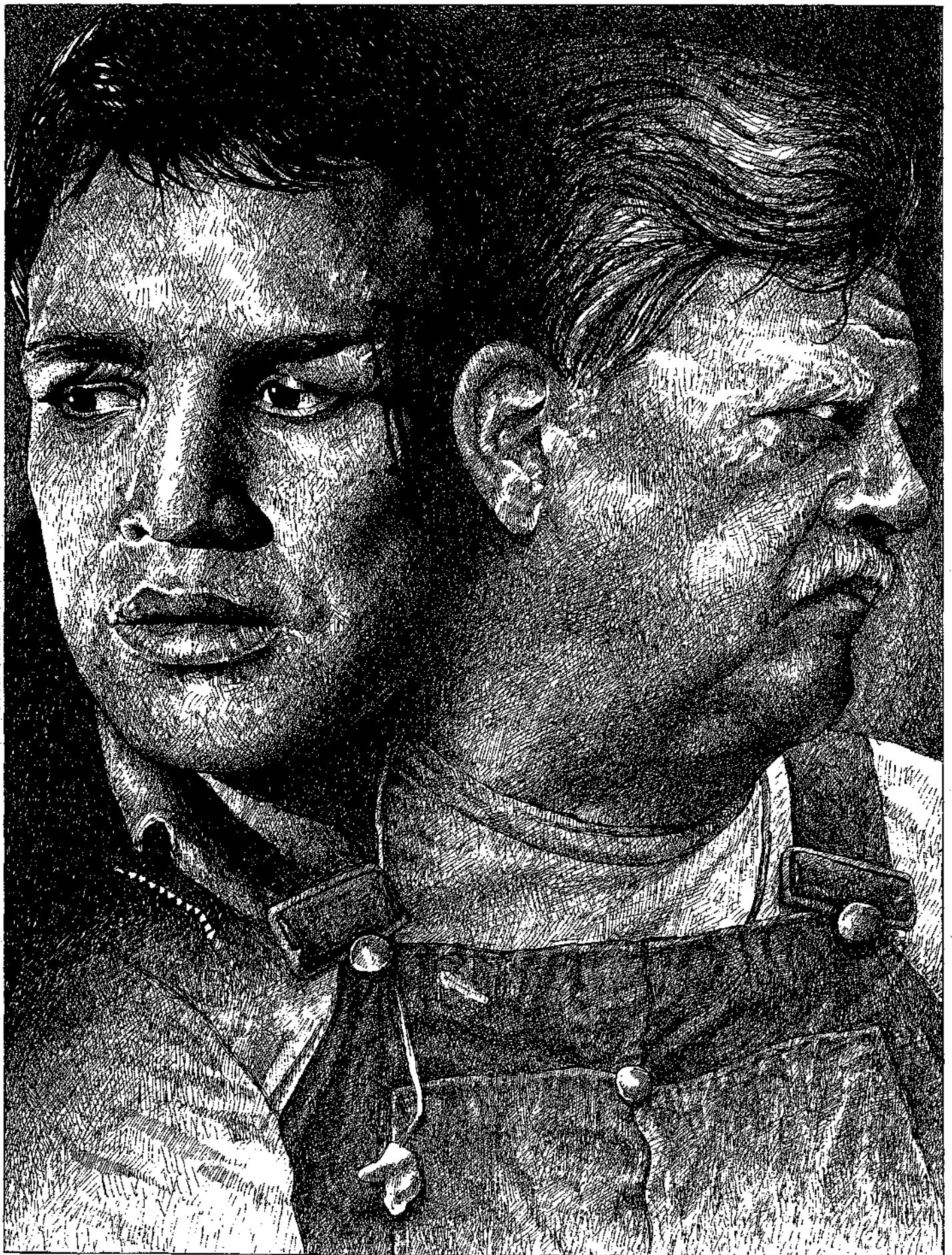
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SILVER SCREEN TARNISHES UNIONS

Hollywood movies have given workers a black eye
by Ken Margolies

A scene from the movie *Breaking Away*: Outside an Indiana quarry two old timers watch a man drive up in a Cadillac. One of the old timers says, "It must be a safety inspector." The other responds, "Or a union organizer."

It is disappointing, but not surprising, that *Breaking Away*—a film with something to say about working people—works the image of the corrupt union organizer for a laugh.

Organizing a film festival of pro-labor Hollywood films would be rather difficult. When unions do appear, they are often part of the subplot or the background for the main story line.

We are currently seeing a few union portrayals, but like a union buster's dream come true, the America on the movie screen has been almost union free. Where portrayed, organized labor's image on film ranges from inaccurate to sordid. Union leaders are depicted as outside agitators, inept nice guys or "big cigar" corrupt bosses. They provoke violent strikes, misuse union funds and dictate to the members.

Movies reflect none of the great drama of grievance processing or collective bargaining, preferring the more easily exploitable action of strikes; and where strikes are portrayed, violence and chaos predominate.

Hollywood has stereotyped not only unions but also union members who are almost always sweaty but lovable, blue collar types. Overlooked are millions of professional, technical and white collar members of the labor movement.

More than a hundred commercial films with some mention of unions have been produced in the past 75 years.

Ken Margolies is an organizer for the Communications Workers of America (CWA) and an avid film buff.



Many of these were produced during periods of great labor turmoil, during the pre-World War I era and the 1930's. With some notable exceptions they have illustrated ideas that discourage union membership. A union organizer could find in Hollywood films most of the standard reasons workers give for not joining unions. They confirm the unorganized workers'—and the public's—worst fears about the labor movement.

Corruption

The most celebrated and best remembered film about unions is *On the Waterfront*, the Academy Award winner in 1954. *On the Waterfront* cannot be called an anti-labor film, but its chief contribution to the movies' portrayals of unions is an indelible portrait of union corruption. Johnny Friendly (Lee J. Cobb), the racketeer union boss of the waterfront, became a symbol of the labor leader.

The film opens with Friendly collecting money from kickbacks, extortion and loan-sharking. He explains how he rose from a poor worker to head of the

union, "I didn't work my way out of there for nothing. You know taking over this local took a little doing; there were some pretty rough fellers in the way . . . I have 2000 dues paying members. That's \$72,000 a year legitimate, and each one of them puts in a couple of bucks a day to make sure he works steady . . . that's just for openers."

Through Father Barry (Karl Malden), the film does make an effort to disassociate the dishonest union from the rest of the labor movement. After observing the man giving kickbacks to get work, Barry declares, "Is that all you do, just take it? What about your union? . . . No other union in the country would stand for a thing like that." Unfortunately for labor's image this is a minor part of the story, and most viewers probably miss the point. The film is not as concerned with the labor theme as it is with Terry's (Marlon Brando) character development. Viewers remember the now legendary taxi scene and the corrupt union, not the minor dialogue of Father Barry.

In the end the longshoremen defy the gangster union leader and follow the blacklisted Terry to work. The men proclaim this will "give us back our union, so we can run it on the up and up." But once created, the image of the corrupt union is not nullified so easily. In the minds of many movie goers Johnny Friendly lives on as an accurate picture of modern labor leaders.

Union leaders in films began as outside agitators who always provoked strikes unrelated to any issues facing the workers. As unions became legally recognized and more established, the union leader was portrayed as just another boss, abusing the union's dues and giving orders to the members instead of representing their interests.

Early movies showed organizing efforts as ineffectual, un-American.

Throughout movie history unions were almost synonymous with strikes. It is management, not unions, who come through for workers in films.

Pre-World War I, The Outside Agitator

The first audiences for movies were mostly working people. While sympathizing with the plight of their major audience, the early movies showed most organized efforts to improve conditions as ineffectual, un-American and inspired by unscrupulous or misguided agitators. The titles alone reveal the bias of the movie makers: *Labor Agitators*, *Lazy Bill and the Strikers*, *Anarchists on Board*, *The Bomb*. The labor agitator would appear over and over until he was replaced several decades later by the more modern stereotype of union boss.

The agitator was presented in a variety

of ways, but all of them negative. In *Pete Wants a Job*, made in 1910 by Pathe, the labor leader is portrayed as an opportunistic loser who fails at every job he tries until he leads a strike. In *The Agitator* (1912), the troublemaker is a ranch foreman who comes back from a vacation in the city infected with crazy ideas. He uses whiskey to persuade the other cowboys to strike and demand that the ranch owner divide his wealth. The union organizer in *The Strike* (1914) is a thug who dynamites the plant, ruining the whole town when the company relocates.

Reality was not a high priority in films about labor action. Comedies especially used great license to ridicule and stereotype unionists. Strikes just magically happened with no hint of any real issues being involved. In *Mr. Faddleaway Goes*

on Strike (1911), a strike is called because Mr. Faddleaway decides he is tired of working. Although all he ever does is sit around in a bar with his friends, he jumps up and declares, "Comrades, throw down your tools, we are going on strike!" Throughout the short comedy, revolutionary slogans are mocked as the hero learns that working around the house for his wife is more than he can handle. Finally he declares they have won the strike and should return to work.

Charlie Chaplin's very popular *Dough and Dynamite* (1914) shows striking bakers as dark men with long black coats and Russian peasant caps. Chaplin goes through his famous slapstick routines trying to fill in for the absent strikers. The strikers beat up another scab and finally smuggle dynamite ("a stick of Russian candy" according to the title) into a loaf of bread and blow up the bakery.

Perhaps as a warning to workers in the film industry, *How They Work in Cinema* (1911) shows how a new movie director defeats a strike in his studio by using mechanical devices and a robot cast.

In contrast to the dastardly labor agitator were a variety of respectable working class heroes who achieved gains for workers without strikes or violence. These heroes were sons of the bosses, clergymen and workers who kept their faith in the boss. An owner's son rescinds a wage cut in *The Girl Strike Leader* (1910) when he falls in love and marries one of the employees. In *How the Cause Was Won* (1912), even the owner's son, working incognito in his father's plant, cannot make any progress negotiating with his father because his tone is too demanding. But when the father shows up at a meeting of his employees who have just voted to strike, he immediately rescinds a wage cut when he is warmly introduced by his old Civil War comrade, a worker in the plant.

Heroic action by a worker to gain the boss' respect was presented as a model for both individual and collective success. A railroad engineer gets to marry the boss' daughter and win a strike for his fellow workers by driving a train over a burning trestle in *The Strike at Coaldale* (1914). In *The Strike at the Little Jonny Mine* (1911), a worker protects the mine superintendent from violent strikers. Later all it takes is a calm ap-



Left, Roddy McDowell in "How Green Was My Valley", Esperanza's birthday party in "Salt of the Earth" (next page)

The labor agitator would appear over and over until replaced by the union boss.

proach from this worker, for the superintendent to grant all the workers' demands. In another mine strike, *The Strike at the Mines* (1911), a miner saves the manager during a violent strike. When the workers finally end the strike by driving away the malcontents, the hero gets promoted to assistant manager.

The scab was treated with sensitivity and sympathy in *Tim Mahoney the Scab* (1911). Tim believes in his union, but seeing his children starve during the strike drives him to the decision to scab. Moving Pictures World praised the movie saying, "The story is human and very probable if not typical."

Some Positive Images

There were some films that justified workers organizing to take action. Upton Sinclair appeared in *The Jungle* (1915), a film version of his bestselling expose of the human working conditions in the meatpacking industry. But getting a pro-labor film produced did not mean it would be widely shown. Moving Picture World cautiously praised the pro-union *Why?* (1913) with this warning to exhibitors, "In this case we have a picture that we dare not wholly commend as a good offering for all kinds of audiences . . . things are bad enough, but they are not as this picture shows them."

Perhaps to reward the AFL for supporting World War I and punish the radical IWW for its opposition, a "sensible" union enjoyed great respectability in *Dangerous Hours*, one of nine "red scare" films released between 1919 and 1920. The communists in the film have all the negative attributes of the agitator in earlier films, but the unionists are not patriotic and vehemently anti-communist. While the "reds" are middle class losers, opportunists or idealistic dupes with orders from Moscow, the unionists are extremely reasonable earthy types. The union president refuses strike assistance from the communists because, "We're Americans and we're fighting fair." Fighting fair meant politely telling the beautiful, young owner of the shipyard:

Union president: "It's a general walk out Miss Weston, ordered by Headquarters, and of course we have to obey. Our leaders feel justified or there'd be no strike; you understand that."

Miss Weston: "I understand, and in the meantime we shall remain the good friends we have always been."



The revolutionary IWW was crushed by, among other things, public opinion generated from their anti-war stance. The AFL, on the other hand, supported the war and prospered from the government sponsored war-time, labor-management cooperation.

1920's Oppose Union, Achieve Success

Once the war was over, however, unions were attacked with a full scale open shop campaign called the "American Plan." Throughout the 1920's companies used spies, strike-breakers and "yellow dog" contracts to create for labor, what has been called the "lean years." The films of the 1920's continued the anti-union themes established earlier and made some innovations.

One comedy and one cartoon enhance the image of workers being easily led on

strike by anyone with the right slogan. In *Bell Boy 13* (1923), a young man provokes a hotel workers' strike to force his rich uncle to allow him to marry an actress. Harry, the nephew, easily leads the workers off the job with speeches like, "What's the use of working when you can strike?" and "Do you want to be crushed under the heel of Capital?" The strike ends as easily as it started when Harry's uncle consents to the wedding. The sheep-like workers go back to work when Harry tells them, "Fellow agitators — all our demands have been met." Walt Disney's *Alice's Egg Plant* (1925) has all of a little girl's chickens going on strike after an agitator chicken comes to town. The new arrival carries a satchel labeled "Little Red Henski Moscow Russia IWW" and incites the other hens with demands for "smaller eggs." Parts of this

A movie director defeats a strike in his studio with a robot cast.

cartoon appear in the recent documentary of the IWW called *The Wobblies*.

In several films management provoked strikes to achieve its own ends. In the *Dixie Flyer* (1926), an ambitious railroad vice president tries to remove the company president by provoking a strike among the employees. A rich father, unhappy with his daughter's new husband in *Coming Through* (1925), gives the son-in-law a management job in his toughest mine, hoping he will fail. The assistant foreman gets the word that the owner wants trouble, so with the help of a saloon owner, they cause a violent strike.

Having established the agitator and unions as evil, the films of the 1920's added a slightly new theme to the labor picture. Overcoming labor troubles became the road to success for young working men. Wealth and the owner's daughter come to a garment presser in *A Tailor Made Man* (1922) when he resolves the labor problems of a shipping magnate despite the opposition of crooked labor leaders. In *The Runaway Express* (1926), a man gets offered a job after he commandeers a railroad train from the engineer who refuses to go any further until he has his union rest period. In *Men of Steel* (1926), a steel worker is wounded saving the owner's daughter from violent agitators. To the delight of his co-workers, he marries the owner's daughter and becomes half owner of the mill.

The 1930's Unions Meant Strikes

The movies of the 1930's continued to equate unions with going on strike. The workers rarely understood the reason for striking, and strikes never produced any positive changes in working conditions.

Coming during a period of tremendous labor struggles, the films sometimes alluded to actual strikes. *Black Fury* (1935) about a coal miners' strike and *RiffRaff* (1936) are two such films.

Black Fury features Paul Muni as a not very smart but well-respected worker who, while drunk, inadvertently advises his fellow workers to strike. Until hearing from Muni, the miners are undecided whether to listen to a militant worker or a moderate union steward. The militant secretly works for a firm that hires out scabs and guards during strikes. He riles up the miners by calling the union leaders sell-outs and attacking their big salaries. The union steward warns that listening to radical talk will only lead to

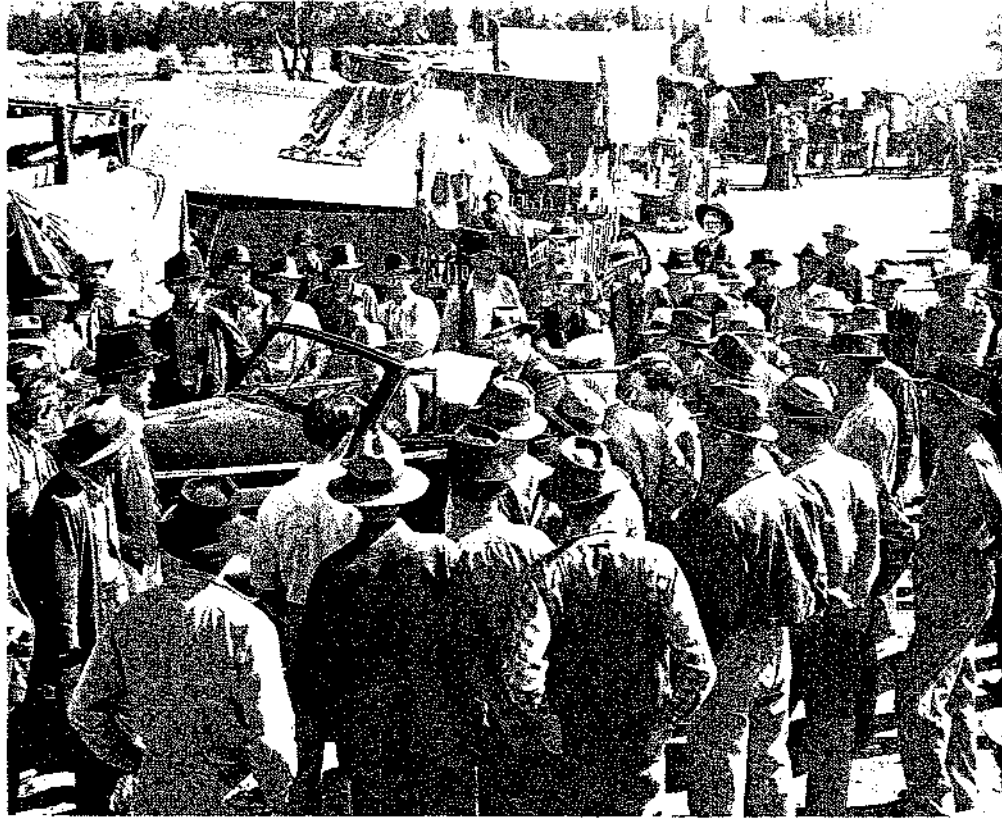
worse conditions. The resulting strike proves the moderate steward correct. Realizing what he has done, Muni redeems himself by taking a dramatic action which brings in the government to return the situation to normal.

Spencer Tracy in *RiffRaff* is another ignorant worker with leadership qualities. He is persuaded by the flattery of an agitator to provoke a strike over the objections of the moderate leaders of the longshoremen's union. The strike causes things to go badly for the workers, and Tracy becomes an outcast. However, he wins back his union membership when he breaks up the

The New York Times called the story "balderdash" but worried that, "The pernicious part of it, unfortunately, is that there are and will be those who accept Mr. Cobb's statement of the case as a complete dossier of fact." Considering the history of films about labor prior to *Our Leading Citizen*, the Time's comment seems understated.

Turning Point

Out of the labor struggles of the 1930's came official and legal acceptance of organized labor. This acceptance was reflected in more positive images of labor on the screen. Some of these new



agitators' plan to bomb the waterfront.

Several other 1930's movies reflected the negative view of unions. When it was released, *Our Leading Citizen* (1939) was attacked by Film Audiences for Democracy and others as anti-labor. The story occurs in a small town where a mill owner institutes a totally unjustified 10 percent pay cut, thus provoking a strike. Scabs and guards are brought in, and labor agitators respond by stirring up violence resulting in an explosion at the mill. Bob Burns plays an honest lawyer who kicks out the outsiders and urges the citizens of the town to help him settle the dispute in the "good old American way."

images were provided by independently produced films that reached a limited audience, such as *Millions of Us* and *The Wave*. *Millions of Us*, produced by American Labor Pictures, Inc., shows an unemployed man who contemplates scabbing on a metal workers' strike until he is given food and an explanation by a friendly union organizer. *The Wave*, commissioned by the Mexican government, produced by Paul Strand and co-directed by Fred Zinneman, also shows the error of scabbing. During a strike by Mexican fishermen, the scabs are converted when they see the strike leader, a former friend, brutally murdered by the

Getting a pro-labor film produced did not mean it would be widely shown.

boss' politician front man.

A popular film with pro-union sentiment is *The Devil and Miss Jones* (1941), a comedy about department store employees. The owner of the store secretly infiltrates his store posing as a shoe salesman. Instead of confronting the union organizers as he plans, he learns they have legitimate complaints. He is treated well by the other workers and poorly by management. The union organizer, played by Robert Cummings, is not an agitator or a radical, but a regular Joe who believes in Coney Island, the U.S. Constitution, and standing up for his rights. The film does show

hears honest men who speak up about poor working conditions called "reds," "agitators" and "labor fakes." Finally he demands skeptically, "What is these reds anyway? Everytime you turn around, somebody calls somebody else a red. Who is these reds anyway?"

The only true agitator in the film is Casey, an ex-preacher and old friend of the Joad family, murdered by company deputies for leading a strike. Tom avenges Casey's death and must flee from his family. His inspired final speech about collective action, "If all our folks got together and yelled," and his new mission in life, "Wherever there's a

and who gives a damn?" The new script emphasized the development of the Morgan family. The film is usually remembered fondly for Roddy McDowell's portrayal of the youngest son, Huw, and the tragic love between the preacher and Huw's sister Angharad.

The labor aspects of the film are mixed in their effect. The working conditions depicted are unrealistically good and the negative images of the owners are not carried over from the book. The pro-union forces are the sons of the Morgan family. They are polite and respectful of their father but determined to "speak out against injustice anywhere, with permission or without it." There are no outside agitators, and the cause of the strike is just. The most significant statement on unionism comes from the preacher, "Have your union, you need it. Alone you are weak; together you are strong, but remember with strength goes responsibility."

Balancing the preacher's endorsement of unionism are the scenes of the miners' strike against the wage cut. After months of hard times, the strikers wrongly threaten the father of the Morgan family because he initially opposed the strike.

Philip Dunne, the screenwriter for *How Green Was My Valley*, comments on the significance of that film and *Grapes of Wrath* in an interview in "Blueprint on Babylon," "At the time, you know, we were being very, very advanced, we thought, in taking a position on the basic right to organize, which at that time was very much in doubt in this country. This was the time of all the sit down strikes and everything also going on, and labor unions were not accepted. They were only in the process of becoming accepted in this country. So Zanuck in this and in the *Grapes of Wrath* was not only pioneering very courageously but also going against his own predilections because he was bitter anti-labor himself."

Dunne goes on to say that he and Zanuck were able to accommodate their opposing views on union by presenting both sides in *How Green Was My Valley*. The overall result is the message that regretfully unions are a necessary evil. They are just one more sign that the simpler, happier days of the past are gone forever.

1950's Established but Corrupt or Inept

By the 1950's the nation had recog-



the union favorably but falls back on an old theme: the boss, now enlightened, makes the union unnecessary.

The Award Winners

This interlude of film acceptance for unions was highlighted by two films, from bestselling novels, that made back-to-back Academy Award sweeps for John Ford and Darryl Zanuck: *Grapes of Wrath* (1940) and *How Green Was My Valley* (1941).

Grapes of Wrath debunks some of the standard movie notions about agitators. All through his journey from Oklahoma to California, Tom Joad (Henry Fonda)

fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there," is a milestone in the movies' treatment of organizers.

The screenplay of *How Green Was My Valley* omits much of the labor content from the original book. According to Mel Gussow in his book, "Don't Say Yes Until I Finish Talking," Darryl Zanuck rejected the first script for the film saying, "I get the impression that we are trying to do an English *Grapes of Wrath*, and prove that the mineowners were very mean and that the laborers finally won out over them. All this might be fine if it were happening today like *Grapes of Wrath*, but this is years ago

The new arrival carries a satchel labeled, "Little Red Henski, Moscow, IWW."



nized that for better or worse, unions were a permanent feature of American life. Even the Reader's Digest ran articles praising George Meany and Walter Ruether, the new leaders of the soon to merge AFL and the CIO.

The movies following *How Green Was My Valley* quietly incorporate acceptance of unions but pounce on their potential weaknesses. They harp on labor's real or imagined faults, show the boss favorably and invent non-threatening unions that only Hollywood could love.

In the *Pajama Game* and *The Whistle at Eaton Falls*, management again comes through for the workers in the end. The unions are so incredibly reasonable and docile it appears Hollywood was presenting a model for real unions to follow. In the *Pajama Game*, a film duplicate of

the Broadway musical, the union is as lovable as a teddy bear. The union president is a nice, dopey kind of guy who tells the union members the union should, "be second only to our loved ones and kiddies." He steers a moderate course for the pajama workers local in its quest for a 7½ cent raise the rest of the industry has already instituted.

The working conditions are good and speed ups are something the workers happily sing about. The grievance in the film (and perhaps in any film) is filed by a wimpy complainer after he gets pushed by the new superintendent (John Rait). The grievance committee chairwoman, Babe (Doris Day), is so accommodating the grievance is dropped before the first step meeting. She tells Sid, the superintendent, "We know you had provocation; we have it in our books as a slight

nudge."

The union's slow down collapses in the face of one firm word from Sid. Even Babe's dismissal for jamming up the machines is accepted by the union without protest.

Even the union's definition of victory is rather weak. When Sid uncovers that the company has been building the cost of the 7½ cent raise into its prices without paying the raise to the workers, he forces the company president, Hassler, to compromise. They rush to the union's strike vote meeting, and Hassler reluctantly announces his agreement to the raise but with no retroactivity. Some of the union members object, but Babe quickly yells, "Can't you see we've won!" and everyone starts dancing.

It is interesting that *Pajama Game* deviates from the novel it is based on, "7½¢" by Richard Bissell, by changing the union's character. In the novel the union is efficient and wins the raise through its own efforts. The grievance scene, the firing of Babe and the holding back on retroactivity do not appear in the book. While the film presents a union that is likable enough, it is not the kind of organization a worker could trust to get much done. Once again someone in management brings home the bacon for the workers.

Except for a few militants who are discredited, the workers in *The Whistle at Eaton Falls* maintain their faith in benevolent management. When the kindly old factory owner is killed in a plane crash, the local union president is appointed the new plant manager by the owner's widow. Uncorruptable, strong, intelligent, an all-American, Brad, played by Lloyd Bridges, really seems to belong in management in the first place. The union replaces him with Bill, a more typical stereotype of a worker, played by Ernest Borgnine. Bill's heart is in the right place, but he is not very smart or dynamic.

As in *Pajama Game*, there is nothing offensive about the union. However, the union is ineffectual and must depend on management to take care of the workers.

As plant manager, Brad must make decisions he opposed as a union leader that cause layoffs. The whole community is hit hard by the lack of work. Al (Murray Hamilton), a recent arrival to the small New England town, objects to the union's faith in Brad and tries to ex-

“Wherever there’s a fight so hungry people can eat, I’ll be there.”

exploit the situation. In contrast to Brad, Al is small, dark and seems motivated by jealousy and ambition. He says, “Labor’s got to fight for every inch it gets. Fight or you don’t eat,” and makes it sound paranoid and overreactive.

Al is thoroughly discredited when he secretly teams up with the anti-union former plant manager to thwart Brad’s plans to bring everyone back to work.

At a union meeting the reasonable voices convince the union members to trust Brad and reject Al’s call for militant action. In a last ditch effort to cause trouble, Al sets up a picket line and barricade at the plant gate. Bill (Borgnine) drives up and announces, “I never crashed a picket line in my life, and I never will. But this ain’t picketin’; it’s wild cattin’,” and drives his car through the barricade. The other workers march past Al behind a woman leader who declares, “Are you going to let this hooligan wreck our union?”

With the primary role of the union in the film being to support management and denounce militant troublemakers, it is never clear why the workers really need a union at all.

None of the standard derogatory images of labor unions appear in the *Garment Jungle*, a film based on a Readers Digest article. Lee J. Cobb plays the owner of a large New York garment factory who hires gangsters to keep the union out. An ILGWU organizer, Tullio Renata, is determined to bring this company into the union fold regardless of the risks. Tullio’s only fault is neglecting his beautiful wife because he is so dedicated to the union.

From the first confrontation between the union and the company, it is clear who are the “good guys.” When a new piece rate is introduced, an old Jewish woman rises timidly to say with an accent, “Mr. Foreman, I don’t want to make a big tsymis, but this garment takes too much time for the money.” The foreman responds in broken English, “Who don’t like, pick up your check and get out of here.” In walks Tullio in a jacket and tie, cool and calm but firm, “Now hold it, Mister. Now suppose we talk this over. It’ll get us a lot further than pushing these people around. Those days are over . . . a majority here want the union.” Tullio sounds like John Wayne protecting the innocent settlers in one of his many westerns. More importantly, a union organizer is finally por-

trayed as respectable, reasonable, dedicated, intelligent, firm and concerned with the wishes of the workers.

The union too is shown as honest and human. There are union dance classes, a union housing project, and after the gangsters kill Tullio, there is a mass union funeral. Unfortunately the film has a weak ending, both dramatically and from a pro-union viewpoint. Returning to the long movie tradition, the *Garment Jungle* has the owner’s son, moved by Tullio’s dedication and sacrifice, intervene on behalf of the workers. Even in films that endorse unions, the boss is only a problem for the workers temporarily, if at all.

In stark contrast to the non-militant fantasy unions in *The Whistle at Eaton Falls* and *Pajama Game* is the realistic

miners union in *The Salt of the Earth*. Released in 1954, the film was repressed because it was sponsored by the International Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers Union, directed by Herbert J. Biberman and produced by Paul Jarrico. The union had been expelled from the CIO for being communist and Biberman and Jarrico were identified as communists by the House Committee on Un-American Activities.

Although called propaganda by some of its critics, Bosley Crowther commented that *Salt of the Earth*, “is in substance simply a pro-labor film with a particular sympathetic interest in the Mexican-Americans with whom it deals.” The story is concerned with the struggle within the union over the role of the miners’ wives in a strike.



non-threatening unions only Hollywood could love

After withstanding the company's attempts to break their strike with scabs and police violence, the miners face defeat of the strike from a court injunction. The women assert themselves and replace their husbands on the picket line thus technically circumventing the injunction. There are dramatic scenes of the women bravely standing firm as the company tries to run them down with cars. Within the strike leader's family there is a crisis because he initially opposed the women's participation.

Unlike most other film portrayals of unions, in *Salt of the Earth* the workers debate issues at democratically run meetings and try to reach consensus. The employer is the adversary, not other workers as in numerous other films. Collective action and solidarity pay off, and the film is inspiring. Unfortunately *Salt of the Earth* has only reach a limited audience.

Big Labor vs. the Individual

As the labor movement continued to make gains, films began to say, "Unions may have been necessary when they started, but they have gone too far." Such a film is *I'm All Right Jack*, a Boulting Brothers comedy that made the New York Times Ten Best List in 1960. The British unions in *Jack* have gone so far the workers hardly ever work. Workers who are no longer needed are kept on to play cards, management is not permitted to increase the snail's pace set by the union and unexplained strikes happen with regularity.

This is the world in which Stanley Windrush (Ian Carmichael), an upper class twit, enters as a blue collar worker. He is unwittingly part of his rich uncle's intricate plot to provoke a strike in his own plant in order to get a kickback on a defense contract. Unaware that he is the owner's nephew, the union quickly tries to acquaint Stanley with trade unionism. Chief Steward Kite (Peter Sellers) tells him joining the union is, "not compulsory, but you have to join."

When Kite suspects that Stanley is a management spy because he is incompetent, ignorant of union principles and wears a three piece suit while driving a forklift, a union delegation complains to the personnel director, Major Hitchcock (Terry Thomas). Hitchcock, also unaware of the uncle's plot, agrees to oblige the union and "sack" Stanley immediately. Caught off guard, the union takes a brief caucus and now opposes the

dismissal on the grounds that "We do not and cannot accept the idea that incompetence justifies dismissal—that's victimization."

The situation gets out of hand when Stanley's insistence on working faster than the other workers provokes a strike that spreads to the entire country. The officially antagonistic chief steward and personnel manager meet over drinks to try to resolve the strike and still save face. Stanley will not go along with their plan calling for him to resign because of overwork. Instead he goes on national TV and condemns both "management clap trap" and "union bilge." The film

thoughtful man who will not join a wildcat strike he does not believe in. His co-workers begin to look like a band of thugs and louts as they persecute the courageous and human Attenborough. The story dramatizes the fears of many perspective union members that they will be forced to support strikes called by some autocratic and unreasonable union.

The same theme of individual freedom vs. unthinking conformity is Americanized in *Sometimes a Great Notion* (1971). An Oregon loggers union represents stifling conformity, and the Stamper family led by Henry (Henry



ends with "big labor" and "big business" victorious over Stanley but exposed as victimizers of the ordinary citizen.

Another British film released in 1960, *Angry Silence*, glorifies the strikebreaker while characterizing the union as an unthinking mob. As in *Tim Mahoney the Scab*, the scab is treated with sensitivity and sympathy. The strikers, on the other hand, are cruel and vicious. *Angry Silence* goes further than other films, however, in making the scab the symbol of the individual standing up for principles against the regimentation and rigidity of unionism.

Richard Attenborough plays a

Fonda) and Hank (Paul Newman) are the rugged individualists.

The Stammers are extraordinary people who believe in keeping their word and living up to their motto, never give an inch. The striking loggers union wants the Stammers, an independent operation, to support the strike by holding their logs back from the market. The unionists are nice people but ordinary and mediocre. The Stammers are extraordinary people and do not like "union creeps" telling them what to do.

When the president of the entire national union again asks Henry and Hank to cooperate because the "whole town is

Strikebreakers are heroes, unionists are pitiful losers.

hurting from the strike," Hank responds with a speech that a 1960's new left radical or a present day right-to-work advocate could agree with.

"Go on give us a look at the Twentieth (century). All the slots and departments you stash people away in. You going to tell us when to stop cutting and when to start cutting and who to sell to and pat our little bottoms and tell us what good little boys we are? Well, not yet, Bub, not yet you don't."

Instead of an organization that helps bring freedom to working people, the union is cast as the suppressor of

union people can only gawk in dismay. The defiant strikebreakers are the heroes while the unionists are a bunch of pitiful losers.

The images in *Sometimes a Great Notion*, *Angry Silence*, and *I'm All Right Jack* correspond to one of the common misconceptions about unions held by many white collar and professional workers. With no long history of unionism, these workers view unions as unable to address their individual needs. They visualize union leaders requiring them to work slower, support incompetents and take orders.

Other modern films round out the pic-

The concerned hotel owner (Melvyn Douglas) demands, "My people vote." The owner believes in, "I take care of my employees, and they take care of my guests," but the union leader seems more interested in the workers' dues and his business deals. The deal finally does get cancelled when the hotel is charged with refusing to rent a room to a Black couple. The union leader acts on politics, not principle when he explains, "Damn it all, you killed your own deal. Do you understand my situation? I've got about 40,000 Negro members."

In the comedy *The Out of Towners* (1970), transit and garbage strikes appear briefly to illustrate one more of the common plagues of modern urban life. Even Elvis Presley takes a swipe at unions in *The Trouble with Girls* (1969). The union steward in the film is ridiculous in the extreme. She represents the performers in a Chautauqua by constantly complaining about imaginary anti-union plots and accusing Elvis, the manager, of having to drink "to forget the corrupt acts you daily perpetrate on the working class." Elvis is amused by the steward's ranting and raving, and at one point tells her, "I think I should have you put in a home for the silly."

Labor History

The 1950's and 1970's saw some film attempts at dramatizing labor history. On the positive side are *The Organizer* (1964) and *Bound for Glory* (1971).

The Organizer is an Italian film with Marcello Mastroianni as an intellectual organizer who helps downtrodden textile workers in 19th century Turin go on strike. In contrast to the standard Hollywood portrayal of agitators, Mastroianni's character is sincere and has nothing personally to gain from his involvement.

Bound for Glory tells the story of Woody Guthrie. Guthrie refused to stop singing organizing songs on the radio, and whenever he could he went to the fields and canneries to urge the workers to unionize with his song. The AFL-CIO sponsored a showing of the film to benefit the United Farmworkers of America with Cesar Chavez attending.

Not so beneficial to labor was *The Molly Maguires*, with violence as the main theme. The story is told from the perspective of the policy informer who infiltrated the secret society of miners in 1870's Pennsylvania. The Mollies try to



freedom.

The Stampers pay a price for trying to keep their word to deliver their logs on time. Cables are cut causing accidents, Stamper children are taunted at school, and Stamper trucks are burned. It becomes clear who are the better people when three strikers ineptly try to set the Stampers' logs adrift. They end up having to be fished out of the river. Hank does not hesitate when called for help even though he knows the strikers are behind the sabotage and harrassment of his family.

When Hank triumphantly overcomes all odds to tow his logs to the mill, the

ture of unions as "big labor." In *Hotel* (1967), the union is rich and powerful, but not necessarily all out for the members. When a grand old non-union hotel is in financial trouble, the resourceful manager (Rod Taylor) arranges for a loan from the hotel workers' union pension fund in return for the hotel going union. The union leader is a well-dressed businessman in a nicely furnished office who agrees over the phone to lend the hotel two million dollars. The hotel manager agrees to "union shop and you write your own contract."

The deal almost falls through when the union expects immediate recognition.

Norma Rae's contribution, an image of organizer as winner.

combat the poor working conditions in the mines with violence but succeed only in getting themselves hanged.

With *Blue Collar* and *F.I.S.T.*, both released in 1978, and *Harlan County USA*, the documentary on the mine workers' struggle in Kentucky, winning an Academy Award, some observers began speculating about a new awareness of labor by filmmakers.

Both *Blue Collar* and *F.I.S.T.* are concerned with union corruption. According to an interview with Paul Schrader, the writer and director of *Blue Collar*, he deliberately sets out to show unions as more corrupt and oppressive than the employers. He succeeds. The shop steward in the film is an unresponsive glad-hander trying to hang onto his job so he does not have to return to the assembly line. The union president is a kindly looking white-haired man who is prepared to use bribes or murder to cover up the union's illegal activities. The government and the company come out looking relatively clean. The message is obvious: unions have lost their original purpose. For the common working person, the union is one more boss.

It is understandable that unionists were excited by seeing Sylvester Stallone, then the hottest male star, cast in a

positive portrayal of a labor leader. However, much like *On the Waterfront*, the theme of corruption in *F.I.S.T.* overshadows much of what is pro-union in the film. In fact, the evolution of the union in the film is almost a perfect illustration of the "unions had their purpose, but now they have gone too far" cliché. The union leaders, Johnny Kovac—an approximation of Jimmy Hoffa—starts off dedicated and honest. The company owners use tremendous force and violence against the workers, forcing Kovac to make deals with organized crime for defense. The union prospers, but it becomes corrupt and power hungry.

Considering the history of films on labor, *Norma Rae* is extraordinary. Made with the cooperation of Local 1840 of the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union, *Norma Rae* was filmed in an actual textile mill, and eloquently states the case for unions.

Norma Rae's greatest contribution is in offering an image of the organizer as an heroic winner. Most important, the hero emerges in the person of an ordinary working woman—a person with whom one can easily identify.

The character of Norma Rae (Sally Field) goes far to counteract the image

promoted so long by Hollywood that only losers and mediocre types, like the loggers in *Sometimes a Great Notion*, need a union. When Norma Rae brings the entire textile plant to a halt by standing atop a table with the word "union" held defiantly above her head, she is a winner. You needn't be a union activist to feel proud of Norma Rae's triumph over management and her own self-doubts. Present day labor organizing is re-endowed with the excitement and mission formerly reserved for labor's "good old days."

Whether more good films about labor will be produced in the future remains to be seen. The history is not encouraging. Hopefully the critical success of *Norma Rae* will lead to more films like it. Certainly unions should make every effort to support pro-labor movies and expose distorted portrayals of unions.

Perhaps the significance of positive labor images is best revealed by the response of textile workers to *Norma Rae*. According to Bruce Raynor, the southern director of ACTWU, textile workers supporting the union have been overheard saying, "If everyone saw *Norma Rae*, we'd have this industry organized."



David Carradine as Woody Guthrie and Ozark (Ronnie Cox) in "Bound For Glory"