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Workers in Early Film

Silent Agitators: Militant Labor in the Movies, 1909–1919

Michael Shull

Today, silent films are rarely watched curiosities, except for a handful of Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton comedies and a few notable epics. Watching a silent film is a vastly different experience from watching a modern blockbuster. The pace is slower, the acting style broader, and the images grainier. About 90 percent of movies made during the silent era are lost forever, often because the nitrate-based film they were printed on deteriorates at a rapid pace. Few modern Americans miss them.

It is more appropriate to view the silents as a distinct art form than as “primitive” films that pointed the way toward the talkies. Silence freed artists to use visual imagery rather than words to tell a story. As moviemaking matured, innovative directors and cameramen created stunning, lyrical scenes that immersed viewers in their cinematic spell.

As Michael Shull observes, early motion pictures were also more explicitly political than today’s. Movies grew up alongside urbanization and industrialization. Their audience consisted largely of immigrants seeking escape after long hours working in factories. Many films addressed issues of immediate concern such as working conditions, unions, and strikes. These were cinema’s Wild West days, before the emergence of large, corporate studios tamed the sometimes subversive messages projected on screen.

“**S**ilent agitators” was a slang term for paste-up sticker slogans the militant Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) used to urge the working class to organize and resist both real and perceived injustices of capitalism. Soon another form of silent communication began to address class consciousness and labor activism while entertaining millions across class lines. Motion pictures began to tell stories that spoke to a working-class audience.

Michael Shull, “Silent Agitators: Militant Labor in the Movies, 1909–1919,” *Labor’s Heritage*, 9/3 (Winter 1998), pp. 60–61, 63–64, 66–67, 70–71, 74–76. Reproduced with permission from M. Shull.

Hollywood’s America: Understanding History Through Film, Fifth Edition.

Edited by Steven Mintz, Randy Roberts, and David Welky.

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The turmoil and diversity of the movies' early years allowed many voices to be heard in this new form of silent entertainment. In 1909, short programs of one-half reel and one-reel "flickers" were the standard fare shown at thousands of small makeshift places of exhibition, usually referred to as nickelodeons. Soon, longer "feature" films appeared in a growing number of converted stage theaters, movie houses, and luxurious theaters known as "picture palaces." Unlike the Hollywood-based motion picture industry dominated by less than a dozen studios that evolved by the mid-1930s, in the 1910s there were over one hundred companies located in New York, New Jersey, Florida, and the Midwest, as well as in California. During this decade, more than 150 films (an average of two films a month) portrayed workers taking some form of direct action such as a strike against their employers. These "Capital vs. Labor" films addressed an "astonishing range" of the social issues of the day, often with considerable candidness. The somewhat balanced treatment dissolved, however, in the wake of World War I, the "Red Scare" that followed, and with the consolidation of the film industry in the conservative environment of Southern California.

The dominant message repeatedly appearing in the early Capital vs. Labor films is that the working class is inherently good, but that it can be easily led astray by militant outside labor agitators; consequently, it is in the best interest of the nation for labor to abstain from violence and to seek a harmoniously symbiotic relationship with capital. Likewise, the films remind capitalists that they must not mistreat faithful workers, and that they often share the guilt with "agitators" when trouble develops. Capitalists must change or deserve the hateful opposition their actions foment.

This capital versus labor friction is usually mitigated by some form of reconciliation. A cross-class romance frequently terminates labor violence and results in the granting of concessions to the employees, giving the appearance of resolving or eliminating the sources of class antagonism. A typical example of this genre was *The Eternal Grind* (Famous Players/Paramount, 1916), in which silent screen idol Mary Pickford stars as Mary Martin, one of three sisters working as seamstresses in a sweatshop owned by James Wharton. One of his sons, Owen, is a settlement worker who labors in the dirty, crowded factory under an assumed name so he can better understand worksite conditions. Handsome Owen and "little" Mary fall in love. But when Owen is seriously injured at the sweatshop after falling through some rotten flooring, Mary refuses to go to his bedside until his capitalist father agrees to pay his "employees living wages" and make the Wharton factory a "fit place to work in."

On several occasions, the films culminate with a pledge by the capitalist to his/her working-class sweetheart, symbolizing a form of class-based pre-nuptial agreement, to respect the rights of the workers. This is particularly poignant in *The Blacklist* (Lasky/Paramount, 1916). In this film, the mine owner, shot in the name of the working class by a miner's daughter, who is actually in love with him, solemnly pledges to her from his sickbed that in the future they will strive together to resolve the issues that have separated capital and labor.

Capitalists are occasionally shown aiding their workers, sometimes secretly and even during periods of labor strife. In *Destruction* (Fox, 1915), the capitalist's handsome son, Jack, for example, persuades a baker not to prosecute the starving laborer's son who had stolen bread while his father was out on strike. The print cartoon cliché of the top-hatted, cigar-smoking, bloated capitalist, while certainly exploited in some films,

never became a universal stereotype on America's movie screens. Instead, American films caricatured capitalists by revealing their class-based biases, which were disrespectful of or detrimental to the well-being of the working class. Screen portrayals of this bias show capitalists wantonly neglecting the basic needs of laborers, hypocritically rationalizing their exploitation of the working class in the guise of social altruism, or engaging in mean-spirited patronizing of their employees. For example, in *Why?* (Eclair, 1913) a young man of the privileged classes has a nightmare about capitalist abuses of labor, including vivid images of railroad ties made from worker's skeletons and a seamstress who is forced to dye the thread of the embroidery she sews with blood obtained from a self-inflicted wound.

Capitalism itself is seldom attacked head on in anti-capital motion pictures. But a comeuppance for egregiously greedy capitalists does occur in a number of films, such as *Money* (United Keanograph/World, 1915). A Rockefeller surrogate named John D. Maximillian and his evil associate are killed in a climactic storm and Maximillian's palatial home destroyed.

The negative portrayal of America's wealthy elite is particularly vigorous in the "modern" story portion of D.W. Griffith's *Intolerance* (Biograph, 1916) – a film nearly three hours in length and at the time the most expensive film to have been produced in the United States. An extravagant party held at the cavernous mansion of mill owner Jenkins – the scenes tinted a deep red – graphically suggests the wealthy are living off the blood of their workers. When the stone-faced Jenkins is privately approached by his spinster sister to financially support her newly sponsored Moral Uplifters Society – the footage now in stark black and white – the capitalist agrees, coldly noting that he will raise the funds by cutting his workers' wages 10%. His communication of this decision to the mill's manager over the phone further accentuates Jenkins' remoteness from his workers. Although Jenkins' factories are featured in *Intolerance*, the film also clearly identifies him as the leading member of a consortium called Allied Manufacturers. The name imparts the concept of a monopolistic group that is joined for a common purpose, united in an alliance directed against the interests of labor.

Wages, invariably at or near subsistence levels, are arbitrarily reduced in several motion pictures in order to make up for expenses incurred through the irresponsible or profligate activities of the capitalist owners' or managers' families. The supposed anti-capitalist message in these films is especially effective since it is textually demonstrated that class conflict has occurred because of the selfishness of insensitive individuals rather than because of the failures of the capitalist system, such as business losses resulting from a period of economic downturn. A strike that leads to the destruction of an immigrant Lithuanian family is directly attributable to such a wage cut in *The Jungle* (All Star, 1914), which closely adheres to Upton Sinclair's famous novel. This story of economic injustice and working-class resistance in Chicago's meatpacking industry, however, differs from most films of the era by advocating that socialism is a humane alternative to the ravages of capitalism.

Unlike the few motion pictures that addressed labor issues after 1920, many earlier Capital vs. Labor films actually take place on or near work sites at "the point of production." Some of these films, including *The Jungle* and *The Eternal Grind*, contain extended scenes of stained-clothed laborers performing their tasks in ways that create sympathy for and sometimes even heroize the workers' skill or hard labor.

The Eternal Grind, for example, features Mary Pickford, her famous curly locks a bit bedraggled, toiling with a sewing machine in a dangerous sweatshop, as well as being sexually harassed by one of the owner's sons. However, common exploitative policies enforced in shops such as production "speedups," pay deductions for mistakes, and fines for petty infractions of arbitrary rules, appear to be absent from these labor-oriented movies. Nevertheless, the pre-1918 period is the only time when significant numbers of motion picture storylines actually provide images of the workplace.

In a related vein, *Capital vs. Labor* films regularly depicted the deprivations suffered by the families of laborers. A recurrent motif used to engender sympathy for the working class is the juxtaposition of scenes of workers' struggles to overcome deplorable workplace conditions and squalid living environments with portrayals of capitalist extravagances. In the most extreme cases, the industrialists display an arrogant callousness to the problems of those whose labor helped create their wealth. The cryptic title of *Money* suggests a reprimand of monopolistic capitalism. The heart of the film's condemnation of capitalist abuses features an opulent "million dollar dinner" where the centerpiece is a skimpily clad girl emerging from a large papier-mâché oyster shell. While the rich host's guests, dressed in the finest evening attire, fill their bellies with delicacies and revel in decadent display, his ill-clothed workers, who have gone on strike after he reduced their wages, are starving outside.

In contrast to industrial workers, striking white-collar workers – defined here as individuals employed in a clerical capacity – were virtually absent from the silver screen. Only two unambiguous examples have been identified – *Lazy Bill and the Strikers* (Eclipse, 1913) and *Bill Organizes a Union* (Komic, 1914). Both of these films were comedic shorts, suggesting that cinematic challenges to capitalism from within the middle class (or from workers aspiring to achieve middle-class status) would be considered dangerously subversive. To emphasize this point, both of the films clearly present the protagonist's militancy as acts of folly. In *Lazy Bill and the Strikers*, the office force, having determined that they are overworked, walk out and hold the "usual indignation meeting" at a local hall. Pumped up by Lazy Bill's sloganeering, the strikers engage the police in a series of skirmishes. Exhausted, the strikers seek refuge at home, only to flee their unsympathetic wives, slink back to the office, and plead for their old jobs. At the end of *Bill Organizes a Union*, the parading teenage strikers, who had impulsively formed a union to protest stringent new office rules, are hosed down by the fire department and then unceremoniously dragged back to work. What is particularly noteworthy about this latter film is its unique, albeit mocking, portrayal of union organizational procedures and rituals, such as the collecting of dues and the wearing of membership badges.

A far more common type of negative treatment of organized labor in *Capital vs. Labor* films was the depiction of the nomadic "paid" labor agitator, most often a "foreigner." Although there are only a few motion pictures in which the anarcho-syndicalist IWW [Industrial Workers of the World] was directly identified, members were either overtly or implicitly portrayed in roughly a score of films released between 1911 and 1920. Producers meant – and audiences understood – that "agitators" or "walking delegates" were euphemisms for peripatetic IWW union representatives. One example of these cinematically coded "footloose" members of the IWW would be the out-of-town "troublemaker" named Black in *The Strike* (Thanhouser, 1914), who

cynically leads workers in a demonstration outside factory offices, hurling stones and shouting slogans such as “Down with factory tyranny!” and “Down with Boss rule!”

At times, an “honest” laborer is portrayed as being manipulated by an agitator into plotting or carrying out an act of violence in order to avenge a real or imagined social injustice. *The Strike* (Solax, 1912) presents a moral parable on this theme by showing that a cigarette butt tossed irresponsibly by an incendiary agitator sets fire to the home of a worker who had agreed to bomb his capitalist employer’s factory. Only with the timely aid of that capitalist is the worker able to save his loved ones from the resulting conflagration. The cooperation with his employer in effecting the rescue also conveniently snuffs out the smoldering flames of labor discontent. The obvious message presented upon the screen is of labor agitators as malicious incendiaries who not only disrupt capital-labor peace, but whose conduct also threatens the lives of workers’ families. They are not “progressive” forces.

The most intense labor-versus-labor encounters usually take place when scabs, oftentimes portrayed as foreign-born, arrive at a workplace to replace native-born strikers. Antagonistic reactions to the imposition of cheaper scab labor are found in both *The Girl at the Cupola* (Selig, 1912) and *The Valley of the Moon* (W.W. Hodkinson, 1914), each of which features riotous confrontations between opposing mobs of workers that begin as the imported scabs debark at the train station. *The Girl at the Cupola* shows running skirmishes from the station platform to inside the foundry, and *The Valley of the Moon* includes graphic scenes of a pitched street battle between striking teamsters and their (apparently meant to be foreign-born) scab replacements, with the police ruthlessly entering the fray. During this scene, in which a thousand extras were purportedly used, police wagons are shown trampling over some of the rebellious teamsters. In neither motion picture, however, is violence portrayed as resolving the labor dispute.

The common social space where workers and labor militants interact on movie screens is the saloon – symbol of the evils of intemperance and lack of restraint, which ultimately discredits labor more often than not. The foreign-born or foreign-looking strike mob, under the influence of alcohol and incited by an anarchist/agitator, would have been particularly disturbing to many middle-class moviegoers. The iniquitous saloon, often owned or operated by immigrants in class-segregated neighborhoods, thus became a recurrent film locale for the plotting of labor unrest. The heavy use of smoke-filled interiors as opposed to traditional outdoor political meeting places reinforced this and may also have created a subliminal link with subversive underground group gatherings. Alcohol, in essence, represented a socially irresponsible and inflammable agent when added to the equation in capital versus labor situations. *The Strike* (the 1914 film) shows workers congregated at a bar and deciding to throw in their lot with an agitator. But in *The Girl at the Cupola* there is no need to even depict the strikers wetting their whistles in the saloon, let alone soberly gathered to rationally discuss the issues. Instead, a number of them are simply portrayed as a surly group exiting a drinking establishment and joining their fellow workers outside to form a strike mob that attacks some imported scabs.

The enraged armed throng of drunken workers bent on committing socially disruptive activities, and usually comprising numerous non-Anglo-Saxon types in ragged trousers, symbolized the dreaded power of the “unwashed” urban masses. Some of the

most compelling scenes in Capital vs. Labor films take place when a seething mob of drunken (often “no-nameovich” foreign-born) strikers confronts the organized might of the police or militia. In uniforms as distinct as those worn by opposing armies on the field of battle, the two sides in the class war fight for opposing visions of social justice in a democratic America.

The apotheosis of militia-labor confrontations during this period was the Ludlow massacre. This tragedy occurred at the height of the great 1913–1914 “Coalfield War” in Colorado during which nineteen miners and their family members died in an attack by the state militia on the strikers’ camp. The event had a noticeable influence upon several significant films. Although set in the textile industry rather than the western coalfields, *The Lily of the Valley* (Selig, 1914) was probably the first movie to show the impact of Ludlow, which had happened only a few months before the film’s release. The *New York Dramatic Mirror* review commented in its lead paragraph that the film’s action “strongly reminds one of the very tragic conditions in Colorado recently.” Certainly, the portrayal of an extended period of violent industrial conflict and a slaughter of strikers suggested a linkage to the Ludlow incident.

In *The Lily of the Valley* the workers of Commercial Valley shut down the mills in a walkout, driven to despair by the cold-hearted policies of the town’s mill owner, descriptively named Old Man Winter. The striking mill operatives are led by foreman Bill Hanks, a bearded stereotype who is “blindly enraged by the capitalist class.” Further prodded by Hanks’ fiery daughter Anna, the strikers riot. At one point an angry mob of workers, many of whom are armed with rifles, beset the top-hatted Winter in his chauffeur-driven limousine. The governor then summons the National Guard. Amid the ensuing bloody labor warfare, the beautiful young daughter of a wealthy family, Lily Vale (a diminutive Olive Drake in the role), selflessly administers to the needs of the working class. Symbolically dressed in white and adorned with her favorite lilies-of-the-valley, she attempts to restore peace to the troubled community. But while Miss Vale is presenting an equitable labor agreement to Winter, a stone is hurled through his window, providing him with an excuse for refusing to sign.

When Lily is killed by a striker’s stray bullet while she is commiserating with her brother, a militia lieutenant, the officer goes berserk and butchers many of the demonstrating workers with his machine gun. The victims of this vivid demonstration of the consequences of capitalism’s willingness to use the forces of the state to suppress the working class include Hanks and his son. Near the film’s conclusion, the repentant lieutenant-turned-millhand, during a renewed outbreak of labor violence, also dies from a bullet fired by a rioting laborer. And the woman he had married, the double-bereaved Anna, has assumed the habiliments of Lily and become an evangelist among the suffering toilers of Commercial Valley.

A primary scenario in pro-Labor films is to show labor militancy as resulting from the economic suffering of families and picture their sacrifices in support of legitimate working-class grievances. While frowning upon radicalism and violence, these movies sympathized with labor’s causes and urged workers and capitalists to compromise in order to ease the suffering of the community.

America’s participation in World War I and reaction to its aftermath changed the outlook and content of films with labor themes. Beginning as early as the latter half

of 1916, before the United States became formally involved in the World War, fears of sabotage and strikes in the strategic materials industries and in plants manufacturing military equipment began to be transferred to the movie screens of America. With the entrance of the United States into the war in April 1917, Americans came to view any domestic opposition to whole-hearted participation in the war effort as subversive. Animosity directed against pacifists, “hyphenated-Americans,” and anyone believed to be in sympathy with Germany, reached hysterical levels by late 1917. Fear of radicals was exacerbated by the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia and the deep-seated suspicion that the hated Kaiser’s Imperial German government had conspired to aid the Bolshevik leadership in order to drive Russia from the war.

Coinciding with this hysteria was an unprecedented degree of labor unrest that peaked in the massive strike wave of 1919. Under these circumstances, any accident or disruption taking place at a war manufacturing plant quickly raised suspicions of treason. Those few domestic radicals who continued to advocate violent strike actions were stigmatized as deliberately aiding or being manipulated by the nation’s enemies. To make this perfectly clear, most films portraying such activities in America specifically identified the responsible culprits as enemy agents or as individuals with non-Anglo-Saxon surnames in the pay of German spies.

As foreign revolutionaries and autocrats became the enemies in wartime motion pictures, indigenous radicals were increasingly pictured as the center of trouble in the United States. *Life’s Greatest Problem* (Blackton, 1918), which premiered in New York City right before the November 1918 Armistice, implied that loyal laborers on the home front are also soldiers – that they too are fighting, in this case against domestic radicalism, to make the world safe for democracy. The film portrays labor agitators, specifically identified as members of the IWW, traitorously resisting the Selective Service’s “Work-or-Fight” order of May 1918 and plotting to blow up a vital American shipyard. At the film’s conclusion, actual footage of Wilson Administration officials meeting with shipyard workers during a ship’s launching were intercut with scenes showing cast members of *Life’s Greatest Problem*, suggesting the stalwart patriotism of all involved in the motion picture.

In *Mr. Logan, U.S.A.*, released by Fox in September 1918, Western movie star Tom Mix played Jimmy Logan, a Secret Service agent in the guise of the quintessential Stetson-wearing cowboy. The title, *Mr. Logan, U.S.A.*, implies that Jimmy is a soldier in the iconic uniform of America’s mythic western hero. Logan enters a wide-open mining town occupied and dominated by the forces under vice kingpin J. Alexander Gage, whose real name is Adolph Meier (German-Jew?). Gage has used his German gold to purchase the services of an army of local collaborators, including gamblers, prostitutes, a cocaine-addicted radical agitator, and his IWW cohorts. Their object is to disrupt government-contracted deliveries of strategic tungsten – a treasonous act of sabotage in the context of wartime America. Logan rallies the “loyal Americans” among the miners to defeat the German-led radicals, “hired Enemies” who are “breeding malice and discontent.” At the end, the surviving IWW members are literally corralled by whip-wielding patriots and herded onto a freight train to be shipped out of town. This portion of *Mr. Logan, U.S.A.* was based on a July 1917 occurrence in Bisbee, Arizona, when hundreds of striking copper miners were forcibly transported in boxcars and later dumped off in the New Mexico desert.

Labor unrest in the United States had occurred throughout the war, but it significantly accelerated following the Armistice – exacerbated by the hasty termination of war contracts and the chaotically swift-paced demobilization of several million servicemen. To many Americans, events took an ominous turn in the direction of radical social revolution when, on February 3, 1919, workers declared a general strike in Seattle, Washington.

One can compare the story of *The World Aflame* (Frank Keenan Productions/Pathé 1919), purportedly depicting reality, with what actually took place during Seattle's general strike that had begun as a walkout of shipyard workers on January 21, 1919. Whereas Seattle's mayor Ole Hanson more or less reacted to events as they evolved, hyperbolically branding the strike a "revolution," *The World Aflame* portrays millionaire manufacturer Carson Burr (played as a patrician type by the white-haired, crag-faced Frank Keenan) running for mayor to neutralize the influence of radicals upon the city's labor force. In particular, the manufacturer sees the unsavory effects of a propaganda newspaper entitled the *Red Messenger* on his cook and chauffeur. Burr's son Theodore (named in honor of Teddy Roosevelt), is enticed by vamp Emma Reich and kidnapped by the Reds in an attempt to intimidate the capitalist.

The dramatic highlight of *The World Aflame* takes place when, aboard an American flag-draped streetcar, millionaire Burr and armed police directly confront a club-wielding mob of workers. Through his convincing sloganeering, Burr breaks the strike. The cowed political agitators are rounded up and forced to hand over the kidnapped son. Meanwhile, a cross-class romance has developed between daughter Roxy and Burr's chauffeur-radical dupe.

The general strike as portrayed in *The World Aflame* is of one day's duration, contrary to the series of strikes that, in reality, took place between January 21 and February 10, 1919. The motion picture concentrates on the city's transportation shutdown caused by the general strike. The resultant lack of mobility accentuates a threat of paralyzing the city and thereby endangering the livelihoods of all. In audiences' minds, the actions of the streetcar workers (uniformed civil servants) foreshadowed the Boston police strike, which began a month after the film's release. The police strike of September 1919 particularly disturbed the public, which viewed law enforcement as a bulwark against radicalism. Further egged on by press coverage of the 1919 nationwide steel and coal strikes, many in the middle class began to believe that revolution was just around the corner.

Unlike in previous years, Red Scare-era films either ignored the legitimate grievances of labor or gave them only a fleeting nod before invoking destructive agitators as the true cause of social discord. In such films, workers, manipulated by assorted radicals and/or spy-saboteurs shaking their clenched fists against social injustices, are quickly convinced to abandon their protests by some vigorous flag-waving. These chauvinistic interludes are seldom delivered by fellow workers, but instead are usually presented by members of the middle class. Labor's concerns and labor's voice, often heard in prewar films, now all but disappears.

The confrontational nature of earlier Capital vs. Labor films and the viciousness of World War I anti-German propaganda releases carried over into America's Red Scare-era anti-Bolshevik motion pictures, where all political or social analysis dissolved into stereotypes of gross villainy. Bolshevism became "a kind of social disease against which

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people could be vaccinated by large doses of 100% Americanism.” Militant laborers who espouse and/or emulate Red savagery are therefore punished or even sometimes killed without remorse.

For example, the climax of *Riders of the Dawn* (W.W. Hodkinson, 1920), features night-riding vigilantes rounding up and possibly lynching a group of IWWs that have been disrupting the harvesting of heartland America’s wheat crop. Led by a World War veteran, these self-appointed watchdogs of Americanism become rabid paramilitaries defending both the ideological and territorial integrity of the United States.

Red Scare films display a significant switch from the use of private police forces to elements of the Federal government as agents of labor suppression. On several occasions, the regular armed forces instantaneously respond to the cinematic summons of civilians announcing the presence of Bolshevik activities. Like modern-day Minute-men, having answered the call to arms, they attack and ruthlessly destroy the “Red hordes” invading America in *Bolshevism on Trial* (Select, 1919) and *The Undercurrent* (Select, 1919). The hero veteran of *The Undercurrent* dramatically seizes a train and arouses the men at the local army barracks, reminiscent of a twentieth-century industrialized midnight ride of Paul Revere rousing the soldiers of democracy to defeat their mortal Red enemies.

By the conclusion of the Red Scare, militant labor had been beaten down and labeled as “un-American” in the public mind. Radical voices, particularly those of immigrants, had been silenced, both in the life of the nation and on the screen. At the same time, the diverse film industry had become highly consolidated, both in the reduced number of studios and in their physical concentration in Southern California. The era when social problems and class conflict frequently served as movie themes had come to an end. The movies of the prewar era had limits to their criticism: they regularly condemned and lampooned individual evil capitalists but rarely challenged capitalism as an institution. Nonetheless, they had often portrayed workers’ lives and labor radicalism in a sympathetic light. Some later films, particularly the “screwball comedies” of the Depression era, would again mock the ways of the rich. Rarely, however, would militant workers with legitimate grievances play a starring role in American movies.

But if serious treatments of class conflict virtually disappeared from the cinema, class itself did not. This is evident in the recent fabulously successful movie *Titanic* (Paramount/20th Century-Fox, 1997). The story of the 1912 sinking of the supposedly indestructible luxury liner features a cross-class romance. Just as the early Capital vs. Labor filmmakers sought to enliven and resolve their tension-laden plots with romances, love between the classes continues to capture audiences’ attention. Moviegoers, however, learn little about the issues that consumed the lives of the workers that traveled on the *Titanic*. Instead, audiences only catch a dark glimpse of their fate, with the steerage passengers locked below decks as the rich scramble to board lifeboats.