

LABOR DAY MOVIE NIGHT

As Labor Day approaches, we present our still in-progress list of movies that put working people, the workplace and the labor movement front and center. From hard-fought strikes and bitter battles with bosses to stories of solidarity, sacrifice and workers discovering the power they have when they stand together, these films remind us why unions matter. These films may span generations and genres, but they offer a reminder of the struggles, sacrifices and victories that shaped the American labor movement.

Following is the list of labor-themed feature films and documentaries, arranged chronologically by year of release.

Feature Films

“Strike” (1925) — Sergei Eisenstein’s silent Soviet film dramatizes a factory strike and the brutal repression unleashed against workers demanding better treatment.

“The Grapes of Wrath” (1940) - Follows an Oklahoma family migrating to California during the Depression and confronting poverty, exploitation and the suppression of agricultural workers.

“The Devil and Miss Jones” (1941) — A department-store owner goes undercover among his employees and discovers their grievances, workplace struggles and efforts to organize.

“How Green Was My Valley” (1941) — Follows a Welsh mining family whose community is transformed by dangerous working conditions, poverty and a bitter miners’ strike.

“On the Waterfront” (1954) – A longshoreman who is an ex-fighter stands up to corruption on the docks.

“Salt of the Earth” (1954) – A Mexican-American mining community fights for safer conditions and equal treatment, while the miners’ wives challenge both company power and traditional gender roles.

“The Pajama Game” (1957) — A musical comedy about garment workers seeking a seven-and-a-half-cent raise while their union representative and the company’s factory superintendent clash.

“The Garment Jungle” (1957) — A clothing-industry drama about workers facing intimidation and violence as they attempt to organize.

“I’m All Right, Jack” (1959) — A satirical British comedy about labor-management conflict, industrial disputes and the manipulation of workers and unions by corporate interests.

“The Organiser” (1963) — Set in 19th-century Torino, Italy, the film follows a socialist organizer who helps exploited textile workers plan a strike.

“The Molly Maguires” (1970) — Dramatizes Irish immigrant coal miners in 19th-century Pennsylvania who secretly organize and use violence against mine owners to fight brutal working conditions.

“The Working Class Goes to Heaven” (1971) — An Italian factory worker becomes increasingly aware of the dehumanizing conditions of industrial labor and joins a workplace struggle.

“Boxcar Bertha” (1972) — A Depression-era crime drama loosely inspired by labor organizer Bertha Thompson and depicting poverty, railroad workers and anti-union violence.

“Bound for Glory” (1976) — Follows folk singer and labor activist Woody Guthrie as he travels through Depression-era America and encounters the struggles of migrant and working-class laborers.

“Blue Collar” (1978) — Three Detroit auto workers turn to crime after becoming frustrated with low wages, oppressive working conditions and corruption within their union.

“F.I.S.T.” (1978) - Sylvester Stallone works his way up in a truckers' union. Fun Fact: M.E.B.A.’s DC Headquarters building was used as the fictional headquarters of the “Federation of Inter-State Truckers” (F.I.S.T.) portrayed in the movie.

“Norma Rae” (1979) — A Southern textile worker risks her job and personal safety to help organize her coworkers into a union.

“The China Syndrome” (1979) — A nuclear power plant worker and others uncover serious safety problems, challenging a corporation more concerned with profits than worker and public safety.

“The Triangle Factory Fire Scandal” (1979) — Dramatizes the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire and the subsequent fight for accountability and stronger workplace safety.

“The Revolt of Mother” (1979) — A labor-oriented historical drama about textile workers and class conflict in the American South.

“9 to 5” (1980) — Three female office workers fight an abusive boss and workplace discrimination, turning their frustration into collective action.

“Outland” (1981) — A science-fiction thriller about workers on a mining colony who are pushed to dangerous limits by a company willing to sacrifice safety for profits.

“Silkwood” (1983) - Based on the true story of nuclear-plant worker Karen Silkwood, who investigates dangerous working conditions and alleged safety violations.

The Killing Floor (1984) — Follows a Black migrant worker who enters Chicago’s meatpacking industry and becomes involved in racial tensions and the fight for workplace rights during World War I.

“Gung Ho” (1986) — A comedy about American autoworkers adjusting to Japanese management after a struggling Pennsylvania auto plant is reopened through a Japanese partnership.

“Comrades” (1986) — Recounts the true story of 19th-century English agricultural workers who form a union and are transported to Australia for challenging their employers.

“Matewan” (1987) — Dramatizes a violent 1920s coal-mining town where union organizers attempt to unite miners against powerful coal companies.

“10,000 Black Men Named George” (1992) — Dramatizes the struggle of Black railway sleeping-car porters who organized to win union recognition and better working conditions under the leadership of A. Philip Randolph.

“Hoffa” (1992) - A fictionalized account of Teamsters leader Jimmy Hoffa, exploring his rise as a powerful labor leader and his battles with employers, government and organized crime.

“Newsies” (1992) — A musical dramatization of the 1899 New York newsboys’ strike against newspaper publishers who raise the price of newspapers sold by the children.

“Germinal” (1993) — Depicts French coal miners who endure brutal conditions and organize a strike against their exploitative mine owners.

“The Burning Season: The Chico Mendes Story” (1994) — Tells the story of Brazilian rubber tapper and union leader Chico Mendes, who organized workers and environmentalists to defend the Amazon from destructive development.

“Brassed Off” (1996) — Coal miners in a struggling English town fight to save their pit and community as the government moves toward closing the mine.

“Justice on Wheels: The Diana Kilmury Story (Mother Trucker)” (1996) — Chronicles truck driver and activist Diana Kilmury’s fight for fair treatment and greater rights for women in the trucking industry.

“A Bug’s Life” (1998) — An animated allegory about exploited ants who organize to resist oppressive grasshoppers demanding that they surrender the fruits of their labor.

“Cradle Will Rock” (1999) — Set during the Depression, the film explores labor organizing, political activism and class conflict surrounding a controversial workers’ theater production.

“Billy Elliot” (2000) — Set during the 1984–85 British miners’ strike, the film follows a coal miner’s son who pursues ballet while his family and community struggle with the strike’s economic and social consequences.

“Erin Brockovich” (2000) - A worker-and-corporate-accountability story centered on employees harmed by industrial pollution.

“Harlan County War” (2000) — A fictionalized account of the Pittston coal strike, inspired by the real struggle of miners and their families.

“North Country” (2005) – A Minnesota mineworker fights back against sexual harassment.

“Made in Dagenham” (2010) – Dramatizes the 1968 strike by women sewing-machine operators at Ford’s Dagenham plant who fought for equal pay.

“Pride” (2014) — Based on a true story, the film follows British LGBTQ activists who raise money for striking Welsh miners and forge an unexpected alliance with their community.

“Sorry to Bother You” (2018) - Surreal satirical comedy about a telemarketer who adopts a white accent to succeed, only to lead a massive worker rebellion against a dystopian corporation.

“At War” (2018) - A French drama starring Vincent Lindon about a factory workforce fighting back after management abruptly shuts down a profitable plant despite a prior agreement.

“Support the Girls” (2018) — A dark comedy following the manager and staff of a Texas sports bar as they navigate low wages, difficult customers, workplace exploitation and precarious service-industry jobs.

“Sorry We Missed You” (2019) - A searing British drama directed by Ken Loach that exposes the grueling realities of the modern gig economy through the lens of a delivery driver trapped in debt.

Documentaries

“Native Land” (1942) — A documentary-style film exposing racial injustice, employer repression and violence against workers attempting to organize unions in the United States.

“Union Maids” (1976) — Three women recall their experiences organizing textile workers in the American South during the rise of industrial unionism.

“Harlan County U.S.A.” (1976) — A landmark documentary chronicling Kentucky coal miners and their families as they wage a dangerous strike for a union contract and safer working conditions.

“The Wobblies” (1979) — A documentary history of the Industrial Workers of the World, or IWW, and its efforts to organize unskilled and immigrant workers across early 20th-century America.

“With Babies and Banners” (1979) — Documents the women who supported the 1936–37 Flint auto sit-down strike and organized themselves into a Women’s Emergency Brigade.

“The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter” (1980) — Examines the women who entered industrial jobs during World War II and what happened to their employment afterward.

“The Willmar 8” (1981) — Documents eight midwestern women who stage a prolonged strike against a Minnesota bank after alleging sex discrimination and unequal treatment.

“Miles of Smiles: Years of Struggle” (1982) — Documents the long struggle of Black railway sleeping-car porters to organize, gain union recognition and challenge racial discrimination.

“Roger & Me” (1989) — Michael Moore investigates General Motors’ closure of auto plants in Flint, Michigan, and the devastating economic consequences for workers and their community.

“American Dream” (1990) — Follows striking Hormel meatpacking workers in Minnesota and the devastating conflict between workers, their union and the company.

“At the River I Stand” (1993) - Documents the 1968 Memphis sanitation workers’ strike and the civil rights struggle that brought Martin Luther King Jr. to the city.

“A. Philip Randolph: For Jobs and Freedom” (1996) — Documents the life and labor activism of the pioneering Black union leader and civil rights organizer.

“Reprise” (1996) — A documentary examining the 1994 Reprise strike by workers at the Chicago-based newspaper publisher, focusing on labor organizing and workplace conflict.

“The Fight in the Fields” (1997) — Documents the United Farm Workers’ struggle to organize California farmworkers and improve wages and working conditions.

“Live Nude Girls Unite! (2000) - San Francisco topless dancers organize.

“Bread and Roses” (2000) — Follows immigrant janitors in Los Angeles as they organize for better wages, benefits and working conditions despite employer resistance.

“American Standoff” (2002) — Documents the Teamsters’ struggle against Overnite Transportation and the company’s resistance to unionization.

“Still the Enemy Within” (2014) — A documentary revisiting the devastating 1984–85 British miners’ strike through the experiences of workers and activists who fought Margaret Thatcher’s government.

“American Factory” (2019) - Oscar-winning documentary examining a Chinese multinational company taking over an abandoned General Motors plant in a blue-collar Ohio town, capturing severe clashes over US labor practices, safety, and unionization.

“Fight Like Hell” (2023) – Chronicles the life and fierce organizing legacy of labor icon Mother Jones.