

The union movement in the movies



**Jamie
Lumm**

The true history of the union labor movement in America is a rich and fascinating story that receives little attention in our nation's classrooms and is often misrepresented. Even in movies and on television programs, working people and labor leaders often are characterized as narrow-minded miscreants or dishonest thugs. It can be difficult to find portrayals that accurately reflect what being a union member is all about. I know that in watching some programs, I find myself wincing and even getting a little angry when I see unions and working people portrayed as greedy or lazy work dodgers.

However, there are a few films available that provide a more accurate look at the history of the labor movement and what it stands for. What follows is just a few of them. You may have seen some of these before; if so, they are worth a second look. If you haven't had the opportunity, I heartily recommend them.

"Matewan": (1987) Directed by John Sayles; Cast: Chris Cooper, James Earl Jones, Mary McDonnell, Will Oldham—Based on actual events, the film tells the story of the Battle of Matewan, an incident that occurred in 1920. Joe Kenehan, a representative of the United Mine Workers, arrives in the company town of Matewan, WV, seeking to organize the workers who have been trying to form a union. He encounters a powder keg of racial hostility, corruption and betrayal in this dramatic retelling of the bitter clash between unionist miners and the tyrannical coal company owners.

"10,000 Black Men Named George": (2002) Directed by: Robert Townsend; Cast: Andre Braugher, Charles S. Dutton, Mario Van Peebles—This film is a dramatization of the true story of the formation of the first black-controlled union, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. It portrays the efforts of Asa Philip Randolph, a black journalist trying to establish a voice for these forgotten workers. Randolph agrees to fight for the Pullman porters' cause and form the first black union in America. Livelihoods and lives are put at risk in the attempt to gain 10,000 signatures of the men known only as "George," after George Pullman, the owner of one of the first national companies to employ emancipated slaves following the Civil War. This is the true story of how a courageous leader came to be known as "the most dangerous man in America."

"Harlan County, USA": (1976) Director: Barbara Kopple—This Oscar-winning documentary covers the "Brookside

Strike," an effort of 180 coal miners and their wives against the Duke Power Company-owned Eastover Coal Company's Brookside Mine and Prep Plant in southeast Kentucky's Harlan County in 1973. Directed and produced by Barbara Kopple, who has long been an advocate of workers' rights, this film illustrates just how frightening going on strike was at that period in time. It explores the politics of the union and the death of United Mine Workers of America President Joseph Yablonski and his family, and the daily, often painful lives of the miners as they take on a power company that thinks the best way to settle labor disputes is to hire thugs with guns.

There is also a dramatized made-for-TV movie version of this struggle titled "Harlan County War" (2000) that was directed by Tony Bill and stars Holly Hunter.

"American Dream": (1990) Director: Barbara Kopple—The film, also directed and produced by Barbara Kopple, is centered on unionized meatpacking workers at Hormel Foods in Austin, MN, between 1985 and 1986. Hormel had cut the hourly wage from \$10.69 to \$8.25 and cut benefits by 30 percent despite posting a net profit of \$30 million. The local union (P-9) opposed the cut, but the national union, the United Food and Commercial Workers, disagrees with their strategy.

Soon, despite the efforts of a seasoned negotiator sent by the parent union, the company has locked out the workers and hired replacement workers, leading to a series of violent conflicts amongs members of the community. Kopple focuses on the personalities and emotions behind the strike, creating a highly charged portrait of labor that is sympathetic to the workers' distress without ignoring the strike's greater ambiguities. "American Dream" features footage of union meetings and press releases, Hormel press releases, news broadcasts, and in-depth interviews with people on both sides of the issue.

"Class Dismissed - How TV Frames the Working Class": (2005) Directed by: Pepi Leistyna—This documentary, narrated by Ed Asner, exposes television's narrow representation of the American working class from the early days of television through more recent sitcoms, reality shows, police dramas and daytime talk shows. Featuring interviews with media analysts and cultural historians, this documentary examines the patterns inherent in TV's disturbing depictions of working class people as either clowns or social deviants—stereotypical portrayals that reinforce the myth of meritocracy. "Class Dismissed" explores the ways in which race, gender and sexuality intersect with class, offering a more complex reading of television's often one-dimensional representations of the working class. The video also links television portrayals to negative cultural attitudes and public policies that directly affect the lives of working-class people.