

FIRST IN A SERIES OF FILMS ON THE STRUGGLES OF WORKING WOMEN.

Working Woman and Man Bookstore

presents

SALT OF THE EARTH

*program notes &
discussion guide*

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THE FILM SERIES: This is the first in a series of films focussing on the struggles of working class women. In offering this film series our purpose is not simple entertainment, nor romanticism, nor escapism, but rather in keeping with the three-fold purposes of revolutionary film-making:

1. To inform people of issues and events portrayed in films.
2. To develop an understanding of the common links and interconnections between our own struggles and conditions and those portrayed on film.
3. To educate and draw lessons from the films so that we can struggle with our own conditions more effectively.

program notes &
discussion guide

SALT OF THE EARTH, a film by Independent Productions Corporation and the International Union of Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers. Shot in New Mexico in 1953.

THE BACKGROUND:

Struggle is what moves things forward. It is a law of development that all things and phenomena of nature develop thru a struggle of opposites. A child being born, a seed transforming into a growing plant, workers organizing a union, a social system--all have negative and positive aspects, something dying away and something developing. Salt of the Earth too developed out of struggle and portrays many different struggles. As an introduction and background to the film, we will present here some of the major struggles of opposites the film develops and portrays.

1. The workers versus the Mining Companies.

"Miner's with their own hands, take the wealth from under ground. They know its value. They bring it to the top as a product. They know that without their labor it would be worth nothing, but when it comes out, all of a sudden its worth a great deal. So they have a sense of worth, a sense of power, a sense of interconnection. They created their own union. It was built against extreme governmental and employer hostility, and it was required by life itself."

--Clint Jencks, union organizer who plays Frank Barnes in the film.

Salt of the Earth is based on an actual strike that took place in Hanover, New Mexico from October 17, 1950 to January 24, 1952. In almost all respects the film is an accurate portrayal of the strike. The miners and women themselves were involved in the writing and editing of the script as well as all other aspects of the film-making. The president of the miners union local, Juan Chacon, plays a leading role as Ramon Quintero in the film.

The mining companies aim in the strike itself was to break the union." The strike began with the companies refusal to follow the standard wage rates for the area. By breaking the district wage scale, the mining companies hoped to undercut the unity of the workers in the area. The mining companies--Phelps Dodge, Kennecot Copper, as well as Empire Zinc--formed an alliance to pool their profits to support whatever company they determined would force a strike. "They picked one of the smaller companies," Clint Jencks summarized, "because it would cost very little to sustain the strike there."

In struggle with the alliance of mining companies, the workers developed their own organizations. Five separate unions were amalgamated into one before the strike began. Most important, as shown in the film, was the development of the Women's Auxilliary.

2. The Workers versus The Government.

In 1947 Congress passed the Taft-Hartley law. This law, written by the National Association of Manufacturers, placed many restrictions on the rights of workers to organize. It provided the legal basis for the court injunction against the miners picketing which is described in the film.

Throughout the course of the strike and after it was over, the government consistently supported the mine owners against the workers. At the end of the strike the union totalled the costs of all fines and bail during the strike to be 113,360 dollars. Pro-union men and women spent 1,148 person-days in jail.

3. Struggles amongst the workers.

The struggles amongst men and women, amongst anglo and Chicano miners portrayed in the film laid the basis for the unity in action of all workers that is shown in the final scene of the film. The development of women in the film is its most important theme and will be the basis for our discussion following the film. In summarizing the development of working women in their own organization, another union organizer wrote: "women have lost their shyness, their timidity, their feeling of inferiority. They preside over

meetings, keep books, write records, letters, news reports, form committees to visit public officials, mount improvised rostrums to take their turn at spell binding...."

THE MAKING OF SALT OF THE EARTH

1. Hollywood blacklisting versus Class Conscious Artists:

The United States emerged from the Second World War as the dominant nation in the world. The major corporations with the aid of the government, moved quickly to take advantage of this situation and exploit the resources, markets, and cheap labor of many nations around the world. In this period for example, the U.S. government began the process of propping up dictators in Vietnam which ended in the Vietnam War.

In order to do this however, it was necessary to repress or coopt working people and their organizations in this country as well. Thus began a period of anti- communism, of restriction of the right of workers to organize unions, and of the "feminine mystique" which was used to justify forcing working class women out of social production, which they had contributed much to during the war, and into a passive role of housewife.

The makers of Salt of the Earth opposed the policies of the Cold War, and as a result were blacklisted and denied the right to work in films. As one representative of Hollywood put it: "Their very connection with motion pictures would detract from the public acceptance of the product which the the companies had to sell. Now, that being true, let's not talk about rights." Herbert Bieberman, the director of Salt of the Earth, spent a year in jail for refusing to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee.

On the other side of the struggle, the makers of Salt of the Earth refused to stop making films and set up an independent production company staffed with blacklisted workers. Further they realized, as one wrote, "The job will not be done in solitude....It will be done by striving individually, and organizationally, and politically in the closest poss-

ible relationship with the great masses of workers who represent the only decent, democratic, anti-fascist force in the world today."

2. Organized obstruction by the monopoly controlled film industry versus the makers of Salt of the Earth.

A Hollywood gossip paper reported in 1953: "H'wood reds are shooting a feature length anti-American racial issue propaganda movie in Silver City, N.M. SAG (Screen Actors Guild) Prexy Walter Pidgeon got the tip in a letter from a fan in N.M. Pidge immediately alerted FBI, State Dept., House Un-American Activities Committee, and Central Intelligence Agency. As a result of the forces mobilized against them, the makers of Salt of the Earth were denied access to many of the technical services needed to make a film. Laboratories refused to process their film; technicians refused to work on it; musicians had to be hired to play the soundtrack without seeing the film itself. The actress who plays Esperanza was deported to Mexico before the film was completed.

In struggle against these conditions, the makers of Salt of the Earth again relied on the working class. Their workers developed new skills to meet the technical requirements of the film. The local union, whose story the film tells, provided actors and extras, housing, childcare, and defense against vigilantes who attacked the film crew. A production board was established for the film made up of four members from the women's auxiliary, four members from the union, and four members from the film company. The board took responsibility for both technical and organizational matters of the film making and for the content of the film.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. The turning point in the struggle comes in the vote at the union meeting around whether or not the women should take the picket line. The proposal passes by a narrow margin. Ramon opposes it. So does Carlota Sanchez, the woman who says "picketting's not proper... maybe a sin for a lady". Why do they oppose the women taking the line? A current issue is the Equal Rights Amendment. Why hasn't it been ratified? What forces oppose it?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

2. In a scene in the film, as the men hang out laundry, they discuss "the Woman Question". Antonio says "there's two kinds of slavery, wage slavery and domestic slavery?" What do those two concepts mean? What is the difference between the two? How are they connected?

3. In the final struggle between Esperanza and Ramon:

Esperanza: Have you learned nothing from this strike? What are you afraid to have me on your side? Do you still think you can have dignity only if I have none?

Ramon: You talk of dignity? After what you've been doing?

Esperanza: Yes I talk of dignity. The Anglo bosses look down on you, and you hate them for it. "Stay in your place you dirty Mexican"--that's what they all tell you. But why must you say to me "Stay in your place." Do you feel better having someone lower than you?

Ramon: Shut up you're talking crazy.

Esperanza: Whose neck shall I stand on, to make me feel superior? And what will I get out of it? I don't want anything lower than I am. I want to rise. And push everything up with me as I go....

Ramon: Will you be still?

Esperanza: And if you can't understand this you're a fool-- because you can't win this strike without me! You can't win anything without me!

Esperanza moves from her oppression as a woman in her relationship with Ramon to speak to the general class character of the contradiction.

What are the people in this film struggling against? What are they struggling for? What do they mean by dignity? What forces deny people dignity today?

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Ramon: Shut up you're talking crazy. Esperanza: Whose neck shall I stand on, to make me feel superior? And what will I get out of it? I don't want anything lower than I am. I want to rise. And push everything up with me as I go....

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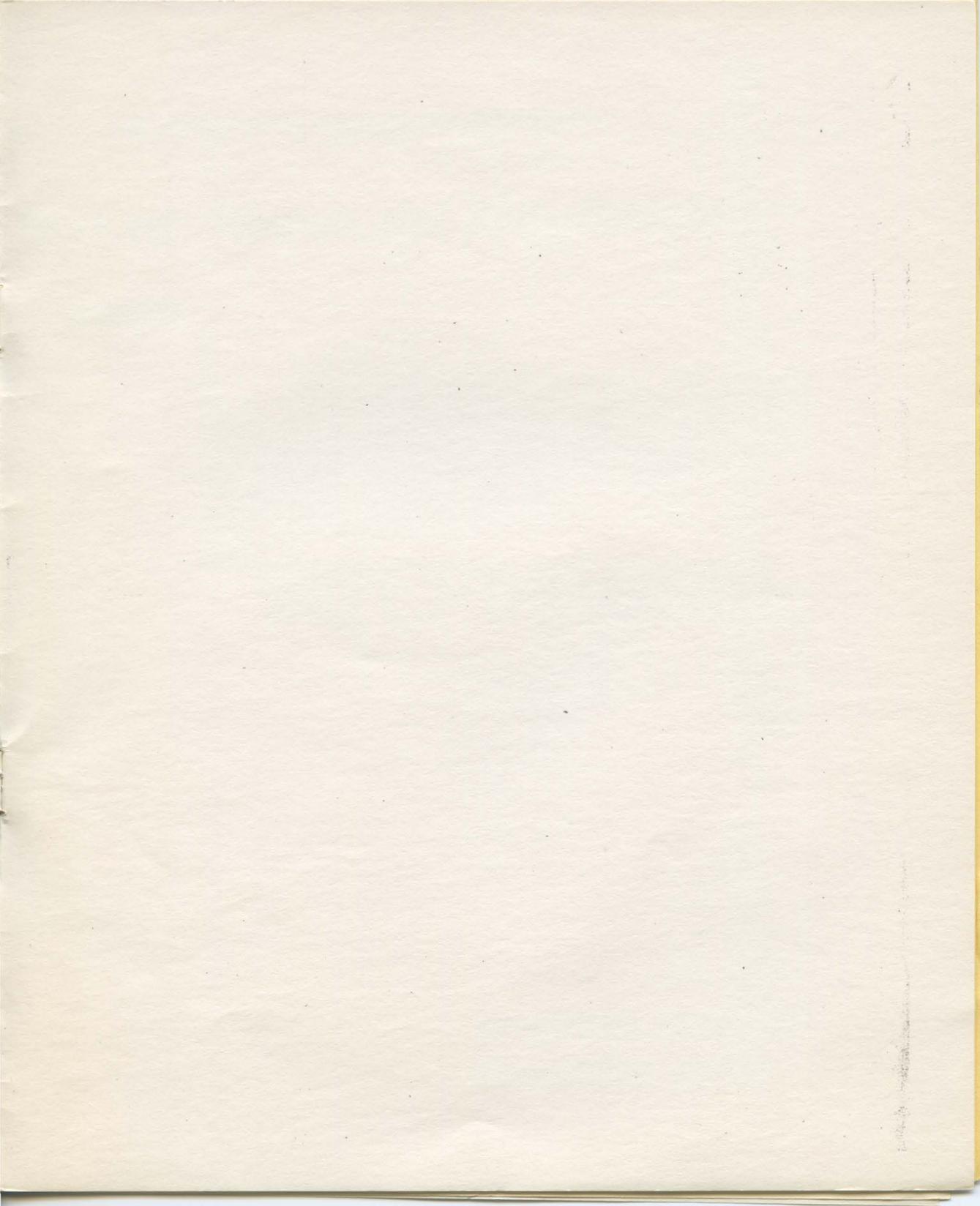
DEVELOPING THE LESSONS OF SALT OF THE EARTH

There are many lessons to be learned from the struggle portrayed in Salt of the Earth. To continue the process, we are encouraging people to write a short essay on the question: what are the obstacles to women's full equality in society and how can they be overcome. The best essays will be published in the bookstore newsletter.

Essays can be dropped by the bookstore.

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