Research Article

Jonathan Judd*

“Riffraff” On the Waterfront: A Critical Analysis of Labor Imagery on the Imagined Docks of the Hollywood Dream Factory, 1934–1937

https://doi.org/10.1515/culture-2020-0139
received June 21, 2021; accepted November 17, 2021

Abstract: At the height of the Great Depression, the American Labor Movement was ascendant as union strongholds and the belief in the power of collective action and labor solidarity were re-asserted. The energy and activism along the west-coast waterfront fomented the resurgent movement. With the revitalization of the International Longshoremen’s Union in 1933 came a succession of events that captured the American populace’s attention, including mass demonstrations and coast-wide general strikes. With this surge of events on the west-coast waterfront, from 1934 to 1937, there was a corresponding flurry of imagery disseminated to the American populace using the west-coast waterfront as a constant backdrop. Thus, an examination of the issues posed and the reality suppressed by this imagery is a crucial part of understanding how collective action and union organization exist in American visual culture. A critical evaluation of the specific ways that these Hollywood portrayals do damage to the image and perception of organized labor will allow for a confrontation with the structures of power upheld and held in tension through the dissemination of these films. This study will involve a close analysis of the following films: Fog over Frisco, Wharf Angel, Waterfront Lady, Barbary Coast, Frisco Kid, San Francisco and Mannequin.

Keywords: great-depression, labor history, visual culture

At the height of the Great Depression, the American Labor Movement was ascendant as union strongholds and the belief in the power of collective action and labor solidarity were re-asserted. The energy and activism along the west-coast waterfront fomented the resurgent movement. Further, with the resurgence of the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) in 1933 there came a succession of events that captured the American populace’s attention, affecting international commerce and putting on display the raw power of organized labor. The Great West Coast Maritime Strike of 1934 demonstrated a willingness toward sustained collective action along the coast, which sparked off myriad small scale “job-actions” such as work slow-downs and “quickie strikes” that put pressure on the bosses locally for higher wages and greater worker protections. This culminated in the formation of the Maritime Federation of the Pacific Coast, achieving what labor historian Bruce Nelson has called the “syndicalist dream of one big union” (60). Empowering longshoremen, dockworkers and sailors alike, organized labor shut down the ports of the pacific coast for an accumulated 99 days between 1936 and 1937. Outside the growing circles of unionized labor and their supporters, the view of the activity on the docks was not the significant historical vision we can now acknowledge in retrospect. To many citizens, far outside the scope of labor politics, the shift

* **Corresponding author: Jonathan Judd,** Department of Art and Communication, College of Mount Saint Vincent, 6301 Riverdale Ave, Bronx, New York 10471, United States of America, e-mail: jjudd.adjunct@mountsaintvincent.edu

toward militant unionism appeared as more in a mounting series of cataclysms that began with the stock market crash (Parrish 408–412). Thus, at a time when the economic devastation of the Great-Depression gave clear cause for many citizens to question the efficacy and stability of the capitalist system, an accurate portrayal of collective action would have been crucial to the labor movement's success.

However, a gap appears between the reality on the ground and the images produced and widely distributed by the new masters of public consensus on Hollywood sets. Specifically, with the surge of events on the west-coast waterfront during the years of 1934–1938, there was a similar and corresponding, flurry of imagery disseminated to the American populace. This imagery directly concerned the action on the waterfront, using San Francisco as a constant backdrop for dramas set in both its past and present. I argue that an examination and exploration of the issues posed and the reality suppressed by this flurry of imagery is a crucial part of understanding how collective action and militant union organization exist in American visual culture and the larger popular consciousness. Speaking on the history of labor imagery in film, media scholar William J. Puette states, "people's values are shaped mostly by experience and emotion and only a little by logical thought. For this reason, the portrayal of unions in the media, particularly in movies plays a major role in shaping the attitudes of Americans toward labor unions" (3). Thus, a critical evaluation of how these Hollywood portrayals do damage to the image and perception of organized labor will allow for a confrontation with the structures of power upheld and held in tension through the proliferation and dissemination of these filmic constructions. I will rely on a close analysis of the following films: *Fog Over Frisco* (1934), *Wharf Angel* (1934) *Waterfront Lady* (1935), *Barbary Coast* (1935), *Frisco Kid* (1935), *San Francisco* (1936), *Riffraff* (1936) and *Mannequin* (1937). I also rely on the contemporaneous reviews and primary documentation concerning both the reception and production for key films such as *Riffraff* and *Frisco Kid*.

In order to briefly illustrate this gap between the reality on the ground and the images produced on Hollywood sets, I open with two oppositional, dramatic scenarios. First scenario: after years of major strike defeats and dwindling numbers, a small group of veteran maritime workers step up from the rank and file to reinvigorate the longshoremen's union in San Francisco. The scrappy team includes a young, charismatic Australian expat named Harry Bridges, who had sailed the world and seen first-hand the exploitation of his fellow sailors and longshoremen at the hands of industry bosses and dockside foremen. Through a rigorously organized grassroots effort, publishing their own rank-and-file bulletin and working with small groups of workers committed to the cause of collective action, they achieve success in re-establishing the union. Taking action to gain headway against the increasing pressures of their employers and with a country wide economic depression in full tilt, the union whips up an amazing display of solidarity, going on an 83 day long strike that ultimately involves over 100,000 workers in San Francisco and Alameda County. Demonstrating their tenacity and determination to agitate for their rights, the militant unionists achieve a guarantee from their employers that they will have a seat at the table, a hard-won right to collective bargaining. The dock workers and their struggles become a symbol of pride for other ongoing trade union struggles across the country, from the autoworkers of Detroit to the dockworkers of the New York City waterfront.

Second scenario: on a San Francisco dock, a large group of longshoremen are being rallied by a communist insurgent to strike for higher wages. They are being whipped up to a fever pitch and their feckless union leader can do nothing to stop them or back them down. What the dockworkers don't realize is that their employer wants the strike in order to break a 5-year contract he has with them. He'll then be able to hire on scabs at half the regular salary. Enter, the charismatic personality of Dutch Muller, has a greater report with the men than their own union leader, incredibly. Dutch jumps into action on the dock, working to call off the strike: when words don't work fists do and a large-scale brawl sends the message to break-up the rally. Dutch is a hero, even garnering some local press for his actions; he soon becomes the head of the union. However, the communist insurgent remains on the scene filling Dutch's head with notions of fair wages and worker's rights. It's not long before Dutch is rallying the men to strike, this time they strike successfully and incur disastrous consequences, scabs are hired on and everyone loses their jobs. Dutch skips town and the longshoreman's families are left hungry and desperate.

The first scenario is a brief overview of the actual events that brought together and effectively revitalized the International Longshoremen's Union on the American west-coast. Actions taken by these

grassroots organizers, an overlapping mixture of veteran maritime workers, US Communist party members and militant unionists, spurred on the high watermark of the American labor movement during the core Depression years (Nelson 59). The second scenario was viewed by hundreds of thousands of film-hungry American citizens during the same period – the fictional fodder for Hollywood's silver screen. It was set in the backlots of the Hollywood dream-factory, shot and produced by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) studios under the watchful eyes of conservative media barons Louis B. Mayer and William Randolph Hearst. The Hollywood blockbuster, *Riffraff* (1936), featured two of the biggest stars of the day, Spencer Tracy as Dutch Muller and Jean Harlow as the love interest Hattie. It had fantastic fight scenes, components of comedy slapstick and the leering figure of a communist insurgent ready to burn it all down.

The film was a Trojan horse of sorts, embedding many elements of "Red-Scare" paranoia and anti-labor rhetoric with the veneer of silver-screen magic. Propaganda promoted on and off the screen at the time, ginned up by reactionary political leaders and Hearst's conservative media conglomerate.

My attention was drawn to this focus on the stark disparity between the Hollywood imaginary and the reality of the labor front by reading a critical review of recent films "Hollywood as Strikebreaker," by Ed Ray, in the Leftist periodical *New Masses*. Looking back at the *New Masses* provides an amazing wealth of primary documentation detailing an entire world of journalistic, artistic and literary production. I was brought to this particular excerpt from the archive while searching out a special art section included in the same edition. This was an illustrated supplement that featured an essay titled "Revolutionary Art Today" by Thomas S. Willison, and a large sampling of works by American artists that were considered to have represented "social reality and revolutionary struggle" in their work. Publication of the *New Masses* was born out of a need to consolidate the influence and appeal of two former leftist publications – continuing the "non-sectarian legacy" of publishing serious content and commentary unbeholden to any singular bit of political machinery (Hagelstein Marquadt 73). Established in 1926, the new periodical was bold in its declaration of intent, the *New Masses* prospectus reads:

> The publication will represent no special school of literature or art… It will regularly interpret the activities of workers, farmers, strikers etc. But in such a way as to bring out the general human and cultural significance of particular movements. For it believes that a deeply human interpretation of any event is better than propaganda… it must strike its roots strongly into American reality! ("Prospectus for Dynamo")

It is this American reality that I mean to get at utilizing the critical thought offered up in the pages of the *New Masses* as my pivot point. Specifically, using the critical reviews of cinema and theater that attempted to argue for truth, even as they saw it suppressed by Hollywood producers and reactionary playwrights. My focus is on the waterfront, the American labor front during the core years of the Great Depression (1934–1937) and the groundswell for the larger militant labor movement fomenting in the US.

Turning to *Riffraff* and the first of two critical reviews of the film from 1936, the thematic elements of the scheming Communist insurgent and the easily corrupted, rowdy, laboring masses persist throughout. Ed Ray, in his aptly titled review, "Hollywood as Strikebreaker" takes up the objective with which this article is also tasked: a critical interrogation of the ways that the actions, goals and consequences of organized labor are envisioned and conceived through the media of film – a medium understood for its power as a vehicle for the mass dissemination of ideology. Ray proposes that the reader becomes critically aware of the potential for the Hollywood film industry to perform the task of strikebreaker from afar. Working through the power of the cinematic eye, there was no need for the officers Billy-club or the national guardsman's rifle butt. In October of 1935 *Riffraff* is still in production, Ray's critique is largely drawn from a reading of the screen-play and possibly from a test-screening. He introduces *Riffraff* as the latest contribution to Hollywood's attack on labor: "The scenario deliberately seeks to prove that the waterfront strike with which it deals is fostered through a "Red" conspiracy to delude the workers and all of Hollywood's outworn clichés are utilized to drive home the lesson" (44). The cast is reduced to a set of hackneyed stereotypes posing the men on the docks and the women in the waterfront canning factory as monolithic masses without agency or individual thought, vulnerable to any charismatic voice that seeks to rally them into frenzied motion.

Riffraff opens with the composite portrayal of action at a dockside labor rally, once again there is a charismatic speaker and a frenzied mob. With scenes of brawling dock workers and the dispersal of a would-be strike, the filmic space is charged from the outset. Spencer Tracy's character, Dutch Muller, lends a bit of comic relief when he gives Belcher, "the Red," a slapstick shove off his soapbox and into the water – in order to send him back to "Rooshia" (*Riffraff* 00:10:00–00:10:16). Pairing this action with the stunning new transformation of Hollywood-glamour-starlit Jean Harlow from platinum blonde to "Brownette," the film had its appeal. However, there is a reminder throughout the film of the possibility of anarchic violence. This stark political content didn't go unnoticed. The Cleveland Federation of Labor, a federation of Ohio based trade unions, passed a resolution to protest the showing of the film – boycotting it locally with a statement claiming that it was "a slander on the militant trade unions of the west coast." It was reported in the popular periodical *Motion Picture Daily* that "Max Hayes, editor of the labor paper *Cleveland Citizen*, described the picture as 'propaganda to prejudice the public against trade unionism'" (2). Thus, this article seeks to interrogate the inherent tensions between the distorted projections of a Hollywood imaginary caught up in the reactionary agenda of "Red-Scare" politics and the really existing struggles between labor and capital during the same period.

In a scene at the dock, Harlow's character drops a Tuna can near a police officer who is trying to break up a brawl, she shouts that it's a bomb and everyone scatters (*Riffraff* 00:11:20–00:11:34). This is offered up as a tense yet playful scene that gestures toward the precarity of strike actions on the dock – working to foreshadow an inevitable slip into chaos at the hands of "Red" unionists. Later in the film, Dutch succumbs to the corruptive influence of the communist-agent Belcher, he leads the men out on strike resulting in tragic consequences for all. Unbelievably, there is no other option for him afterward but to wonder the jungle of a foreign land as a despondent hobo. Ultimately, returning to the docks to make amends, he can only find work now as a night watchman. It isn't long before Belcher comes to call on him revealing his true form as communist fiend. With his hands full of explosives, Belcher seeks to conspire with Dutch to blow up the very dock on which he stands guard: "if they ain't gonna let us work, we ain't gonna let them work…" (*Riffraff* 01:17:10–01:17:35). Continuing with his review of the film, Ed Ray concludes:

> To list every attack on the working class made in Riffraff would entail copying the complete script. If this film had been blessed with a glossary it would run something like this: *Hero* – A man who resorts to violence to knock out Reds and stop strikes. *Villain* – A Red, whose chief pleasure in life comes from making employees disloyal… *Workers* – (especially waterfront workers). Drunken, improvident, lazy good for nothings, addicted to much thoughtless rousing. (44)

This critical reduction of the film to a glossary of types works here to highlight the continual drumbeat of Red-baiting and anti-labor rhetoric and imagery that one encounters throughout.

Moreover, *Riffraff* centralizes its narrative action around the drama between labor and capital – between the workers and the bosses – swinging back and forth from the tragic moment of the strike to its consequences. Other films, however, used the waterfront more as a launching point or backdrop for narrative action. Embedding the west-coast waterfront as a necessary stage-set for the endless scenarios of murder, mystery, hustle, romance and dramatic intrigue, there was a subtler action revolving through the Hollywood imaginary. In its fixation on the waterfront during the core of the Great Depression – while the waterfront functioned as a literal and figural labor-front for the ongoing labor movement – American cinema was constantly on the docks, fascinated with the figures both real and imaginary that could populate those liminal spaces. In the film-noir world of the pre-code film *Fog Over Frisco* (1934) and the pre-code crime-drama *Waterfront Lady* (1935), the cinematic world is simultaneously populated by nefarious criminal elements (shady dock-side deals, gambling rings, etc.) and a naive, disorderly and often drunken/Irish (or "gypsy") cohort of the working class.

In *Waterfront Lady*, we are thrown into the world of high stakes gambling aboard a yacht-casino evidently cruising along the west-coast – somewhere between Seattle and San Francisco. When a shooting occurs onboard, businessman Ronny Hillyer jumps ship with the weapon to save his boss from implication in the murder of a night watchmen (*Waterfront Lady* 00:10:30–00:11:30). Hillyer surfaces on the docks and decides to hide out among the sailors and longshoremen. Adopting a sailor's pea-coat and cap, he assumes

a position in the wharf community. He meets the stumble-drunk Captain O'Brien and his daughter, who spouts off with charming statements like, "This is a great neighborhood we're living in… with murder goin' on all around yuh," and speaking to the disguised fugitive "You'll never find a better place to live, no landlords to be due here and no taxes to pay" (*Waterfront Lady* 00:16:10–00:16:45). Collectively, this imagery works to erase the tumultuous working-class reality of the waterfront, wharf and dock, replacing it with a surreal space overrun by outlandish characters and fantastic scenarios. Other significant scenes in *Waterfront Lady* include Hillyer vouching as father to one of the wayward "wharf rats," while he is chased down by a truancy officer. He takes the young boy aside and explains to him that he can't grow up to be a decent businessman without understanding arithmetic (*Waterfront Lady* 00:28:40–00:30:05).

Ultimately, the charming figure of Hillyer as outsider/business-tycoon wins over the romantic interest (Captain O'Brien's daughter Joan) with his ambitious entrepreneurial spirit and fistfuls of cash – won off a dockside dice-game. Joan refuses her once promised suitor – the burly working-class Joe who attends to her father's ship and has clearly been a point of stability in her life – to take up with Hillyer in an exciting gamble toward upward mobility. Everything ends happily when Hillyer and Joan are able to escape the working-class reality of the docks and open their own restaurant. Similarly, in the wildly popular film *Mannequin* (1937), wherein Spencer Tracy is transformed into a successful shipping tycoon, it is the inherent trouble of unexplained "labor unrest" on the docks that unseats the industrialist from his wealth. Without any real understanding of why or how the militant union actions occurred, or any level of involvement in the circumstances of the "unrest," the viewer is made to understand the tragic end of destitution that results from agitating for worker's rights. In an interesting variation, the audience is endeared to the figure of the tycoon and the strike actions lead to a loss on all sides. This is especially so for the love interest, Jessie the factory-girl (Joan Crawford), who desperately wants to escape her working class reality at the factory. With the wealth of a handsome and mysterious stranger figured in as the winning ticket toward upward mobility, the only foil conceivable is the pesky incursion of the labor movement. A dramatic statement from the wan, overworked figure of Jessie's mother cements the film's ethos of radical self-interest over any concern or consciousness of class-interest: "Live your life for yourself, Jess. Always remember what it is *you* want… Get it… anyway you can" (*Mannequin* 00:52:20–00:52:45).

In his study, *Working Class: The Feature Film in British and American Society*, historian Peter Stead presents "a broad overview of workers and film in Britain and the United States from the silent era to the 1980's." Regarding the interrelation between film and class in America Stead states that, "The great triumph of film, especially the American film, was that it had successfully negotiated the mine-field of class." It did so by refusing "to look very closely at the realities of working-class life" (239). Stead continues, arguing that through the Hollywood dream factory audiences "came to know a great deal about the work of cowboys and detectives but they were to learn almost nothing about routine laboring, manufacturing, selling, and clerking and they were shown even less of the trade union politics that were associated with those activities" (243). From script to production, Hollywood created a filmic space where "the reality of class and the possibility of sustained class struggle" was deliberately obfuscated in support of an all consuming focus "on individual men and women and the way in which they were able to cope with all the challenges and dilemmas that they experienced" (244). Thus, a cinematic suppression of class consciousness is in play through the simultaneous promotion of a hyper-visible mob collectivity – corrupted by its own susceptibility to populist radicalism; and/or the substitution of substantive working-class narratives for a narrow focus on individual struggles – mired in the myopia of psychological melodrama. Moreover, there is a subliminal element to point to regarding the persistent absence of complexity in working-class portrayals. With the outpouring of waterfront representations in the staged Hollywood universe of the MGM, RKO and Warner Brothers backlots, the Hollywood gaze breezes over the surface of things. It stops only to fabricate outlandish portrayals of cartoonish "Reds" and mindless mobs, strategically deployed to facilitate the movements of a plot that is always otherwise engaged.

Looking to the earlier pre-code film *Wharf Angel* (1934), the combined elements of hyper-visibility and atomized individualism appear once more. The drama unfolds when San Francisco saloon girl Mary returns home to find fugitive Como Murphy using her place for his hideout. He quickly explains his situation, relating the story of his travails on the dock and the riot that he stirred up by simply lecturing on the "rights

of man." Como explains that when in the heat of the riot a policeman was killed, he was blamed and thus became a fugitive (*Wharf Angel* 00:04:35–00:06:45). This reality soon fades as the two realize a passion for one another – Mary arguably infatuated with musclebound Como and the atmosphere of danger that surrounds him. Again, it is with a broad and dismissive hand that the really existing labor struggles on the waterfront are called up in phantom form to provide a launching point for narrative action. This is more alarming considering that the film was created during large scale strike actions in San Francisco, acting as a real-time, reactionary lambast, insisting on the inherent chaos created by labor activism or "speaking out." Scholar Tom Zanielo, in his comprehensive catalogue of labor films, *Working Stiffs, Union Maids, Reds and Riffraff*, deals in a filmography with certain necessary exclusions due to restrictions of time and space. However, it is important to deal with and catalogue these peripheral examples with only limited or passing content directly related to labor struggles or union organizing. This work creates a pathway for understanding how these films foreground narrative action based on a contrived and consistent vision of the inherent "trouble" involved in speaking out against the bosses – denying a coherent vision of labor thinking or acting collectively. Indeed, there is an insidious play of power in presenting to the movie going public the fait accompli of a working-class narrative always-already made to self-destruct.

Far from monolithic, the diverse make-up of political representation on the west-coast waterfront was never without the productive influence of Communism or fully beholden to its influence and representatives. Members of the Communist Party USA (CPUSA) were present and instrumental in the struggle for workers' rights; however, they were only one labor faction within a wider field of the collective that ultimately came together in solidarity during the 1934 general strike and afterward. Scholar Bruce Nelson has demonstrated "that communists and party sympathizers at the grassroots showed a significant capacity for independent initiative," unbeholden to foreign directives. Nelson declares that "any discussion of the party's relationship to unions and workers requires attention to a complex dialectic" (60). It was CPUSA that was instrumental in activating a politics of the "Popular-Front" on the San Francisco docks, years before the 1935 resolution at the seventh world congress of the Com-Intern: "Communist leadership was not incompatible with a vibrant local democracy and a good deal of rank-and-file independence" (61). Instead of whispering insurgents attempting to provoke anarchic moments of disaster and destruction on the docks, there were organized, activist initiatives, put into place by "work-place democracy factions." It was this armature of organized labor on the waterfront that took the lead in consistently demanding a democratic approach that championed the voice and actions of veteran longshoremen and seamen of the rank-and-file. Labor historian Victoria L. Johnson, in her 2008 study, *How Many Machine Guns Does It Take to Cook One Meal?: The Seattle and San Francisco General Strikes*, argues that "Communist Party (CP) organizers had to join with syndicalist-oriented rank-and-file longshoremen through the Albion Hall group to have an impact on the docks. To do this, they had to go against the party directives of the centralized CP to work with West Coast longshoremen who valorized rank-and-file control" (74). Instrumentalizing an entrenched, working class, waterfront culture that focused on community building and participatory local politics, the various labor factions from San Francisco to Seattle formed a united front against exploitation.

Moreover, if the screen writers at MGM, Warner Brothers or RKO wanted to produce a feature film that really took in and attempted to deal with the more dramatic elements of union activity on the docks, their star wouldn't be one of flesh and blood but rather paper and ink. For it was *the Waterfront Worker* – an independent press publication written and produced by the rank-and-file members of the Albion Hall group within the San Francisco chapter of the ILA – that worked to galvanize the movement. Independently published and distributed, the paper dealt directly with the issues facing the longshoremen, sailors and warehouse workers. This was the entire network of production that generated wealth for a corporate class that continually sought to lower wages and combat workers organizing for their rights. Distributed directly from worker to worker, it was a free press that the unionists could trust – operating outside the atmosphere of distorted reactionary bias spread by the conservative San Francisco Examiner, owned by media mogul William Randolph Hearst. With regard to *the Waterfront Worker* and its import during this time, the Archives of the International Longshoremen and Warehouse Workers Union (ILWU) states:

The paper served a vital role in organizing longshoremen throughout the Pacific Coast in the months before the 1934 strike. During the strike, it helped strike organizers disseminate information on strike issues and key events, helping inform workers on unionization efforts. With its frank language and simple line drawings, the paper looked inelegant, but its message was clear: the time was rife for organizing for real union representation on the waterfront (www.ilwu.org).

Both Nelson and Johnson are explicit with regard to the power and necessity of *the Waterfront Worker*. It was a vehicle for consciousness raising, a unique platform where a host of issues could be addressed. While the Albion Hall Group and other labor factions, including the industrial unionists of the IWW in Seattle, were agitating for a general strike months before the great west coast strike began, they couldn't gain widespread consensus. Labor was mobilized toward a mass demonstration of solidarity, finally, in the face of state sponsored terrorism. Calling in the national guard to protect corporate interests, federal overreach resulted in the horror of two of the San Francisco ILA's rank-and-file murdered in cold blood (107–112). Moreover, the American labor movement on the west-coast waterfront and elsewhere was never subsumed under a singular vision or ordered by an iron-fist from above or abroad, it was rather the complex and dynamic process of a subjected minority agitating for their rights.

There is a dominant historical thread regarding the post-WWII McCarthy witch hunts of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) that points to the postwar "Red-Scare" and trial phenomena as a result of shifting power balances. With Germany and the axis powers defeated, with Europe in smoldering ruins, the US imperial offense shifted to its uneasy wartime ally: The USSR, Communism and Stalin. With the Fascist leaders banished, it was time to square-up the home-front, which had become "overrun" by the Reds and their fellow-travelers – overrun by the Communist threat directed from abroad. Missing here is the longer saga of the corporatist agenda that underpins the deeper historical reality. The vehement atmosphere of Red-baiting and the resulting black-list and HUAC show-trials resulted from the collapse of an entrenched resistance against the reactionary socio-political and socio-cultural phenomena that threatened the civil liberties they were ostensibly meant to protect. The McCarthyite-era was in fact the third successive wave of "Red-Scares" gripping the American populace since the close of WWI, when a senate subcommittee disseminated a report titled, *Bolshevik Propaganda*. This report "concluded that bolshevism was the greatest current danger facing the United States and recommended legislation that would eliminate all anti-American propaganda" (Ceplair 400). This report and the coinciding anarchist bombings of June 1919 brought on the establishment of the FBI, along with J. E. Hoover's unique form of paranoiac policing.

There was an entire scaffolding of legislative proposals aimed at the reactionary end of policing all that could be arbitrarily labeled as "un-American." However, these actions were unpopular, garnering little to no public support. In its first iteration, during the 1930s, HUAC was ultimately a failure. "In the face of strong opposition from, among others, the American Civil liberties union, the American League Against War and Fascism, prominent law professors and the print media none of the proposed bills became law," reports historian Larry Ceplair (401). The attacks against politically progressive actors continued in insidious ways, despite these continuous demonstrations against the anti-democratic action of Red-Baiting. The heat and friction from all of this activity at the governmental level – by arch-conservative powers that feared the organization and empowerment of the laboring masses – were held in tension by the reality on the ground. This reality consisted of a radical turn in the American populace's relation to capitalism and corporate power – a deep questioning of the economic system that had so suddenly collapsed with the onset of the Great-Depression. Anti-capitalist, anti-corporatist sentiment was already building in the "roaring twenties" when it became evident that the prosperity of the post-war decade was funneled into the pockets of the upper strata. It fomented a resurgence of the American labor movement that continued post-WWII, despite the disparagement of union organizing and collective action as "un-American" activities.

Both scholars Michael Slade Shull and Russell Campbell have demonstrated the degree to which "Red-Scare Cycles" dominated representations of labor in film during the early twentieth century, with an overarching fixation on revolutionary bolshevism. In fact, both found that before the Russian Revolution portrayals of the working class and their associated struggles were significantly more sympathetic. In his *Radicalism in American Silent Films, 1909–1929*, Shull elucidates the conservative tactics of "stigmatizing liberal intellectuals, strike leaders, socialists, 'free love' advocates, and so on, together with the bloody red

spectre of Bolshevism," lumping all activity around union organization together in a monolithic block (9). Labor historian Steven J. Ross further analyses Shull's body of scholarship surrounding the silent film era in his essay *American Workers, American Movies: Historiography and Methodology*: "Shull suggests that postwar Red Scare films helped legitimize 'a significant switch from private police forces as agents of labor suppression to elements of Federal government.' By the conclusion of the Red Scare… 'militant labor had been beaten down and labeled as 'un-American' in the public mind' and radical 'voices, particularly those of immigrants, had been silenced, both in the life of the nation and on the screen'" (87).

Thus, a consistent narrative across the interwar decades, upon the news of the Bolshevik uprising and formation of the Soviet Union, involves the use of red-baiting and fear mongering known as the Red-Scare. These tactics were employed by both State and Corporate actors alike to demonize, weaken and disparage union organizing and collective action generally. It was in the mines and on the docks, in the lumber-yards and on the assembly line that labor organized against the advancing degrees of exploitation evident during the Depression-era. In all areas of labor production workers felt the pressure of the boss's heel and thus sought to organize, unionize and take a hand to the work of collective action. Tradesmen, factory workers, students and individuals from all sectors of the working class understood what was at stake in every mass-demonstration and with every push toward a broader marshalling of empowered labor. As Ivan F. Cox, Secretary of Local 38–79, ILA, stated in 1934 with regard to the San Francisco general strike:

> This controversy goes further than just the longshoremen. It is the intrinsic right as well as the acquired right of every American worker to organize and control the job. The longshoremen are fighting labor's battle and not fighting for themselves alone. They are in the grip of a great struggle for human rights, human betterment and social advancement (Johnson 69).

With vigor and zeal, easel painters, sculptors, printmakers and muralists worked to establish the Artists' Union (AU) under the FWA, FAP branches of the WPA, on the east coast. On the west coast, on the MGMA lots of Hollywood, the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) brought together writers and actors alike to unionize. Within the same year, despite the pressures and aggressions of the industry bosses, the Screen Writers Guild was also formed (Collins 6–8). However, these significant movements toward collective bargaining and worker protections, in the otherwise cut-throat marketplace of art and cultural production, were still menaced by the ever-present paranoia and fear mongering of the ongoing Red-Scare.

Moreover, the studio bosses understood their power as "strikebreakers," with the ability to directly influence the American populace on important political issues. This is best demonstrated by the dissemination of petty propaganda by Louis B. Mayer and MGM studios, in an attempt to distort the intent of the 1934 End Poverty in California (EPIC) campaign. Launched by the novelist and progressive activist Upton Sinclair, during his run for the California governorship, this campaign was meant to rally Californians toward the need for stronger social programs in the state. However, Mayer and his cohort were able to paint Sinclair as a "bolshevist beast" distorting his popular agenda to raise taxes on the wealthy, expand relief programs and nationalize the film industry by misquoting him "in order to give the impression of an eccentric radical with lunatic notions on every issue" (Humphries 27). Moreover, this episode of undue influence in the electoral politics of the California governorship bears significant weight on the analysis of consequent image production in the coming years leading up to WWII and afterward, with the rise of the Cold War. Historian Reynold Humphries in *Hollywood's Blacklist: A Political and Cultural History* (2008) details the tactics used by Mayer and MGM to guarantee Sinclair's failure, exhibiting an alarming show of anti-democratic force to protect their business interests:

> Of considerable interest is the way the Hollywood moguls used fiction (their own films) to put over another fiction. Fictional films became newsreels bearing the stamp of Truth, as do documentaries. There is considerable irony in this situation when one remembers that HUAC launched its Hearings of 1947 with the claim that there was Communist propaganda in Hollywood films. Here the studio bosses gave the Left a lesson on how to create and exploit propaganda for their own purposes (29).

Operating within close proximity of the waterfront and the mass demonstrations of militant unionism organized by the ILA and its associated allies, the film lots of MGM were also embroiled in an evolving atmosphere of labor activism and confrontation. According to reporting in the Motion Picture Daily dated

January 22, 1936, the motion picture industry workforce was looking to collectivize toward greater bargaining power with the bosses: "The Screen Actors' and Screen Writers Guilds met here today at the Writers Club with Teamsters, carpenters and other recognized labor unions in the first move toward plans for a Hollywood film industry labor council" (6). Movement toward a Hollywood film industry labor council would mean a major step toward the kind of syndicalist consolidation of union power evident on the west-coast waterfront. This labor council would have the potential power to challenge the established hierarchy in the multi-billion-dollar industry. A power portrayed at the time as "radical," and "dangerous" by such conservative, anti-labor forces as media mogul William Randolph Hearst, his contact and compatriot Louis B. Mayer of MGM.

It was Hearst who, in a fit of caustic reactionary angst, called for the engineering of negative public sentiment toward the strike actions on the San Francisco waterfront. Understanding his control over the MGM lot in the form of producers loyal to his interests, and propagandist agents able to do his bidding remotely, Hearst was a major impediment to positive, authentic or realistic portrayals of the events unfolding on the west-coast. Of course, Hearst was only channeling the collective outrage of all corporate interests at stake, those bosses who responded in turn to rally with local municipal and federal powers to break strikes and sow dissension against the popular rise of union actions. Here we can get at a more subtle line of anti-labor sentiment that emerged within the plot and placement of a series of films that stepped outside the "time" of these ongoing conflicts. Whereas, the actions of *Riffraff, Waterfront Lady, Mannequin* and *Wharf Angel* were set directly in the tumultuous time in which they were made, the concurrent films *Barbary Coast* (1935, MGM), *Frisco Kid* (1935, Warner Brothers) and *San Francisco* (1936, MGM) were set in a sensational world of historical-fiction.

Much has been written by scholars Reynold Humphries and Louis Pizzitola about the creation and dissemination of anti-labor propaganda under the guise of "newsreels" during the height of the 1934 general strike. Pizzitola, in his involved study of Hearst, H*earst Over Hollywood: Power, Passion, and Propaganda in the Movies*, discusses the explicit use of film scenes of mob violence in these "newsreels" that purported to present objective reportage (326). The task, then, is to analyze the implicit metaphor of an essentializing "historicity" that acts against this backdrop and in collusion with the explicit contemporary fabrication. Once again, I am led here by the critical awareness of the *New Masses* staff that understood and were weary of the power new forms of mass media could potentially wield, especially in the hands of Hearst and his corporatist entourage. Returning to Ed Ray's "Hollywood as Strikebreaker," it is the Warner Brothers gangster epic *Frisco Kid* (1935) that he aligns with MGM's *Riffraff*, declaring:

> The entire Pacific Coast is threatened with an industrial crisis in maritime and allied industries and Hollywood propagandists are right on the job... Each of these pictures attacks militant labor leadership, seeks to win sympathy for scabs, pictured as "loyal" workers and strives to bolster up the fascist ideology (44).

Ray sets the historical stage on which these two films play out their implicit biases, laying out the high stakes of visual representation in the covert battle for public consensus. Interestingly, Ray does not mention *Barbary Coast*, a Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer production that essentially mirrors the narrative and setting of *Frisco Kid* and premiered 2 months earlier. Both films fit his description in their "attempts to evade the propaganda issue by dating the story in the Barbary Coast days." Both plots center "around the action of vigilante mobs in cleaning out water-front grumblers" (44). His analysis stops here, yet a further examination of these two films, as well as *San Francisco* (1936) of a year later, presents another significant layer to the issue of labor representation on the docks. What is presented in totality across the site of these three films, beyond the ongoing fixation with the San Francisco waterfront, is an historically entrenched and essentializing narrative of which Ray was right to be weary.

Through the drear night fog of the Frisco' bay, under the power of the Hollywood gaze, the viewing public is invited to connect the past with the present, thrown into the chaotic world of a waterfront that was always-already rife with corruption, lawlessness and the ubiquitous unruly mob. Accordingly, when things tip too far in the direction of debauchery "Law and Order" must be re-established by whatever brutal means necessary, by the vigilante mob or by an act of God. Within the opening sequence of *Barbary Coast*, we have the few clichés that will work to frame out the rest of the film. A young woman and older man discuss the

poor impoverished souls on the boat: "They all dream of being reborn in this new land… beyond gold it's the idealism of being a self-made man." When they hit the shore, it is the rabble that greets them; it is the rabble of swindlers, hustlers and petty thieves they are thrown into, this is an environment built on boom-town debauchery (*Barbary Coast* 00:04:20–00:07:10). At the helm of it all is the infamous casino owner/king-pin Louise Shamalis, whose empire reaches into every part of the city. When a "muck-racking" journalist tries to uncover his network of criminality he is struck down and his press destroyed. It is ultimately a mob of "upstanding citizens," deputized in the moment to warrant their vigilante violence, that sweep the streets shouting "Law and Order! Law and Order!" These mustachioed thugs brandish rifles and duly suspend habeas corpus, parading through the streets to pursue their "justice" (*Barbary Coast* 01:08:00–01:10:20). Other interesting details include the constant reminders throughout the film that it is very rare to have a "white lady" on the Barbary Coast, and the corrupt judge who can be bribed with a few drinks to find guilt or absolve it.

With *Frisco Kid*, the allusion to a present structured by the sins of the past is made even more clear and transparent when Hollywood icon James Cagney arrives at the local saloon in sailor's garb, with hushed whispers of "it's the Frisco Kid!" This is San Francisco "in the wildest days of the Barbary Coast," and the Frisco Kid is coming, "he's the most dangerous man on the Barbary Coast." The promotional copy screams that, "he's the two-fisted terror of the square mile of Hades that the devil himself disowned!" Crucially, Cagney's outlaw character organizes all the seedy elements of "the Coast" against a do-gooder reformist who wants to eradicate the rampant vice that suffuses the operations on the docks and the degeneracy of the saloons (*Frisco Kid*, trailer 00:00:10–00:00:55). When the local judge is killed by another one of the degenerates that call the Barbary Coast home, the reformer wages war on "the coast" gathering a vigilante collective of top-hatted elites to once again re-establish order (*Frisco Kid*, trailer 00:02:03–00:02:30). The reigning theme of a reformist elite attempting to establish "law and order" in a fictional San Francisco of the historic past, gone to ruin when the rabble are left to rule themselves, pervades the filmic space from start to finish. Ultimately, aligning the working-class struggle along the west-coast with a longer historical-fiction of mob rule and outlaw culture on the docks works to essentialize and stigmatize organized labor at this most crucial moment.

I close here with a revealing historical note regarding the actual production of *Riffraff*: a labor dispute buried in Screen Guilds archives, resulting from the systematic exploitation of female extras on the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer film lots. During the production of *Riffraff* and other films in 1935 MGM studios consistently overworked its female extras, running them through 16 h days and sometimes longer, exploiting an unresolved loop-hole in the local labor law. According to report published in *The Screen Guilds' Magazine* from November 1935, this all came to a head on the set of *Riffraff*, when a group of 40 female extras of diverse age-groups were subjected to a 17 h shift where they were exposed to extreme conditions: "That the Motion Picture Industry is unique among manufacturing industries is well known. That it has in it a rottenness, a complete disregard of the human factor that makes it possible, is less apparent" (3). The report details the extremity of the conditions that these underpaid, overworked extras were pushed to endure: "The set was equipped with overhead sprinklers, three fire hoses and three wind machines. The latter created such a terrific gale that a number of women were forcibly knocked down and bruised in each take. One woman was knocked unconscious while another who took the full force of the stream of water from the hose on her back, was paralyzed from her hips down." The women were made to weather these conditions for the 17 h work day, extended due to "emergency" need from the producers/management. Without the proper accommodations of towels and dry clothing to change into the women "gritted their teeth and stuck it out… And for all this, t*hey each received the sum of $11.25*" (4).

In a dynamic turn the incident and resulting labor dispute impinges on the surreal, filmic space. It challenges the contrived, Hollywood narrative with the persistence of an inescapable historical reality. This was a reality of labor exploited in pursuit of capital gains, and the active reportage and resistance to the same that continued to exist despite its suppression under the Hollywood gaze. Ultimately, it can only be traced out in reflection, sifting through the archive of box office revenues, critic's reviews and production details, yet the compounded cinematic vision of a past and present in flames must have worked on the minds of many of the movie going public. The insidious nature of a media oligarch hanging over, influencing and colluding with those in control of Hollywood's dream-factory, adds a significant layer of import to the filmic space. Understanding the simultaneously charged energy of the waterfront, pushing on the

dense structure of economic inequality fastidiously maintained by captains of industry, we glimpse in these films how radically out of touch they were. They appear debauched and estranged before the pain and suffering facing the average citizen at the Great Depression's height. For wherever labor sought to militantly and effectively organize toward real change, against the increasing *status quo* of worker exploitation, it was pushed back, brutalized, terrorized, stigmatized and mocked by both state and private actors. Behind this really existing menace was the imagined threat of the "Red Menace" held up to justify any and all actions taken against the laboring bodies of the working class.

Conflict of interest: Author states no conflict of interest.

Works Cited

"Actors and Writers Meet Labor Units," *Motion Picture Daily*, 22 Jan. 1936, p. 6.
"Are Extras People?" *The Screen Guild's Magazine*, vol. 2, no. 9, Sept. 1935, p. 3.
Barbary Coast. Directed by Howard Hawks, performances by Miriam Hopkins, Edward G. Robinson and Joel McCrea. Samuel Goldwyn Productions, 1935.
Ceplair, Larry. "The Film Industry's Battle Against Left Wing Influences, From the Russian Revolution to the Blacklist." *Film History*, vol. 20, no. 4, 2008, pp. 399–411.
Collins, Andrew. "Hollywood's Yes-Men Say 'No': The Acquiescers of the Golden West Stick their Chins Out (but can they take it?) When it Comes to Unionism," *New Masses*, 31 Aug. 1937, pp. 6–8.
Fog Over Frisco. Directed by William Dieterle, performances by Bette Davis, Donald Woods, Margaret Lindsay and Hugh Herbert. Warner Brothers, 1934.
Frisco Kid (film and theatrical trailer). Directed by Lloyd Bacon, performances by James Cagney, Margaret Lindsay and Ricardo Cortez. Warner Brothers, 1935.
Hagelstein Marquadt, Virginia. "Art on the Political Front in America: From the Liberator to Art Front." *Art Journal*, vol. 52, no. 1, 1993, pp. 73–89.
Humphries, Reynold. *Hollywood's Blacklists: A Political and Cultural History*. Edinburgh University Press, 2008.
Johnson, Victoria L. *How Many Machine Guns Does It Take to Cook One Meal?: The Seattle and San Francisco General Strikes*. University of Washington Press, 2008.
Mannequin. Directed by Frank Borzage, performances by Joan Crawford, Spencer Tracy and Alan Curtis. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1937.
Nelson, Bruce. "Unions and the Popular Front: The West Coast Waterfront in the 1930s." *International Labor and Working-Class History*, vol. 30, 1986, pp. 59–78.
Parrish, Michael E. *Anxious Decades: America in Prosperity and Depression, 1920–1941*. Norton, 1992.
Pizzitola, Louis. *Hearst Over Hollywood: Power, Passion, and Propaganda in the Movies*. Columbia University Press, 2002.
"Prospectus for Dynamo" [application to the American Fund for Public Service]. *American Fund for Public Service Records*, Reel 11, Rare Books and Manuscripts Division, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundation, 23 March 1925.
Puette, William J. *Through Jaundiced Eyes: How the Media View Organized Labor*. Ithaca University Press, 1992.
Ray, ed. "Hollywood as Strikebreaker." *New Masses*, 1 Oct. 1935, p. 44.
"Riffraff Attacked by Cleveland Unions." *Motion Picture Daily*. 18 Jan. 1936.
Riffraff. Directed by J. Walter Ruben, performances by Jean Harlow, Spencer Tracy and Joseph Calleia. Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer, 1936.
Ross, Steven J. "American Workers, American Movies: Historiography and Methodology." *International Labor and Working-Class History*, vol. 59, 2001, pp. 81–105.
San Francisco. Directed by W.S. Van Dyke, performances by Clarck Gable, Jeanette MacDonald and Spencer Tracy. Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer, 1936.
Shull, Michael S. *Radicalism in American Silent Films, 1909–1929: A Filmography and History*. McFarland & Company, Inc., 2015.
Stead, Peter. *Film and the Working Class: The Feature Film in British and American Society*. Routledge Press, 1989.
"The Waterfront Worker, 1932–1936." 21 March, 2020, www.archive.ilwu.org/?page_id=1854.
Waterfront Lady. Directed by Joseph Santley, performances by Ann Rutherford, Frank Albertson, J. Farrell MacDonald and Barbara Pepper. Mascot Pictures, 1935.
Wharf Angel. Directed by Stephen Morehouse Avery, performances by Victor McLaglen, Dorothy Dell, David Landau and Preston Foster. Paramount Pictures, 1934.
Willison, Thomas S. "Art Section: Revolutionary Art Today." New Masses, 1 October 1935, pp. 18.
Zanielo, Tom. *Working Stiffs, Union Maids, Reds and Riffraff: An Expanded Guide to Films About Labor*, Cornell University Press, 2003.