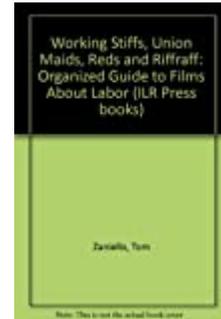


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Tom Zaniello. *Working Stiffs, Union Maids, Reds and Riffraff: An Organized Guide to Films About Labor.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996. 295 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-87546-353-7; \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87546-352-0.



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An Invaluable Resource

I have been teaching classes about labor and work, to both college students and workers, for 28 years. Often, I supplement lectures with films, and over the years, have shown scores of movies and documentaries. Finding good labor films has always been pretty much a matter of chance—a mail catalog comes in, a magazine review, a newspaper article, or a friend’s recommendation. So, when I heard about Tom Zaniello’s new book, *Working Stiffs, Union Maids, Reds and Riffraff: An Organized Guide to Films About Labor*, I was excited. Now that I have read the book, I can say enthusiastically that my excitement was justified. Zaniello has compiled a list of 147 labor films, from many countries, and described and analyzed each one (in alphabetical order). He explains when the film was made, who directed it, what it is about, what—in his view—is its value, what has been written about it, and where we can get it. All of these features make the book an invaluable resource for teachers or anyone interested in the workers’ portrayal in the movies.

While most of the titles were familiar to me, many were not, and I learned a lot about the films I had seen several times. I did not know, for example, that at Emile

Zola’s funeral procession in Paris, coal miners marched shouting “Germinal! Germinal!” or that Mexican actress, Rosaura Revueltas, was deported before finishing her role in *Salt of the Earth*. And I was unaware of the subtle Marxist iconography in Bertolucci’s epic, *1900*. Readers will appreciate some of the esoteric films reviewed. I look forward to seeing *Adalen 31* (about a strike in Sweden in 1931), *Business as Usual* (a strike in a small Liverpool dress shop), *Fast Food Women*, *Harry Bridges: A Man and His Union* (Bridges says of the famous last line of the Manifesto—“and that’s as good as the day it was said!”), *Man of Marble* (the downfall of a Polish worker hero), *The Killing Floor* (black workers in Chicago’s meat-packing plants), *35 Up* (tracks the lives of people from different social classes beginning at the age of seven), and many others. Zaniello’s reviews reflect his sympathy for working people, but they are generally sophisticated and even-handed. He indirectly criticizes Pauline Kael’s negative review of Michael Moore’s wild satire, *Roger and Me*, and gently chastises Edward R. Murrow’s cooperation with the Kennedy administration to pressure the BBC not to air Murrow’s moving farm labor documentary, *Harvest of Shame*. In the case of titles that

have generated controversy, he is remarkably objective; four good examples are *American Dream* (Barbara Kopple's film about the strike against Hormel in Austin, Minnesota), *The Molly Maguires*, *On the Waterfront*, and *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* (the racist murder of a Chinese-American).

Three themes stand out in these labor films. First, most Hollywood movies portray workers—especially their unions—negatively. Viewers can be almost assured that a labor picture will suggest that unions are undemocratic (see *Blue Collar*, *Gung Ho*, and *Teachers*), corrupt (see *Inside Detroit* and all of the Hoffa films reviewed), and prone to violence (too numerous to mention). There are exceptions such as the “socialist realist” films made during and about the Great Depression (see *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Gold Diggers of 1933*, and *Our Daily Bread*) and more recent films made by pro-labor directors (such as Martin Ritt's *Norma Rae*). When a book or a screenplay presented unions favorably, Hollywood did not hesitate to change or distort the author's original meaning, and it seldom refused to change scripts which the corporate found radical. More subtly, labor films often glorify heroic individual actions but rarely do the same for collective efforts. In connection with these points, I strongly recommend William Puette's fine book, *Through Jaundiced Eyes: How the Media View Organized Labor*, (...), which I read in conjunction with Zaniello's book.

Second, films made outside of the United States are often more pro-labor. There are many examples especially *Joe Hill*, *The Organizer*, and *Kamaradschaft*. No doubt the reason for this is that in other advanced capitalist

countries, there are well-developed, working-class political parties and stronger unions. In Sweden, for example, more than 80% of the workforce is organized and labor's Social Democratic party has held power for most of the last 60 years. No wonder, then, that Swedish filmmakers do not automatically view labor through “jaundiced eyes.”

Third, documentaries offer the least biased labor films. Naturally, these pictures vary in quality, and they contain their share of distortions. However, they are usually made by independents and do not rely solely on corporate funding. Therefore, their makers can delve into subjects which commercial films find taboo. It is a rare commercial labor film which moves me, but I have been emotionally uplifted and intellectually challenged by such documentaries as *Harlan County*, *Final Offer*, and *Union Maids*. It would be nice if our documentary filmmakers had ready access to public funds, but this is unlikely until labor has some real power.

One of the things that made this book enjoyable was to compare the author's choices with mine. Some of his listings are questionable. I could not see any reason to include *The Fountainhead* or *The Harder They Come*. And I wondered about some exclusions, such as *The Battleship Potemkin*, *Finally Got the News* (documentary about revolutionary black workers in Detroit), and the remarkable Italian film, *Sacco and Vanzetti*. This, of course, is not really a criticism, just a reflection of the fact that tastes differ. Overall, Zaniello has rendered his readers a great service. Get his book and you will see.

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