

WORKING WOMAN AND MAN BOOKSTORE

*presents*

# UNION MAIDS

WOMEN ORGANIZING IN THE 1930s

*program notes &  
discussion guide*

#### WORKING WOMAN AND MAN FILM SHOWINGS:

In offering this 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 common links and inter-connections 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.

#### WORKING WOMAN AND MAN BOOKSTORE:

The purpose of working woman and man bookstore is to inform and educate working people about issues and events that have a direct and indirect influence on our lives. In addition to operation of a bookstore offering many books that are difficult to obtain elsewhere, we have organized:

1. Bookstore Club Discussions: The Bookstore club is a means for customers and supporters of the bookstore to build a stronger and better bookstore through their support and participation. Discussions are organized through the bookstore club on many topics, including Women's Rights, Socialism vs. Capitalism, and Wage Labor vs. Capital.
2. The Women's Work Book Project: The Women's workbook project is an opportunity for working class women to summarize their conditions and experiences in writing and in interviews, and to engage in discussions to develop lessons from that experience. The results will be published and distributed by the bookstore.
3. Research: The bookstore maintains a research library and clipping files on many issues and events of importance to working people. Research projects, eg: on energy, union-busting, etc. are organized regularly by bookstore staff and members of the bookstore club.

UNION MAIDS: A DOCUMENTARY ABOUT WOMEN WORKERS ORGANIZING

Produced by New Day Films

Union Maids tells the story of one of the great social movements of our history from the point of view of three working class women organizers who played a part in that movement: the struggle of millions of working people to organize large industrial unions and win basic rights of economic security for all workers in response to the Great Depression of the '30s.

From our point of view as working people today--faced with another economic crisis and increasing attacks on worker's rights--the struggles related by the women organizers in Union Maids offer both inspiration and important lessons. But it would be a mistake to view Union Maids from the viewpoint of nostalgia for past movements or to fail to recognize both the common elements and different conditions of our struggles today.

Historical development doesn't proceed in a straight line. The process of development of social forces goes through periods of victory and defeat, gains and setbacks, periods of intense struggle and periods of relative calm and rest. Development passes from quantitative, gradual change to open, abrupt, qualitative change.

The victories won by working people in the 30's have had an important effect on all of our lives, but they did not qualitatively change our conditions. Our struggle continues.

1. Historical Conditions-The Great Depression: The women whose stories are told in Union Maids became active in the union movement during the Great Depression of the '30s. In that period, from the stock market crash of 1929 to the recovery that was finally only achieved with the full scale war production of World War II, 5,761 banks failed, gross farm income dropped by more than 50%; wage cuts for industrial workers averaged 45%. By 1933 estimates are as many as 17 million people were unemployed and 40 million men, women, and children were without a regular paycheck or any other form of regular income. Between 1930 and 1935, 75,000 farms were lost through foreclosure and bankruptcy sales; in New York 100,000 eviction orders were issued in one year.

Working people and small farmers faced these conditions without the benefit of unemployment insurance or welfare.

In addition, racism and sexism intensified problems for many workers. According to Labor's Untold Story: "Women received less pay than men...Wages of \$5, \$6, \$7 a week for full time work for women were common. The wages of Negro women, the most oppressed of all, were even lower than those for white women.

Not all people were so directly affected by the depression however. According to Milton Meltzer: "Some of the new rich and the wilder speculators were ruined by the crash, but it hardly nicked the old money. The great American fortunes accumulated in the nineteenth century stood solid. The paper value of a families wealth diminished, but the family still owned significant and usually controlling shares of the productive power of America. Some of the great empires managed to expand: U.S. Steel, Western Electric, Dupont, Standard Oil, Shell, Armour, Monsanto, General Motors. When stock market values fell, the giant corporations bought up more properties at bargain prices."

## 2. What was the cause of the Great Depression?

The depression which began in 1929 was neither the first nor the last of depressions and recessions in this country. In fact, depressions or crises are a basic feature of capitalist societies and economies. Crises have occurred periodically every 8 to 12 years since 1825. Everyone today is well aware of the current "recession" and can recall the similar recession of 1974-75.

The causes of recessions and depression are no mystery, despite what the media tells us today. They occur based on the fundamental contradiction of our society: the wealth of society is produced socially by the interconnected labor of millions of people, but it is appropriated by a few, rich capitalists who control the means of production, the tools factories, and machinery needed for production. Because they own the means of production, the capitalists can hire workers to work for them for a wage. Workers produce the wealth, but the wages paid to them equal only a part of the wealth they produce.

The remainder, the unpaid labor of the worker, is pocketed by the capitalist.

Always looking for a competitive edge over other capitalists, the capitalist invests a portion of the wealth the workers produce to develop the productivity of labor and thus lower labor costs for each item produced, thus getting a larger profit on each or a bigger share of the market. In the period from 1919 to 1929, just before the Great Depression, output per worker hour rose 72%. By 1929 workers could make each unit in 30% less time. Wages by no means rose with the productivity of labor. By 1929, the top 5% of all Americans took in about one-third of all personal income.

But having developed production to a high level while holding wages to a minimum, the capitalists are caught up in contradictions of their own making. Who will buy their products? Workers have been systematically paid less than the value of what they produce and cannot afford to buy all of the products of their labor. The result is a crisis of over production. Production is suspended and workers laid off. Products and productive forces are destroyed rather than used. Wealth is concentrated in fewer and fewer hands. And then The cycle begins again.

The working out of this cycle can be observed today both in general economic conditions and in particular industries, like the auto industry.



Fred Wright

### 3. Workers response to the Great Depression: Formation of the CIO.

At the beginning of the depression, workers had few weapons with which to fight for economic security and decent working conditions. Only 10% of the work force was organized into unions, and the dominant unions were organized as craft unions in the American Federation of Labor (AFL). Craft unions organized workers by their particular skill or trade regardless of how their actual working conditions were organized. Thus workers in a single industry or shop were often represented by many different unions, each of which represented workers from only a single trade. The effect of this form of organization was that workers were not able to coordinate their struggles and most new, large scale industry remained unorganized. In fact, leaders of the AFL declared workers in large industrial plants--often recent immigrants, blacks, and women--to be unorganizable! The interests of the leaders of the AFL was exposed as representing only the interests of their narrow trades, not the interests of the working class as a whole. For example, at the beginning of the depression, the AFL opposed workers demands for unemployment insurance.

Union Maids tells the story of the formation of a new type of union, known as industrial unions, which would represent all workers within a plant or industry regardless of their particular trade or job. The leadership in these struggles, as Union Maids shows, often came from those workers whom the AFL leaders declared unorganizable.

A worker summed up the accomplishment of the CIO: "The CIO movement gave the American public its first real taste of class consciousness and social thinking, establishing in the American mind for the first time the idea of democracy on the job, in the factories, the offices, and every place where people work. The whole idea of human relations at work, which has since become the subject of innumerable studies by industrial relations experts, is the product of this movement. The CIO, in conjunction with the war and the activities of the Negroes themselves, established a framework within which Negroes could fight for equality inside the plant. It has done the same for women workers. Over the years it has provided a focal point for the energies of tens of thousands of idealistically minded young people who found in the labor movement a cause they could serve. The theory that America has a class struggle, so long disputed, was finally recognized after the CIO was organized. It was the CIO movement and following it the Second World War, which established the production worker as a citizen of American society rather than just a beast of burden." (James Boggs, "The American Revolution: Pages from a Negro Workers Notebook" 1963)

But in assessing the significance of the CIO for our struggles today, we should be clear that the real gains of working people in the 30's represented quantitative changes for the most part, not a qualitative change in the social relations of production, in the basic relations of exploited and exploiter. The CIO movement helped to win the right to unemployment insurance, but it did not solve the problem of unemployment. The CIO won the right of workers to organize unions, but a majority of workers have never been organized. It won new respect for working people, but it did not eliminate finally racism and sexism within the working class movement itself.

The struggle to change the relations of production continues today under new conditions.

#### 4. The working class movement today.

The struggles of the '30s developed out of the advance of the productive forces in the industrial revolution following the First World War: the expansion of large scale industrial production, the mechanization of agriculture, the migration of millions of black and other agricultural workers to the cities. Significantly, the rise of the CIO took place in a period of rising U.S. control of world markets and resources which was consolidated in the period following world war II.

Our struggles for a decent standard of living and social development today, take place in a period when U.S. capitalists are increasingly unable to transfer the burden of super-exploitation to workers overseas. A new industrial revolution, spurred by automation and computerization, is eliminating many industrial production jobs, and increasing the number of clerical, service, and technical jobs while at the same time increasing the numbers of people more or less permanently unemployed and forced onto welfare to survive. The size of the workforce has continued to grow, but its composition is rapidly changing. Soon more women will be employed than the total number of workers employed in 1929. Out of this changing composition of the workforce, strong, independent movements of women, blacks, and other minorities have arisen and grown, and now represent the rising force for development within the labor movement as a whole.

Common elements of our conditions today and those of the 30s however reveal the interconnection between our struggles and the class struggles of the CIO movement. Real wages today have declined steadily for all workers since the early 70s. The concentration of economic power in fewer and fewer hands continues. The rights of workers to organize are increasingly under attack--both from government regulation and legislation and from a new army of union-busting "industrial relations" consultants. The percentage of workers in unions has declined from a peak of 37% in 1947 to 22% today.

We face the necessity and the responsibility of creating a new movement today even stronger than the CIO movement. In our discussion tonight, we will focus on the key role of women in developing the working class movement: How are our conditions today similar and how different from the conditions of the rise of the CIO; what are the positive and negative lessons of the experiences summarized in Union Maids for developing a movement today?

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