

# There is history and then there is history

An Analysis by Ron Hinch, Bill Dunn, and John Bursey

We are writing this article to arouse you. We would like you to view a film. A special film. A film that explosively shows the dominant relationships that shape our lives. We would like you to attend this film and consider the content in relation to the problems we face in this province and throughout the country.

The actions of working people in a society are the foundation of the history of that society. Yet, it is rare in Canada to find this basic truth in the media or in writings of the academic community. In Canada we grow up with an "idealist" version of our history, an interpretation that fails to

place the lives of working people - the vast majority of us - in context.

Rather the dominant interpretation of Canadian history paints workers as indolent children who have to be continually shown and periodically punished. The real lives of the men and women who make the wealth of this country are omitted.

One example will suffice: In 1919, in Winnipeg there was a massive strike involving thousands of workers. The character of this strike was important in the development of the Canadian labor movement. There were long-standing issues that required negotiation. Nevertheless, Donald Creighton, the reigning Canadian champion of the "idealist" thesis,

has referred to this strike as simply the "Winnipeg riot". The problems of workers that formed the roots of this strike are lost in the obvious ideological usage of the term riot.

Now we all know that riots require the police or the army to act. Riots must be and should be quelled. But does this term convey the spirit of the conditions that push workers to strike or the actions they take while on the picket line?

It is important to think about the ideological significance of language, be it used in history books or in the TV news. The labor movement is continually described by virulent language. Just think about the way the problems a month ago in Caraquet were presented in the media. And how the actions of the RCMP - tear gas and riot gear - were not seriously questioned.

Often when looking at a strike or a situation in which there is labor turbulence we feel ill-equipped to unravel the essential elements. We have no tradition of giving the problems and ideas of the workers primacy. So, most often we accept the position put forth by the media. And to suggest that the media is independent of "interests" is fallacious.

Therefore, a basic reason why the struggles of workers are thought about in the negative springs from our inability to articulate the fundamental problems that workers face every day. This is crucial to rectify. Given certain conditions we might become participants in a strike or become involved in a struggle to achieve justice. How should we look at strikes? What are the key elements that we should look at when we find coal miners, nurses, fishermen and school teachers on the picket line? We think the film *Harlan County USA* provides the basic scaffolding needed to answer these questions.

The struggles that the miners

waged against the capitalists in the film *Harlan County, U.S.A.* are not new. They are the same struggles workers have waged against the "owners of the means of production" in times past, and the same struggles are still occurring today.

The Harlan County miners first went on strike against the coal companies in 1917. The war effort was on, and the companies needed men, thus a quick settlement ensued.

In 1924 a downtrend in Harlan County coal production became visible. Wages were cut. The Harlan County miners, in March of 1931, after years of harsh working conditions, came out on strike. The strike clearly pitted the workers against the owners of the coal fields. The workers, as one would expect, were categorized as the cause for the disruption. The grocers, sheriff, lawyer, bankers all sided with management. The full force of the state - government, law, courts, and police - supported the owners of the coal fields. The churches, of which many of the workers were members, called their attention to a paradise in another world, but did little to alleviate their immediate suffering.

The type of violence and repression noted in *Harlan County, U.S.A.* is not strange to the Maritimes. During the early part of this century workers in Cape Breton were literally at war. The owners of the Sydney steel mills and the mines at Glace Bay were using profits from these industries to finance other ventures. Consequently, in the early 1920's wages were reduced twice.

To resist this exploitation, the workers were forced to organize trade unions. The mine owners and the government of Nova Scotia responded to these efforts of workers by creating a special 1,000-man police force to "keep the peace". During the ensuing struggles a number of the workers were killed.

Capitalism has endured and the character of social relations in Harlan County had not changed in 1970. The film *Harlan County, U.S.A.* shows by focusing on the everyday activities of the striking coal miners and their families - the meetings, the picketing and the confrontations with the police and strike breakers - how the law, the courts and the police act in a partisan manner to aid the owners of industry.

It is important that we see these struggles in a larger context than the Harlan County experience. Whenever workers and capitalists are in conflict the state inevitably intervenes on behalf of the capitalists. Our major point is that social relationships under capitalism are similar, whether it be a miners' strike in Harlan County, or a fisherman's strike in Caraquet, or a school teachers' strike in Fredericton.

*Harlan County, U.S.A.* will be shown on November 6th at 8 p.m. in the MacLaggan Hall Auditorium, Room 105.



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1 Law Seat	1 Nursing Seat	1 Forestry Seat
1 Physical Education Seat		1 Education Seat
1 Engineering Seat		1 Rep-at-Large
		1 Rep-at-Large (half term)

All seats are full term positions unless otherwise indicated.  
 Nomination papers are available at the student union office.  
 Nominations close on Nov. 7th 1979 at 5:00 p.m.

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 Friday Nov 2nd  
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