

## Labor on the Big Screen

Review of available union-related commercial movies  
For Labor History with a Bite! program  
November 15, 2004

Here is a brief description of some 30 union-related movies that are currently available on VHS or DVD.

Being a movie critic is great work. All you do is watch movies and express your opinion. The descriptions and comments here are mostly my own opinions, for what they're worth.

If, however, you want *informed* opinions on a complete listing of commercial and documentary labor films, you should check out Tom Zaniello, *Working Stiffs, Union Maids, Reds and Riffraff* (Cornell University Press, 2003), which is available from Rainbow Books in Madison.

For more perspective, a number of prominent area labor leaders were asked to identify their five favorite union films. Their recommendation appears after the blurb. JC = Jim Cavanaugh; FE = Frank Emspak; DNK = David Nack; DNY = David Newby; SV = Sue Vilbrandt.

In solidarity,

Ron Blascoe  
AFT Local 4848

### *Boys from the Blackstuff*

Five-part series for BBC television on the decline of the working class in the era of Margaret Thatcher. A little depressing. Maybe too close to home. (1982)

### *Brassed Off*

Another class-conscious movie about Thatcher's England—but funnier than *Boys*. (1996) Rating: One fist up.

### *Bread and Roses*

The SEIU's Justice for Janitors campaign in LA. A great show of solidarity and massive rule-breaking. Or is it Madison? (2000) Rating: Two fists up. Recommended: SV

### *Brother John*

A story straight out of Sidney Poitier's head about an observer from another world who visits a strike, apparently to decide whether the Earth is worth saving. Nobody seems to like this one much. See what you think. (1971)

### *Burn!*

Not really a union flick, but highly recommended. Chattel slaves become wage slaves on a fictional island and the boss discovers paying wages is cheaper because you don't have to feed and house workers when they can no longer work. (1970) Recommended: DNY

*F.I.S.T.*

Reportedly Jimmy Hoffa's side of the story. Is labor violence ever justified? (1978)  
Recommended: JC

*Grapes of Wrath*

One from a series of John Ford's working class flicks, where the class struggle is toned down for big studio tastes. Read the book instead. (1940) Recommended: FE, DNK

*Harlan County War*

Take *Norma Rae* and *Harlan County, USA*, put them in a blender, and you get *Harlan County War*. May as well watch the originals. (2000)

*Hoffa*

We should have been tired of Jimmy Hoffa and the mob stories by the time this one came out, but there are some interesting strike battle scenes that were apparently choreographed from actual photos of the Great 1934 Minneapolis General Strike. (1992)

*How Green Was My Valley*

John Ford, again. This time mineowners cut wages and pit pro-union sons against get-along parents. Darryl F. Zanuck himself reportedly cut the radical material from the story. Read Richard Llewellyn's book instead. (1941)

*Illusion Travels by Streetcar*

Mexico City transit workers commandeer a streetcar and expose the contradictions of capitalism. "Love blossoms, workers get rides, the exploitive food chain gets briefly disrupted..." (Zaniello). Spanish with English subtitles. (1953) Rating: One fist up.

*I'm All Right, Jack*

Peter Sellers is a pro-Moscow union president. The makers of this movie no doubt intended to show how powerful, communist-dominated unions were ruining the British economy. But imagine it from the point of view of the working class: Who wouldn't want their union to be so powerful that it ran the plant? This one surely backfired. And, not entirely PC, but funny as hell. (1959) Rating: Two fists up.

*Joe Hill*

Some say too sympathetic; others say it's dishonestly critical of the Wobblies. Nobody says it isn't a great movie about Joe Hill. Swedish with English subtitles. (1971)

*The Killing Floor*

Chicago stockyard workers organize across race and ethnic lines as the boss plays the race card. First and last in a proposed PBS series on working class struggles. The series was purportedly killed in deference to those ubiquitous corporate sponsors. (1984)

*Kuhle Wampe*

Alternate title *To Whom Does the World Belong?* Written by Bertolt Brecht. Pretty tame class conflict, but banned by the Nazis, which is tantamount to an endorsement. German with English subtitles. (1932)

*Long Road Home*

California immigrant workers and labor agitators battle the bosses. A better rendition of the more militant Steinbeck than movie versions of *In Dubious Battle* or *Grapes of Wrath*. (1991)

*Matewan*

Historically accurate and compelling account of a UMW organizing drive in West Virginia after World War I. Black, white and Italian workers and intended scabs unite with the local sheriff (how often does that happen) to face off company goons. Why would a corporation like Cinecom let John Sayles make a movie like this? (1987)  
Rating: Two fists up. Recommended: JC, FE, DNK, DNY, SV

*Metropolis*

An up-date of the 1924 classic depicting the horrors of life among the industrial proletariat. "Historically important film," as they say at the University, but probably not something the kids would enjoy. (1926/1984)

*Newsies*

Remember that militant strike by thousands of newsboys in New York in 1899? Me either. But here's a reportedly accurate and definitely entertaining account, in spite of the fact it comes from the people who brought you *Bambi*. (1992) Recommended: SV.

*Norma Rae*

Martin Ritt (one of the blacklisted guys) makes a movie based on the real-life organizing drive at J.P. Stevens. Empowering. Probably the best of the lot. Again, you have to wonder why they let him make a pro-union movie like this. (1979) Rating: Two fists up. Recommended: JC, FE, DNK, DNY, SV

*The Molly Maguires*

Martin Ritt, again, with a story based on questionable history this time about a secret militant Irish-American mineworkers union. Did they do it or were they innocent? Did they even exist? Does it matter? (1970)

*Never Steal Anything Small*

Another The Union = The Mob story, this time with James Cagney singing and running for Union Boss. Watch it stoned. (1959)

*Nothing But a Man*

Consider the time this was released. Here a black man in the South stands up and says the workers should stick together—and he refuses to take it back. Plus a good Motown track. (1964) Rating: Two fists up. Recommended: FE, DNK, DNY

*On the Waterfront*

Elia Kazan (the HUAC fink) pioneers The Union = The Mob genre with this offering. It won eight Academy Awards, proving once again that the ruling class takes care of its own. (1954)

*The Organizer*

The Professor, an inept hero, comes to town and organizes a textile strike. These Italian working class movies often have good politics and are funny to boot. Italian with English subtitles. (1963) Rating: One fist up.

*Our Daily Bread*

Agricultural workers struggle to set up a co-op during the Depression. If you went through the Willy Street Co-op organizing campaign, you'll take comfort that there's nothing new under the sun. (1934)

*Sacco and Vanzetti*

Sacco and Vanzetti were caught up in an earlier wave of Homeland Security, as the U.S. capitalist state reacts to the Russian Revolution. This Italian-made movie came out six years before Sacco and Vanzetti were declared innocent. Italian with English subtitles. (1971)

*Salt of the Earth*

Three of the blacklisted Hollywood 10 set up an independent film company and produced one of the best union movies ever made. *Salt* has it all: militancy, people overcoming ethnic distrust and sexist attitudes, and workers taking charge of their own struggle—and winning. You couldn't see this movie for years after it was released, but you can see it now. Contrast this to the anti-union *On the Waterfront*, which came out the same year and was produced by the HUAC fink Kazan, and you see why it makes a difference who makes movies. (1954) Rating: Two fists up. Recommended: JC, FE, DNK, DNY, SV

*Silkwood*

You know the story: Karen Silkwood, activists in her OCAW local, finds major health and safety violations at the Kerr-McGee plutonium-processing plant and is killed on her way to blow the whistle. There's also a decent drive and a strange love angle: something for everyone. (1983) Recommended: JC, SV

*Strike*

What if a bunch of intellectuals overthrew capitalism and then gathered some of the best avant-garde artists of the day to make a movie about organizing unions? They'd probably start with a prologue from Lenin. The first—and arguably one of the best—pro-union movies ever made. Ok, maybe it's not for everyone. (1924) Rating: Two fists up.

*Teamster Boss*

This time it's Jackie Presser who is in bed with The Mob. Will they ever get tired of this theme? (1992)

*10,000 Black Men Named George*

How the black Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters turned slave-labor jobs into good union jobs. (2000) Rating: Two fists up.

*The Triangle Factory Fire Scandal*

The horror of the fire with insufficient coverage of the collective response. (1979)