

# Film and Video Resources for Teaching Labor History

## Why It's Hard to Teach About Labor History

Working people typically have not had the time, inclination, or specialized resources necessary to post their stories on the bulletin boards of history. Since our culture tends to ignore or suppress a class-based sensibility, most working people in the United States have little contact with their own rich traditions. In turn, a majority of students have few access points to the often fascinating but elusive past struggles of working people for dignity and social justice.

The corporate-owned news media and entertainment industries have their own institutional reasons to discourage producers from developing accurate or balanced views of workers and unions in the present. Not least of these are the all-important financial relationships with advertisers, who have scant interest in supporting programming perceived variously as boring, politically suspect, or inimical to their bottom line. Factor in relationships between the media industry and its workers' unions, and one begins to sense a possible structural conflict between positive worker imagery and the perspective of mass media managers.

Even in supposed bastions of historical preservation, images of labor too often fall prey to unconsciously biased eligibility criteria for entrance to the "Pantheon of History." This occurs not only through underrepresentation, but within the very forms of classification that organize historical collections. Seated recently in a university archive, I scanned the photograph holdings of a local daily newspaper representing nearly half a century of news photography. I searched in vain through cards describing the photographs for more than a few entries under headings such as "labor," "unions," "trade unions,"

"workers," and decreasingly likely substitutes. Finally I turned to "strikes." Of course, here I found dozens of cards on photographs dealing with the only aspect of labor considered—then and now—newsworthy. More disturbing to me than this revelation was that the newspaper's cataloging system had been left intact by the university archivists.

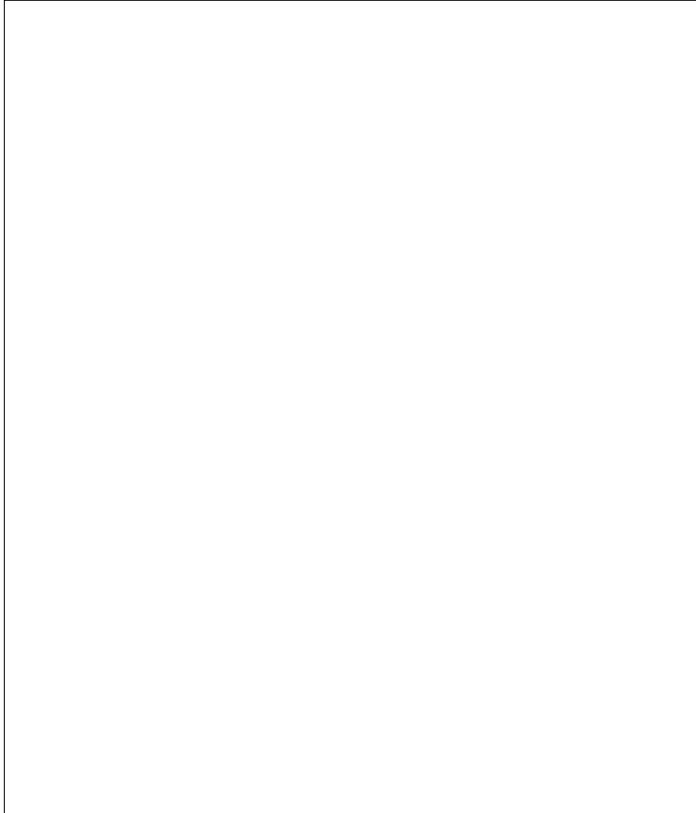
Woven through our cultural experience, these biases and tendencies filter down to affect the thinking of students. With less than one sixth of the workforce organized, a small minority of kids grow up in union households. The next generation's understanding of labor stems from sources unlikely to promote union values in a fair—let alone positive—light.

## How It's Getting Easier to Teach About Labor History

Lest this sound depressing, one should know that there are a growing number of films and videotapes available to provide the interested teacher with a countervailing point of view. Even better, one can find some decent, recently compiled lists, which reach across the boundary of documentary and fiction, to help guide classroom choices.

Visual media get students inside history. There is nothing like a Hine photo to show the unavoidably painful face of child labor at the turn-of-the-last-century. Good dramatic films based on historical labor events such as the underappreciated *The Molly McGuires*, or the now-historical *Norma Rae* (1979) provide students with a compelling sense of having been up close to events in a way that written texts alone cannot.

McClure's Magazine (November 1901)



Henry C. Frick (1849-1919), president of Carnegie Steel Company, a major art collector, and philanthropist, was responsible for suppressing the Homestead Strike of 1892.

Properly integrated with classroom simulations, readings, discussions, homework such as oral histories, classroom visits by veterans of the labor wars, films, and videotapes round out the learning experience. This is a crucial point. Films and videotapes about labor history function much more effectively through the reinforcement of other learning activities than they would on their own. Especially given the vacuum of entry knowledge one can expect from most students—for both labor and history—pedagogical underscoring helps immensely.

One example of clear thinking along these lines is the American Social History Project's *Who Built America?* The authors and designers of the project combined a state of the art two-volume textbook with a series of videotapes and CD-ROMs to create a range of possibilities for teachers and students in post-secondary educational settings. Another good bet is *The Power in Our Hands* (Monthly Review Press, 1988), a curriculum designed for high school students but also quite usable with adults. The authors suggest appropriate placement of films such as *Union Maids* and *Modern Times* within generally excellent lesson plans.

A lesson on the 1892 Homestead strike and lockout in *The Power in Our Hands* revolves around a simulation of a meeting between two key groups of workers that must reach a decision together. The authors offer a reading, to be undertaken after the role play, so that the students may compare their results with the historical

record. I have found that screening *The River Ran Red*, an hour-long documentary on Homestead, following the simulation and debriefing, substitutes nicely, allowing another option for students with different learning modalities. Some of my students who might not have done the reading were intrigued enough by the simulation and video to do so.

Sometimes I hear colleagues fall into the “bite-sized pedagogy” refrain: do not show anything longer than twenty minutes. People are so conditioned—or so goes this perspective—by the mass media’s assumption of short attention spans that one cannot expect to be able to show longer films. In contrast to received wisdom, my community college night students have stayed to watch the entirety of slow-paced feature films such as *Matewan*, even during the unfortunate occasion when I took on faith the (erroneous) running time printed on the video box and started the film so late it ran over the end of class.

There are many ways of organizing discussions around fictional films. I have generated good ones by showing *On the Waterfront* and *The Molly McGuires* in consecutive class sessions, after providing students with background about the Hollywood blacklist. The theme of “informing,” treated so differently by these two films, takes on a multi-dimensionality when the viewer knows the director and screenwriter of *On the Waterfront* were former members of the Group Theater who named names and continued to get film industry work, while the director of *The Molly McGuires* refused to testify before HUAC and was blacklisted. The students’ analysis of the two films delved into the psychology of informing; dealt with how the portrayals of worker violence differed, and possible reasons why; considered what options workers face when their unions are removed from their control; and moved beyond thematic interpretation to address questions such as “why are there so few Hollywood films about labor?”

A similarly rich terrain may be explored in the documentary realm, roughly divisible into four parts. First, there is the oral history subgenre for events recent enough to be harvested from the memories of the living: *Union Maids*; *Babies and Banners*; *Rosie the Riveter*; *The Wobblies*; *The Uprising of '34*; and *A. Philip Randolph: For Jobs and Freedom*. Second, one can readily find excellent documentaries on older topics such as *1877: The Grand Army of Starvation* and *The River Ran Red*. Third, some films produced by unions as action tools, now themselves historical documents, can be dislodged with a little digging, such as *Hell Bent for Election* (1944); *Poverty in the Valley of Plenty* (1945); and *Huelga!* (1966). Finally, verite coverage of unfolding events (e.g., Barbara Kopple’s *Harlan County* and *American Dream*) provide an emotional edge of immediacy that can engage all but the most history-resistant students.

Most labor history films and videos are produced with adults in mind, or, at best, an audience of university students. With a little stretching and proper setup by teachers, however, many of these can be used in secondary school settings, providing, of course, the class is able to transgress traditional bell-divided hours. Longer films, for example, can be broken up into screenings over two or three class sessions.

When looking for films appropriate to elementary classrooms, the choices dwindle. Los Angeles teacher Phyllis Chiu, with assistance from the CFT Labor in the Schools Committee, developed a curriculum called "The Yummy Pizza Company." In the course of teaching young kids about the world of work and some of the conflicts that may arise there, she has successfully integrated clips from *Modern Times* and *Newsies*. And let us not forget that Mr. Rogers visits a different workplace in nearly every episode, quite respectful of the workers!

Labor films and videotapes open numerous windows into cross-disciplinary approaches to the teaching of labor history. Film history, media critique, the aesthetics of labor imagery, and the special place of oral history in uncovering the stories of individuals and social groups unappreciated by mainstream history-telling: these are but a few of the starting places for discussion and discovery in your classroom. The Horatio Alger myth will not immediately fold up its tent, but at least one can help it to suffer some honest competition.

*The Critical Communications Review, Volume 1: Labor, the Working Class, and the Media*, (Ablex Publishing Corporation, N.J., 1983). Four sections: History; Media Unions; Media Content and Working People; and New Communications Technologies for the New Workplace. Ranges from highly specialized theorizing to down-to-earth discussions. (T,U,C)

William J. Puette, *Through Jaundiced Eyes: How the Media View Organized Labor* (I.L.R. Press: Ithaca, N.Y., 1992). Tends toward a monolithic view of corporate media's treatment of unions and labor issues, but some chapters could be useful for secondary student reading. The appendices alone are worth the price of admission, listing, as they do, decent-sized selections of "American Movies Dealing with Labor Unions," "Network News Specials and Documentaries About Labor Unions on American Television," and "Plot Synopses of American TV Dramas Dealing with Labor." (T,U,C,H)

Zaniello, Tom, *Working Stiffs, Union Maids, Reds, and Riffraff:*

## Resources

### Books

These range from advanced theory to high school student-friendly, sometimes in the same volume. Most are appropriate for teachers or university students. I have marked each with a designation: (T) teachers; (U) university student; (C) community college student; and (H) high school student. Fauss's volumes stand outside these categories. They are an indispensable resource for film makers or serious researchers into the history of the treatment of working people in film and television.

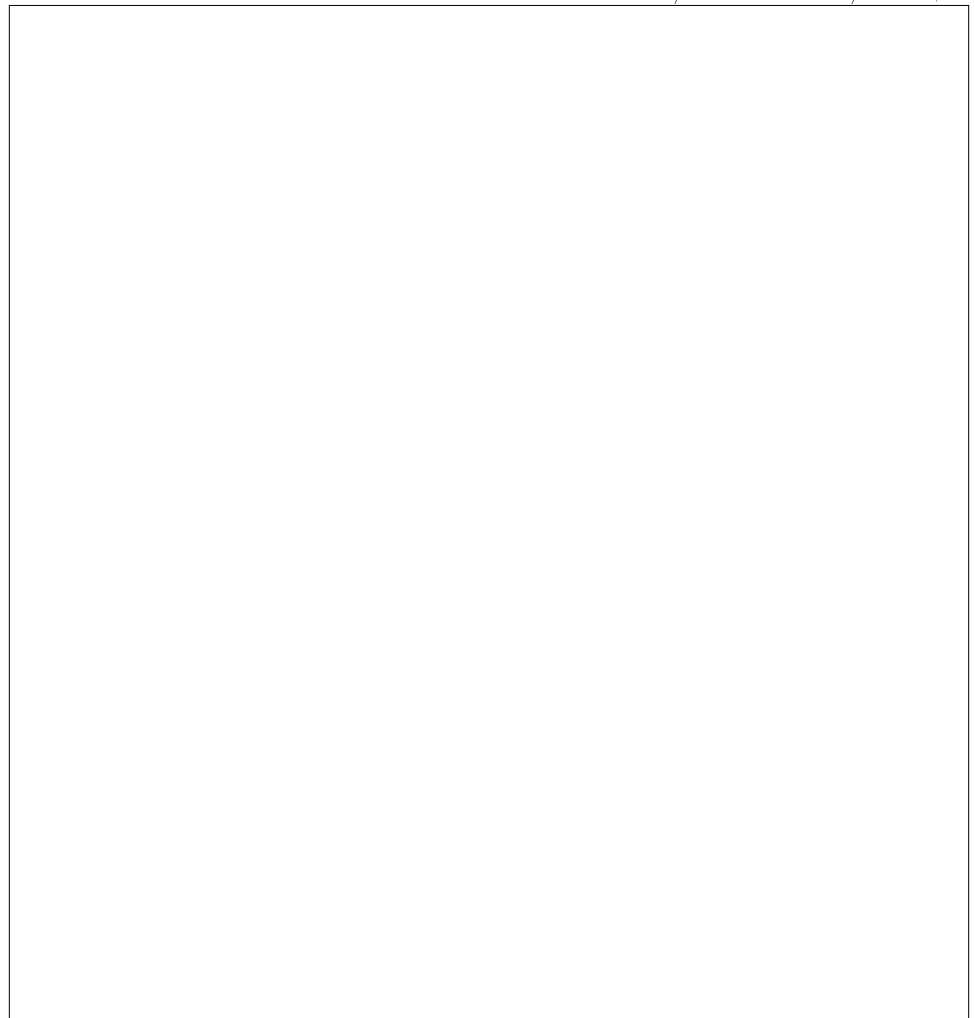
Sara U. Douglas, *Labor's New Voice: Unions and the Mass Media* (Ithaca, N.Y.: I.L.R. Press, 1986). A historical and theoretical essay exploring labor and media issues, with a focus on unions' efforts to communicate with their members and the public, but commentary along the way on various films. The case studies are particularly good. (U)

Richard Fauss, *A Bibliography of Labor History in News Film* (Institute for Labor Studies, West Virginia University, 1980). Four large volumes of briefly annotated newsreels and news programs with labor content, from the early-twentieth century to the 1970s.

Vincent Mosco and Janet Wasko, eds.,

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This is an Adobe Portable Document Format (PDF) from the original publication. Paper copies may be made, free of charge, for classroom use, but must include a notice acknowledging the source.

Courtesy of American Social History Productions, Inc.



The Grand Army of Starvation, Pittsburgh, July 1877. The Pennsylvania Railroad yards were destroyed by rioters after Philadelphia militiamen fired into a crowd of strikers and sympathizers.

*An Organized Guide to Films About Labor* (I.L.R. Press: Ithaca, N.Y., 1996). A look at one hundred fifty Hollywood features, documentaries, and foreign productions with labor themes. Each film gets a short critical essay, brief bibliography, referral to similar films, and notes on availability. Intelligent if sometimes quirky commentary. (T,U,C)

#### Articles, Pamphlets and Special Issues of Journals

The issues of *Extra!* and *Ammo* cited below provide good student readings for developing a critical perspective on viewing the mass media's presentations of labor issues. *Film Library Quarterly* and *Workers' Education* supplement the lists of labor films and videotapes found in Puette's and Zaniello's books. *FLQ*, while obviously dated (1979) in its film and distributor lists, contains decent critical contributions by a stellar group of labor historians, and a good discussion by union communications staffers on some of their experiences using labor films.

"The Media Business: A Workers' Guide to the Media," a special issue of *Ammo* 25 (November, 1987). UAW *Ammo*, 8000 E. Jefferson, Detroit, Mich. 48214.

"Bringing Labor into the K-12 Curriculum: Resource Guide for Teachers," California Federation of Teachers, 1995. CFT, One Kaiser Plaza, Suite 1440, Oakland, Calif. 94612. While the listings are somewhat California-centric, the Guide is full of ideas for teaching about labor.

"Lost in the Margins: Labor and the Media," a special issue of *Extra!* 3 (Summer 1990). *Extra!* Subscriptions, FAIR, 130 West 25th Street, New York, N.Y. 10001.

"Film and Video," a special issue of *Workers Education* 8 (March 1995), Bulletin of the International Federation of Workers' Education Associations (IFWEA), c/o Histadrut, 93 Arlozorov Street, Tel Aviv 62098, Israel.

"American Labor Films," a special issue of *Film Library Quarterly* 12 (1979).

Also see the "A-V Shelf" column in every other issue of the quarterly *Labor Studies Journal*, which reviews new (and sometimes venerable) films and videotapes useful in labor education. *Labor Studies Journal*, Transaction Periodicals Consortium, Department 8010, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, N.J. 08903.

#### A Selected List of Labor Film and Video Distributors

AFL-CIO Education Department, 815 16th Street, N.W., Washington, D.C.; (202) 637-5153.

Bread and Roses Cultural Project, 330 West 42d Street, 15th Floor, New York, N.Y. 10036; (212) 631-4564.

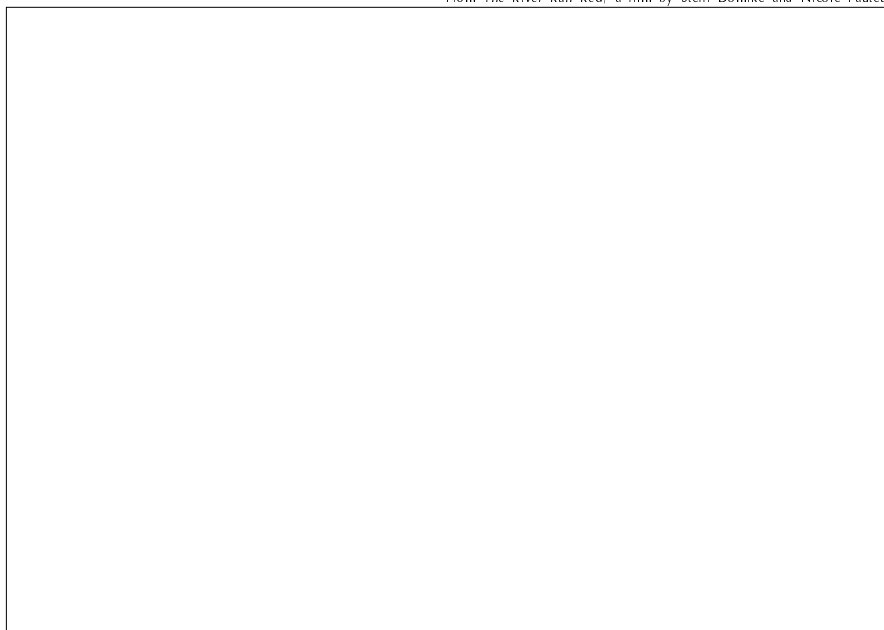
California Newsreel, 149 Ninth Street, Suite 420, San Francisco, Calif. 94103; (415) 621-6196.

Labor Education Service, University of Minnesota, 271 19th Avenue, South, Room 437, Minneapolis, Minn. 55455; (612) 624-5020.

New Day Films, 22 D. Hollywood Avenue, Hohokus, N.J. 07423; (201) 652-6590.

Paper Tiger, 339 Lafayette Street, No. 6, New York, N.Y. 10012, (212) 420-9045.

From *The River Ran Red*, a film by Steffi Domike and Nicole Fauteux



The barges which carried the Pinkerton guards to Homestead were set on fire after the bloody battle on 6 July 1892.

United Auto Workers, Education Department, 8000 E. Jefferson, Detroit, Mich. 48214; (313) 926-5000.

We Do The Work, 5867 Ocean View Drive, Oakland, Calif. 94618; (510) 547-8484. □

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