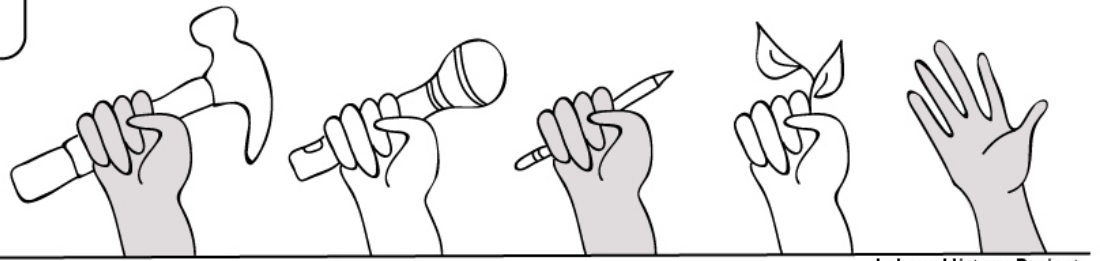




Lesson 10: Labour on Screen



Labour History Project

Lesson Summary: Recommendations for significant labour films with discussion and reflection questions.

Time: 2-3 classes

Essential Question: What can be learned from film about the struggles of labour?

Summary of the Lesson Activities

Obtain a film from the list provided to view with your classes taking into consideration the topics you've been covering, your class makeup, or demographic. Each of the stories presented here is based on or inspired by true labour events. Most can be found at school or public libraries or online.

Films:

Bread and Roses, 2000 directed by Ken Loach, stars Adrien Brody. Dramatizes janitorial workers in L.A. and their struggle to unionize and improve conditions. Based on the "Justice for Janitors" campaign.

F. I. S. T. (FIST) (1978) Directed by Norman Jewison. Cast: Sylvester Stallone, Rod Steiger, Peter Boyle, Melinda Dillon. Closely paralleling history, this film recounts the rise and fall of union leader Johnny Kovak from his beginnings as an idealistic blue collar worker to head of the Federation of Inter-State Truckers.

Germinal (France, 1993) Directed by Claude Berri. Recreates the gut-wrenching poverty and intense struggles of striking French coal-miners in 1884 at the Voreux mines through the bitter toils of Maheu and his family and Etienne, an organizer for the miner's new union. As conditions in the mines worsen, Etienne convinces Maheu to organize a miner's strike but when the miners finally do strike the owners send in armed soldiers to defend the mines. Based on a novel by Emile Zola.

Grapes of Wrath (1940) Directed by John Ford. Cast: Henry Fonda, Jane Darwell, John Carradine, Charley Grapewin. The migration of the Joad family to California from their dust-bowl farm in Oklahoma during the Great Depression. c1987. 100 min.

I'm All Right, Jack (UK, 1959) Directed by John Boulting. Cast: Peter Sellers, Peter Sellers stars as tragic-comic socialist shop steward Fred Kite in this class struggle comedy; Ian Carmichael is the upper class twit hired as a common worker at his wealthy uncle's missile factory, who becomes the unwitting pawn of both the corrupt management and the union, provoking a national strike.

Made in Dagenham, 2010 British, directed by Nigel Cole. Dramatizes the Ford sewing machinist's strike of 1968 over equal pay for women. Theme song's lyrics by Billy Bragg. The strike leads to the Equal Pay Act of 1970.

Matewan, 1978. Classic film by John Sayles. Starring Chris Cooper, James Earl Jones, Will Oldham (as a young man, now the anarcho-punk musician 'Bonnie Prince Billy'). Dramatizes the 'Battle of Matewan' in the "Mingo Logan Mine Wars", a 1920 coal strike in Mingo county West Virginia. Excellent for illustrating issues around race, immigrants, solidarity, and the role of music. Music includes singing by Hazel Dickens, well known feminist, pro-union bluegrass musician.

Norma Rae, 1979. Perhaps the most well known union film. Directed by Martin Litt, stars Sally Field as a textile mill worker in North Carolina who struggles to organize the mill. The film won two awards (Field for Best Actress) and Best Original Song. It was nominated for several other awards. Based on the life of Crystal Lee Sutton. Excellent as well for examining the role gender, race, and even age.

Pajama Game (1957) Directed by George Abbot. musical. The Broadway musical based on the novel seven and half cents. Doris Day stars as an employee at a pajama factory who becomes the spokesperson for her fellow workers when management refuses to give them a seven and a half cent raise

A Time to Rise, 1981. This is a shorter documentary (40 mins), directed by Anand Patwardhan and co produced with Jim Monro. "This film documents the conditions among Chinese and East Indian immigrant workers in British Columbia that provoked the formation of the union, and the response of growers and labor contractors to the threat of unionization. Made over a period of two years, the film is eloquent testimony to the progress of the workers' movement from the first stirrings of militancy to the energetic canvassing of union members." Includes Raj Chouhan, BC labour and human rights activist and Cesar Chavez, American migrant worker activist (<http://www.patwardhan.com/films/timetorise.htm>) Available from the National Film Board store. Great to show in conjunction with Viva La Causa.

Viva La Causa, 2008. Documentary covering the seminal grape strike and boycott led by Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta in the '60s. "Viva la Causa will show how thousands of people from across the nation joined in a struggle for justice for the most exploited people in our country - the workers who put food on our tables." From Teaching Tolerance. Teaching Tolerance of the Southern Poverty Law Centre offers a free dvd and teacher guide kit on this topic. Great to show in

conjunction with A Time to Rise. <http://www.tolerance.org/kit/viva-la-causa>

Salt of the Earth, 1954. Based on a strike at a mine in New Mexico, the film examines racism, gender, and forces of poverty as Mexican American workers strike for equal pay with English speaking workers and for dignity. Miner’s wives play a major role in the strike. Written and directed by members of the “Hollywood Ten”.

Learning Objectives

Struggles in the workplace are dramatic events well told on film. Each of the listed films is a powerful way for students to understand labour struggles in a more meaningful medium

Materials and Resources Needed

Selected film

Handout #10a: Labour on Screen Extended Questions

Handout #10b: Labour on Screen Simple Viewing Questions

Extension Activities

The Handout#10a entitled “Labour On Screen Extended Questions” questions offers great opportunities for essay responses, and most of the films offer an interesting comparison with the Big Strike case in Lesson #7. Have things changed?