

# Research & Policy Brief

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## Eyes on Labor: Documentaries on Work in the Neoliberal Era

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### Introduction

From the beginning of moving pictures in the 1890s, when women workers were captured on film leaving the filmmaker’s own factory,<sup>i</sup> to the neoliberal reality of work captured in the 2014 Sundance hit, *The Overnighters*,<sup>ii</sup> documentary films have revealed obscured histories and events and chronicled the struggles and changes that workers, unions, and the U.S. economy have experienced over the last hundred-plus years. These films have made an important contribution to the public’s knowledge and understanding of labor, have sought to intervene in the exploitation of workers, and provided compelling tools for new forms of organizing.

Focusing on recent decades, this paper offers approaches to thinking about independent documentary filmmaking in the U.S. dealing with labor and work issues. It does not attempt to provide an exhaustive review of films about labor or the history of this work; rather it uses brief case studies to explore varied relationships between documentary filmmaking, the world of work and unions, and the communities whose stories are told – and explores a few related issues along the way. This brief also looks at various ways documentary film has furthered, and in one recent case undermined, a deeper understanding of work and the labor movement. Hopefully it can help readers imagine a range of possibilities for stronger collaborations among filmmakers and labor in the future.

### Documentaries, history, and movement-building

As filmmakers Steven Bognar and Julia Reichert wrote in a 2010 essay, “Arguably, two major developments have altered humanity’s relationship to work [over the last century] – the labor movement and, much more recently, globalization.”<sup>iii</sup> Documentary films about the rich terrain bounded by these two “events” - including the demise of US manufacturing, importing workers, exporting work, the movement of goods, ongoing sweatshop labor, attacks on unions, rise of worker centers, and organizing for labor rights - have all made increasing appearances on television and the silver screen, in union halls, and in diverse grassroots venues.

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There seems to be a common assumption among many labor historians, academics, longtime activists, and some filmmakers that there was a heyday of labor films - and that heyday is now behind us. From that perspective labor documentaries largely came out of the culture of social justice activism that defined the period from the 1960s into the 1980s – and were seen within the context of media that rarely gave voice to working class people fighting for their rights. The activist producers/directors from the 70s and 80s saw themselves as a vital part of a movement that included anti-war, feminist, and civil rights activism across the country. Feminist activists were particularly driven to bring women’s unknown histories to life and into the male-dominated history and film canons; their work resulted in some of the best-known labor documentaries and inspired filmmakers, academics, students, and activists to continue their efforts building peoples’ community history, labor history, and oral history movements. In the 1970s *Harlan County USA* (Barbara Kopple, 1976), *Union Maids* (Jim Klein, Miles Mogulescu, and Julia Reichert, 1976), and *With Babies and Banners* (Anne Bohlen, Lyn Goldfarb, and Lorraine Gray, 1979) researched and reclaimed labor history and brought workers’ struggles, as well as the previously unknown protagonists themselves, to the movement, the public, and the 1977-1979 Academy Awards.<sup>i</sup>



*The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter*,  
by Connie Field /Clarity Films

But the question remains if that period was the “heyday.” Tom Zaniello’s books “*Working Stiffs, Union Maids, Reds, and Riff Raff: An Expanded Guide to Films About Labor*,” and “*The Cinema of Globalization: A Guide to Films about the New Economic Order*,” use the following criteria for inclusion: films about unions or labor organizations, labor history, working-class life prioritizing economic factors, political movements if closely tied to labor, production or the struggle between labor and management, and all of the prior issues within the context of globalization, global capitol, and multinational corporations.<sup>ii</sup> At the exact time that working-class jobs are being outsourced and unions face vicious attacks, Hollywood for the most part has moved on to block-busters and more aspirational films.

<sup>vi</sup> But the contents and chronology of documentary films listed in these books detail a remarkable number of labor-related films made up until the publication of *Cinema of Globalization* in 2006, contradicting the idea of a bygone “heyday.” Despite the rapid decline of fiction feature films focused on labor in the US since the early 1990s, there has been consistent production of documentaries about work, unions, globalized production, and closely related topics since the early 1980s. Zaniello’s books describe roughly 180 documentaries produced in the US (plus at least 120 made internationally), the majority of them made over the last twenty-five years – and this just through 2006. Increasing numbers of documentaries, some with celebrity support (for example, *Food Chains*, Sanjay Rawal, 2014, was executive produced by Eva Longoria), have been made in the nine years since then, digging deeply into diverse aspects of the new global reality and its vivid landscape, including most of the films discussed in this brief.

Another view of a bygone “heyday” of labor film may be tied to a perceived lack of a contextualizing movement similar to that of the 1960s and 1970s - and the diminishing of the traditional union movement many have fought for and cultivated for decades. But a great deal of organizing is taking place, often outside “traditional” workplaces, and frequently tied more closely to the immigrant-rights movement than the formal labor movement. While the labor documentary and the documentary form in general are no longer “new” and don’t stand out as dramatically as they did in the 1970s, worker organizing is occurring in powerful and unexpected ways across the country, often getting significant attention – and building new movements for justice that could benefit from more filmmaker participation.

### **More and more documentaries**

Exact numbers of documentaries made each year are almost impossible to ascertain. Some of the only numbers available relate to documentary funding and theatrical releases. The Harmony Institute (HI) found that foundations had awarded \$70 million in grants to documentary projects between 2002 and 2011; according to data they relied on

from the Foundation Center, a high of 81 projects were funded in 2007 and a low of 36 in 2011.<sup>vii</sup> But this does not account for the documentaries funded by all foundations or by television/cable, corporations, government sources, cultural institutions, individuals, or self-financed. HI has also started an online documentary evaluation project (StoryPilot) that to date includes 433 social issue documentaries released between 2000 and 2014. Ironically their 24 social-issue categories do not include work and/or labor; films in these areas are probably meant to fit into their “banks and corporations/economic inequality/economic policy” category.<sup>viii</sup> Work/labor is a category that embraces hundreds of films and is used in many film collection and distributor listings (see examples at the end of this brief), so it is discouraging to find it missing from a project aiming to be a major new research tool about documentaries.

Another possible indication of the overall growth of documentary production is the number of documentaries that qualify for Academy-award consideration; since 2006 the number of qualifying films has gone from 83 to 134.<sup>ix</sup> These numbers are even more meaningful when you consider that the process of qualifying has gotten increasingly demanding (and problematic); films now have to screen theatrically for a week in both Los Angeles and New York as well as meet many other criteria.<sup>x</sup>

Though most documentary films are not intended for a theatrical market, and often draw on television, festivals, and a more grass-roots outreach approach to reach their audiences, one of the only arenas where numbers of films are counted and monetized is through theatrical release. Between 2000 and 2011 documentaries increased their share of all theatrically-released films from roughly one to eighteen percent. At the same time box-office revenue for documentaries remained at roughly 1.7% of the total (at its highest in 2004 when Michael Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11* was released).<sup>xi</sup> This is a clear statement that documentary films are starting to develop a significant enough following that distributors and filmmakers are willing to risk the expense of theatrical release to increase exposure, reviews, and potential Oscar-winning qualification and votes. While it seems clear that a growing number of documentaries are being seen by a static number of ticket-buyers and there is room for theatrical audience numbers to grow, undoubtedly the most significant increase in viewership (and number of films available) is being facilitated by the internet, through mail-order, VOD (video on demand) and streaming on Netflix, YouTube, Vimeo, and numerous other platforms. Most of these platforms have refused to share data relating to numbers of films they carry and online views they facilitate. Partly because of this, The Transparency Project, a new data collection project of the Sundance Film Institute and Cinereach, will collect and share information on revenue and expenses for independent film distribution with the goal of helping filmmakers see the numbers and “be more creative and efficient in funding, marketing and releasing their work.”<sup>xii</sup>

The changing nature of filmmaking itself reflects the shifting technological and global realities work takes place in and has exponentially increased the numbers of documentaries being produced. New digital technologies are making filmmaking accessible to almost anyone who wants to pick up a camera or cell phone and tell a story; a filmmaker can be much more unobtrusive and a less invasive presence in settings that may be intimate or even dangerous. And workers themselves can initiate or participate in projects, documenting their own experiences. These relatively recent developments have enabled the heightened dramatic, intimate, and emotional possibilities of non-fiction film and have moved them closer to the captivating realm of Hollywood’s dramatic feature films. This enhanced story-telling helps explain the increasing popularity of documentary films - and increases the chances that these stories can shift viewers’ understanding of the world and move people to action.

The following are three approaches to labor documentary that have both nurtured the field and placed the films within a diverse and growing movement for change. The first section looks at community-based documentaries supporting labor struggles in geographically-based communities, primarily in Appalachia. In the second, documentaries and labor history are rooted in community-based labor activism and organizing. And thirdly several models of documentary-making within and about the union movement are described. Finally there is a brief exploration of the intersection of documentary and the new world of story-telling within the neoliberal context.

### **Documentaries and coal country: Community-based filmmaking and community-building**

Media production can play a vital role in community self-awareness and empowerment when stories are rooted in a community’s own specific realities and struggles. Among the longest running and most documented themes in labor

documentary is the struggle of coal mining communities in Appalachia. One of the best-known documentaries is Barbara Kopple's Academy award-winning *Harlan County USA*, made by a small crew of New Yorkers "embedded" on the union side of a vicious coal strike in Kentucky for several years in the early 1970s. The film broke the mold of documentary as extended news story, with the filmmakers situated in the center of the highly-charged action. It provided viewers with an intimate experience of the miners, their families, and labor in America.

At the same time Appalshop, a media and cultural center founded in Whitesburg, Kentucky in 1969 as part of the War on Poverty, was providing job training to local youth and community members in media arts.<sup>xiii</sup> The program arose out of the need for jobs, but with the explicit mission to counter the prevalent negative stereotypes of Appalachia and the people who lived there. Rather than leave and seek work in the typical centers of film production, many Appalshop trainees stayed in Kentucky and built a media movement that both told their own stories and showed the world the reality of living and working in coal country over the long haul. Appalshop became a leader and one of the long-lived media centers in the national network of community-based arts and culture projects (NAPNOC, Neighborhood Arts Program National Organizing Committee, later the Alliance for Cultural Democracy) that drew on place and culture-specific community knowledge in their art-making. Appalshop and other organizations in this network grew and were strengthened by funding from CETA, the 1973 Comprehensive Employment and Training Act, established to increase job training subsidies at the local level and employ low-income and unemployed community members in public service jobs, broadly defined. Later terminated by the Reagan administration, for 9 years media and arts workers across the country were integrated into community life through this national experiment.<sup>xiv</sup>

Kentuckian and longtime Appalshop staff Elizabeth Barrett's film, *Stranger With A Camera*, which screened at Sundance in 2000, brought the history of Appalachians' struggles to counter stereotypes about their communities to the screen. Her earlier films included *Quilting Women* (1976), *Coalmining Women* (1982) and *Long Journey Home* (1987). Two "outsider" women joined Appalshop's film staff early on as well. Filmmaker Anne Lewis came to Kentucky in 1973 as Barbara Kopple's associate producer and had no plans to stay. But she and Mimi Pickering, who came to West Virginia and learned film during an Antioch College internship, stayed on at Appalshop and created a large body of labor documentary, together and as individuals, while training budding media-makers and working with Appalshop's programs for local public radio and television.<sup>xv</sup>

Having a home base has given Appalshop filmmakers the opportunity to delve deeply into the many facets of life and coal-mining as seen through local people's experience and voices; they have investigated a range of complex issues within local labor struggles, exploring mining law (*Justice in the Coalfields*, 1995), multi-ethnic organizing, social justice unionism (*Rough Side Of The Mountain*, 1999), globalization (*Morristown: in the air and sun*, 2007), and gender issues (*Evelyn Williams*, 1995). Appalshop's award-winning documentaries have screened at numerous festivals and on national public TV; while focusing on Appalachia they touch on issues that reverberate across the country. Regular broadcasts on Kentucky public television have deepened their educational role in the region. Unfortunately as funding mechanisms have disappeared, Appalshop has been less able to train new filmmakers. More recently filmmakers originally from Appalachia have made strong PBS-funded documentaries about coal – country issues, including Sally Rubin (*Deep Down: a story from the heart of coal country*, 2010). But Appalshop's unique experience has demonstrated the importance of ongoing community-based media production and the role it can play in supporting labor and related struggles – which are clearly not going away anytime soon.

### **Textiles, sweatshops, and community activism: Accessing the impact of documentary film**

With so many contemporary documentaries aimed at encouraging activism and social change, the question of what impact they are having has become more relevant, especially to funders. Many factors contribute to the kind of impact a film will have, but most filmmakers don't have the resources, experience, or passion for the work it takes to maximize their film's reach in the world. Until fairly recently the traditional approach to distribution had been to screen at festivals and in theaters when possible, then turn sales over to a distributor and hope for the best. Now, after spending years completing a film, increasing numbers of filmmakers plan to spend one or two years on grassroots outreach and distribution campaigns, both to make sure the film reaches its intended audiences and results in activism on a particular issue - and to generate more income. Over the past decade many funders have

begun requiring filmmakers to have community engagement plans before the film is completed in order to compete for funding. While the goal is admirable and should result in powerful outreach campaigns, these requirements can also set unrealistic expectations and standards of success for films and increase costs for filmmakers significantly.

While more and more filmmakers are finding innovative ways of reaching both new and broader audiences, two powerful labor-related films, *The Uprising of '34* and *Made in LA*, illustrate approaches that have been spotlighted by funders as models of “engagement.” In a way they provide past/present book-ends to each other and illustrate how revisiting the past can help pave the way for future organizing. Both were funded by PBS and have made Bill Moyer’s list of “Ten documentaries on Champions of Justice;” in both cases the champions of justice are ordinary people.<sup>xvi</sup>

Deep historical research and community education and outreach were the two elements integral to the process of making *The Uprising of '34* (1995), an early model of participatory research in documentary film. Through the six-year period of searching out participants, using media to combat the silence around the topic, and creatively engaging communities in discussion about the past, the three filmmakers - George Stoney, Judith Helfand, and Susanne Rostock - unearthed and told the almost completely suppressed story of one of the largest strikes in US history. Roughly 500,000 workers, stretching from Massachusetts to Alabama, eventually walked out during a textile strike that was brutally shut down within a month. Workers were traumatized by fear and passed down a deep silence and ambivalence about unions - until a group of academics invited the filmmakers to join their research team. The filmmakers’ commitment to process provided participants at all levels a chance to engage personally with the issues and shape the story while exploring their own divergent experiences and perspectives. Along the way reclaiming this history brought with it considerable controversy and media coverage. The filmmakers’ Labor to Neighbor outreach initiative around the 1995 PBS broadcast included more than 50 screenings and local events; as one piece of the campaign, union members invited neighbors into their homes to watch the television broadcast and discuss the film. And in another more tangible example of how the film linked past with present, one of the film’s interviewees organized the first workers’ memorial in South Carolina.<sup>xvii</sup>

*Made In LA*, shot up-close by filmmaker Almudena Carracedo in 2007 and co-produced and written with Robert Bahar, is a deeply personal contemporary journey that follows three immigrant women garment workers as they participate and take on leadership in a boycott against the exploitative sweatshop practices of trendy retailer Forever 21. The characters’ development as activists takes place through their involvement with LA’s Garment Worker Center (GWC), still the only group organizing in LA’s vast garment industry. The GWC is one of roughly 140 worker centers across the US, largely rooted in immigrant communities. They are gradually changing the face of low-wage worker education and organizing – making the film a compelling tool for the growing community which supports their vision and accomplishments.<sup>xviii</sup> In addition the main characters’ trip to New York’s Tenement Museum exposes them to the historical context of their activism in the garment industry, giving audiences a clear sense of the power of historical knowledge.

The Fledgling Fund’s assessment of the film quantified its “engagement” campaign. Since *Made In LA* was released in 2007 over two million viewers have watched it on television, 30,000 people have attended 600 in-person screening events in 37 states and 31 countries, and much more, all designed with the goal of generating awareness of immigrant realities, sweatshop labor, and developing activism on those and other issues. Partner organizations used the film to generate national and grassroots activism, which was not tracked to the same degree. In 2014 the Ford Foundation-funded Multilingual Education and Organizing Toolkit for *Made in LA* was released, fully accessible in twelve languages. Meant both as a tool for organizing low-wage workers and for educating the broader community, it is available online and distributed as a packet at no cost to worker centers and other organizations serving low-wage immigrant workers.<sup>xix</sup>

During the 1970s and 1980s PBS notably denied or cut funding for labor-related projects that had labor, rather than corporate, backing. “Made in U.S.A.,” a PBS series of fiction films based on labor history, had its funding cut after the first highly-successful film, *The Killing Floor* (Elsa Rassbach, 1984), was made, and Kartemquin had to return a \$15,000 grant to the United Steel Workers in order to be eligible for PBS funding for its second film on Taylor Chain. PBS tries to follow strict conflict of interest guidelines, but unions had no editorial control or other role in either production –

and throughout this same time financial corporations were major funders of several PBS business-themed series. A study of PBS programming by the City University of New York (CUNY) Committee for Cultural Studies found that during 1988 and 1989, 27 hours of prime-time programming were offered that “addressed the lives and concerns of workers as workers’ [19 of them about British workers], as opposed to 253 hours that focused on the upper classes.”<sup>xx</sup>

In response to organizing by documentarians, independent producers, and community-based groups, PBS launched ITVS (Independent Television Service) and two documentary series, POV and Independent Lens, with the goal of supporting and screening diverse stories about complex issues rarely seen on broadcast media. Both have featured work-related films including *The Uprising of '34*, *Made In LA*, *Senorita Extraviada* (Lourdes Portillo, 2002), *Waging A Living* (Roger Weisberg, 2005), *Maid In America* (Anayansi Prado, 2005), *Maquilapolis* (Vicky Funari and Sergio De La Torre, 2006), and, early on, *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* (Christine Choy and Renee Tajima-Pena, 1989). PBS broadcasts reach the largest national audience currently available and PBS has played an essential role in leveraging the funding and community/media attention at the core of the completion and outreach campaigns for *Uprising of '34* and *Made in LA*. 72% of funding for *Made In LA* came from PBS programming funds; unfortunately very few films receive that level of support.<sup>xxi</sup> Recently PBS has been back in the news for again proposing to move the documentary series from



Maquiladora workers with the components they produce, from the documentary *MAQUILÁPOLIS [city of factories]*, by Vicky Funari and Sergio De La Torre. Photo by David Maung.

their longtime prime slots, replacing documentaries and their “99%” focus with programs like *Antique Road Show*, and undermining PBS’ core mission of presenting diverse and rarely-heard community voices.<sup>xxii</sup>

The truth remains that there are probably as many versions of impact and success as there are films. Andy Garrison’s film *Trash Dance*, documented choreographer Allison Orr’s work developing a performance with Austin, Texas, trash collectors and their vehicles. It played a major role in raising awareness of these public employees’ work and low pay (although not their union membership) and contributed to the City Manager’s decision to give them a long overdue 5% raise after a screening for heads of City Departments. Resource Recovery employees have since told Garrison that the combination of the dance performance and long

reach of the movie has made a concrete difference in how people treat them on their routes.<sup>xxiii</sup> Amie Williams’ dramatic documentary *We Are Wisconsin*, an intimate view from in and outside the state capitol during the historic 26-day occupation in 2011, put a human face to the public workers Governor Scott Walker was demonizing. The film screened in hundreds of community venues as it toured across the state as part of the movement to recall Governor Walker. It did not ultimately succeed in that mission, but as Michael Moore said, “The film will be the record people refer to a hundred years from now when they study this era of greed.”

### **Documentary filmmakers and unions**

Unions themselves have experimented with a range of approaches to filmmaking over the last (at least) thirty years. AFSCME (American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees) started video production in the 1980s and in 1991 the newly-elected Teamster reform leadership brought video into their revamped communications and education programs.<sup>xxiv</sup> Currently SEIU (Service Employees International Union), AFSCME, and other unions have video production capacity and hire outside filmmakers when needed. Most of the videos produced are short pieces developed specifically for organizing, internal education, and/or larger union events; among them are some good agit-prop films, including United Food and Commercial Workers’ (UFCW) *Wal-Mart’s War on Workers* (2002), and satire, as in AFSCME’s recent *Anti-Unionol* “ad.” As part of AFSCME’s current home care work in Missouri, organizers sometimes use portable DVD players during individual home visits to help attendants, often isolated from other

workers by the nature of their work, see what's happening statewide. And their online press releases periodically include videos.<sup>xxv</sup>

Fred Glass produced *Golden Lands, Working Hands*, a ten-part, three-hour series on California's labor history, for the California Federation of Teachers and their Labor In The Schools Committee. In 2000 Minnesota's labor community and the Labor Education Service at the University of Minnesota launched *Workday Minnesota*, the first online labor newsletter, and in 2011 *The Stand*, an online interactive news and opinion magazine, was unveiled by the Washington State Labor Council, AFL-CIO; both were established to provide news that is almost never seen in mainstream media.<sup>xxvi</sup>

Rarely have independent filmmakers ventured into creative partnerships with unions, but there are interesting exceptions. During the 1980s filmmaker Lyn Goldfarb was Assistant Education Director at SEIU International. She organized a month-long labor film festival at the Smithsonian and helped filmmaker Tami Gold with access to union members for a film project. After leaving SEIU Lyn began working with Tami, making two independent shorts that were shown in film festivals and community venues, and were widely used by the union. *From Bedside To Bargaining Table* looks at nursing and organizing and *Prescription For Change*, a feminist behind-the-scenes view of nursing, was broadcast on PBS.<sup>xxvii</sup>

One of the most dynamic examples of the convergence of filmmaking and strategic organizing began in 1991 when HERE (Hotel Employees & Restaurant Employees) International Union (now UNITE HERE) hired filmmaker David Koff as their strategic research analyst in Los Angeles. LA's HERE local 11 was fresh from a successful insurgent campaign that put it in the hands of longtime organizers dedicated to worker empowerment. Koff's professional background as a documentary filmmaker enabled him to convince Local 11 to buy a camera and start documenting their work, collaborating with other LA filmmakers including Lyn Goldfarb, Libby Horne, Ann Kaneko, and Amie Williams. Koff's commitment to documenting workers struggles from the inside out and his long-term and close relationships with union members helped him create short films for internal and external organizing on a quick turnaround. At least 36 diverse short films and three hour-long documentaries were produced between 1991 and 2008 and hundreds of hours of footage documenting organizing campaigns from the inside out remains as an invaluable archive. Complete DVD sets of the videos were given to all attendees at HERE's 2009 national convention.

Koff's approach was part archival documentation, part agitation and organizing, and part education, including regular film screenings and discussion with HERE's staff. One of the first campaigns he initiated to support contract negotiations with LA's hotels centered on a video he produced, *City On The Edge*. Contrasting the beauty of Los Angeles with its deteriorating economic and social conditions, the video links the city's increasingly harsh realities with the tourism industry's efforts to drive down wages and benefits for its workers. 2500 copies were mailed to chambers of commerce and event planners across the country, causing quite a controversy and helping LA hotel workers win their city-wide contract in 1992.

Another major campaign involving HERE's activist film work as an essential element of their organizing was The Immigrant Workers Freedom Ride (IWFR), launched by Koff and HERE in 2003 to bring attention to Washington's inaction on immigration reform since 9/11. During September 2003, 900 immigrant workers and their allies departed in buses from nine different locations across the United States, stopping in more than 100 towns and cities to meet local activists. They were united in Washington DC and traveled to New York for one of the largest immigrant rights rallies in U.S. history. IWFR Documentary Project film crews were on each bus, documenting the trip, interviewing participants, and shooting each stop along the way. They shot more than 450 hours of footage over two weeks and full-length documentaries were produced about the Los Angeles, Bay Area, and Las Vegas rides. Copies of all the footage shot and the finished documentaries are housed at UCLA's Film and Television Archive.<sup>xxviii</sup>

Conversely, there are interesting questions raised by films that are rooted in or provide historical context to present-day labor struggles but are not part of union organizing efforts – and lack resources for strong outreach campaigns. *Harvest of Loneliness/Cosecha Triste* (Gilbert Gonzalez and Vivian Price, 2010), a powerful film about the bracero program, has found its audience in Latina/o Studies and global justice film festivals, but has not been embraced in

the same way by unions and the labor community as some of the other films discussed here. Perhaps because the film portrays a complex story that does not always show unions in their best moments or perhaps because the film develops a narrative of the US as an imperial power, *Cosecha Triste* presents limits that the labor movement until now seems to have set for itself.



Braceros and their belongings are sprayed with DDT before entering the United States, 1959, Photo by Harry Anderson from *Harvest of Loneliness/Cosecha Triste*, Courtesy of Vivian Price.

The film *Locked Out 2010!* (Joan Sekler, 2010) presents a different dilemma. It carefully and movingly documents a 100-day lockout of ILWU (International Longshore and Warehouse Union) members, by the international corporate behemoth Rio Tinto Minerals in the small mining town of Boron, California. The film details the day-to-day experience of the workers, their families, their desert community, and their union as they negotiate with Rio Tinto, struggle to stay afloat, receive support from the Los Angeles labor community, and ultimately win. But by the time the film was completed, five months after the victory, the international union had moved on to other battles and this film, with its potential as a strong educational tool for diverse union members across the country, never got the rollout it was promised. It did however screen at a number of festivals internationally and was passed around in

a paper bag from employee to employee in a northern California Walmart in preparation for an organizing drive.

These projects raise for unions many of the same issues filmmakers face with their own individual projects: how to archive hundreds of hours of tape or digital media and keep increasing amounts of material available for use when, in the case of unions, the primary focus is on organizing; how to fund ongoing film work and creative outreach, particularly with constantly evolving technological demands; and how to evaluate the value of and develop ongoing strategy for this kind of filmmaking work.

### **Documentary Story-telling and Work in the Neoliberal World Order**

Documentary films have become increasingly sophisticated and powerful. Their strong focus on character and plot-driven story-telling, previously considered the domain of fiction feature films, has helped create and are on the cutting edge of what is now a demand for “story-telling” in new and diverse venues. Network for Good, an online platform for non-profit fundraising, is distributing “Storytelling for Nonprofits: How to Present Stories That Attract Donors, Win Support, and Raise Money.” Their message that “storytelling is the single most powerful tool you have available, bar none,” sounds very much like the playbook for documentary film that has attracted so many. But one of its guiding questions, “does your story have a clear protagonist that is a person or character – and not your organization?,” points to a common problem with much of the “story-telling” being promoted: it often advocates for a more heroic narrative form, rather than the collective vision that many labor films have at their core.<sup>xxix</sup>

About Face Media uses the same basic story concept but instead employs award-winning documentarians to make story-based promotional films for corporations. And Craigslist Foundation is in the process of transitioning most of their foundation resources into LikeMinded, an online platform that “enables compelling digital storytelling that engages and mobilizes the community.”<sup>xxx</sup>

While some independent documentarians feel that some degree of context is necessary to understanding a subject and choose to include the politics and/or background history inherent to their stories, in subtle and less-subtle ways the urge to create compelling, dramatic Hollywood-style documentaries is in some cases shifting the content of films being made. Other filmmakers choose to dispense with historical or political back-story because it can break the flow of a strong narrative and/or take the focus of a story off a dynamic character. In addition increasing numbers of large



fundings and cable venues are not interested in history; their focus seems to be on current stories that engage viewers in a way similar to fiction films.

Kartemquin Films, an award-winning collaborative center for documentary filmmakers founded in 1966, has made over 50 films that span a broad range of topics and story-telling styles; their approach to filmmaking on labor/work has evolved from cinema-verite labor films to character-driven films that share the realities of work. Each project responds strategically to the times, themes that emerge while filming, and the intended screening platform and audience. Their early labor films *Taylor Chain I: A Story in a Union Local* (1980) and *Taylor Chain II: A Story of Collective Bargaining* (1983), took viewers directly into the complex and harsh realities of a seven week strike during 1974 and then eight years later inside a collective bargaining session, the first ever filmed in the U.S. Using a different approach, an invitation by Pullman employees to film *The Last Pullman Car* and the emerging impossibility of their vision of keeping production in the US led filmmakers Gordon Quinn and Jerry Blumenthal to contextualize the story within the 100-year history of government, union, and corporate policies that were beginning to globalize rail car production. Kartemquin's huge success in 1994 with the Oscar-nominated, youth and sports-themed *Hoop Dreams* brought home the power of character-driven story telling. Since then they have developed several character-driven series that include labor storylines. Many of the immigrant stories told in *The New Americans*, a seven-hour series produced in 2004, were driven by economic necessity and take place in Silicon Valley, a camp for baseball recruits, and a meatpacking plant. This year their six-hour series *Hard Earned*, produced for Al Jazeera America and scheduled for release in May 2015, follows five low-wage families working to make do on minimum wage or less; one of these intimate stories involves an organizing campaign for \$15/hour at a Walgreens.<sup>xxxii</sup>

Sophisticated story-telling, focus on characters, and lack of back-story can also result in dubious ends. In a time of increasing vilification of unions, the documentary *Waiting for "Superman"* (Davis Guggenheim, director of Oscar-winning *The Inconvenient Truth*) won the 2010 Sundance Audience Award. It used dynamic characters and selective facts to tell what turned out to be an extremely popular but also widely contested story about the failures of the public education system, largely focusing on teachers as the source of the problem. It follows five students and their families as they compete for a few slots in highly desirable charter schools, and attempts to depict a deplorable state of public education in the US.<sup>xxxiii</sup> While the filmmaker said his goal was to "bring people to the table" to make changes in the educational system, many others view it as a high-profile plug for charter schools that unfairly criticizes public school teachers and their unions. Clearly this film engaged a huge audience: earning roughly \$6.4 million in 2010, the film ranks 20<sup>th</sup> in earnings among all widely-released US documentaries, and it generated 294,000 pledges to support educational reform.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

In 2010 the Ford Foundation funded an in-depth study of the film's impact and influence. The summary maintains that while facts from the film stuck with the vast majority of viewers and over half wanted to further engage with the issues, audiences overall felt the film "over-emphasized and over-simplified" the value of charter schools. And interestingly the study found that viewers did not leave screenings with an anti-union perspective. Despite the film's insistence on viewers taking action, audiences felt there were few clear options presented for individuals to follow up on; the main follow-up action consisted of donating gift cards to school projects through a partnership with DonorsChoose.org, which generated over \$2.4 million in donations.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

In response to *Superman*, a group of New York City public school teachers (Julie Cavanagh, Darren Marelli, Norm Scott, Mollie Bruhn, and Lisa Donlan) produced *The Inconvenient Truth Behind Waiting For "Superman"* which streams on their website. Nowhere near as slick as *Waiting for "Superman,"* the video and related website does re-contextualize the accusations made in the original film and provide facts that were conveniently left out. The film outlines a view of what educational reform should look like, including the involvement of individuals in local schools from throughout a community; contrary to *Superman* it points out that it takes a village, not a Superhero, to provide a vibrant education for all.

*The Overnighters*, a film shot entirely by director Jesse Moss and the 2014 Sundance Film Festival-winner of the Intuitive Filmmaking award, is a contemporary “Grapes of Wrath” set in the ongoing fracking boom in tiny Williston, North Dakota. In comparison with the widely-seen, activist film *Gasland* (Josh Fox, 2010), which exposes the dangers and controversies around fracking, this is a deeply personal narrative. Work is the backdrop to a heart-wrenching story that explores the limits of human compassion. But there is enough backdrop to see that the passionate desire to work and pride in doing good work are up against serious health and safety hazards and random hirings/firings in a wild-west boomtown. Some viewers may know, although it is not at all explicit in the film, that oil and gas drilling jobs are almost twelve times as deadly as the average job in the US, and that the dilemma for the workers and unemployed sleeping in their cars is compounded by four decades of neoliberal labor and trade policies.<sup>xxxv</sup> This film makes that a very intimate experience. At a Q&A following a screening of *The Overnighters* Moss summed up the attitude he saw people confront during their desperate search for work and home in Williston – reminding viewers of unfortunate parallels across the country: “Humans are an expendable commodity.” Documentarians’ work inherently contests this idea and Moss himself is devoting 10% of film sales to organizations providing permanent affordable housing.



Still from *The Forgotten Space*.

A film by Allan Sekula & Noël Burch. © 2010 Doc.Eye Film & WILDart FILM.

### **Labor documentaries: Will the neoliberal reality be an impetus for a new heyday?**

This brief has highlighted various issues in the complex web where documentary filmmaking, filmmakers, the world of work, and the larger community intersect. Labor documentaries remain as relevant as ever and the genre is alive and well in a variety of forms. From nail salons (*Painted Nails*, 2014) to the high seas (*The Forgotten Space*, 2010), documentaries are putting a face to the hidden or little-known spaces of work, health and safety violations, organizing, and more – and at times providing important tools for organizing.

A number of issues have gone unexplored in this paper, including the changing situation for filmmakers themselves, who, reflecting the status of other workers in the globalized economy, face evolving challenges. Despite growing audience numbers and the opening up of new venues, there are more filmmakers, less support for production, and shifting acquisition norms and distribution platforms.

In the meantime, the upsurge and embrace of social issue documentaries in American culture are underscored by Netflix’s acquisition and promotional campaign for Oscar-nominated films *The Square* in 2014 and *Virunga* in 2015, and the opening of documentary divisions by Al Jazeera, CNN, and Pivot, all aimed at different audiences. Al Jazeera’s focus on long-form documentaries and their commissioning of Kartemquin’s series *Hard Earned* highlights one opportunity for films focusing on labor and issues of equity. At the same time the recent coverage of the dramatic ending – and real-life consequences – of HBO’s documentary *The Jinx: The Life and Deaths of Robert Durst* has highlighted a relatively new recognition of the power of documentaries on the part of mainstream media and other producers. In part wanting to use the documentary cache to be seen as doing good, their interest nonetheless will open up new opportunities.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

This era is clearly a heyday for documentaries in general –and with the increasing attack on labor and working people the need for labor documentaries has rarely been more important. Video has become an increasingly accessible and popular medium for personal and community expression - and presents rich opportunities for diverse kinds of social engagement and exploration. The pursuit of stronger collaborations and understanding among documentary filmmakers, community members, unions and other organizing efforts, and producing entities could help build a stronger movement for worker and economic justice.

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