



Smithsonian Institution

MUSEUM on Main Street

The Way We Worked **Film List**

The following information will assist you in researching and developing local programs around the themes of The Way We Worked. Hold a film viewing and discussion or work with your local movie theatre to dedicate one screen, one night a week, to a film in conjunction with the exhibition. All films are available on DVD unless otherwise noted.

American Dream (1991)

Documentary; 102 minutes; rated PG.

Documentarian and workers' rights advocate Barbara Kopple won the Best Documentary Oscar for this account of the 1985-86 Hormel meatpacking strike in Austin, Minnesota. The country had just emerged from a deep recession, and the Reagan administration's demolition of the nation's air traffic controllers' union boded ill for organized labor. Somewhat more balanced than her previous labor documentary, *Harlan County, U.S.A.* (also listed), *American Dream* features footage of union meetings, Hormel press releases, news broadcasts, and in-depth interviews with people on both sides of the issue.

American Experience

Four documentaries listed below; 60 minutes; not rated.

PBS's acclaimed series features over two hundred one-hour films, and several have American workers as their focus. Go to www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/ to watch some of these full films online (noted), to download teacher's guides, and to go behind the scenes and learn more about the subjects.

The Civilian Conservation Corps (2009)

Four former Corpsmen share their experiences of poverty, hard work, and brotherhood from their time in the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), one of the most ambitious and successful New Deal programs advanced by President Franklin D. Roosevelt during the Great Depression. The CCC provided jobs in natural resource conservation to over three million young men in every U.S. state and territory, where they lived in camps and worked in national forests and parks to plant trees, build flood barriers, fight fires, and maintain roads and trails. Also available online at www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/?film-online.

Fly Girls (1999)

A group of former Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) recalls the critical role they played in the American war effort during World War II. Over one thousand of these female pioneers were trained to ferry aircraft, test planes, and instruct male pilots. Despite their dedicated service, WASP often encountered disbelief and resentment, and the program was discontinued as the homefront returned to normalcy after the war. As women's roles in the military continue to evolve, the legacy of the WASP is more relevant than ever.

Hoover Dam (1999)



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Built to tame the wildly unpredictable Colorado River, Hoover Dam prevented flooding and provided water and power to California, Nevada, and Arizona. Constructed in the midst of the Great Depression, the dam renewed faith in American ingenuity and technology, and was a symbol of hope for the unemployed. Conditions were dangerous and pay was low, but most workers were grateful to have work at all as they poured concrete twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week for two years. Five thousand of these men and their families settled in Boulder City, the company town built by the federal government in the Nevada desert. Also available online at www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/?film-online.

Transcontinental Railroad (2005)

Built by a team of ruthless entrepreneurs, innovative engineers, and diligent workers, the Transcontinental Railroad shaped American culture, commerce, and politics in the late 1800s and beyond. Its completion in 1869, when it was touted as the largest construction project in history, marked the culmination of six years of grueling work by armies of workers who labored relentlessly on the enterprise.

Broadcast News (1987)

Romantic comedy; 132 minutes; rated R.

Holly Hunter is a gifted producer, Albert Brooks is a seasoned reporter, and William Hurt is a smooth but intellectually limited anchorman in this Oscar-nominated film about changing priorities in television news. These ambitious workaholics become entangled in both their professional and personal lives as they struggle with the trend in journalism of style over substance.

Country (1984)

Drama; 110 minutes; rated PG.

This film follows the trials and tribulations of Iowa farmers Jessica Lange and Sam Shepard as they struggle to hold on to their home and livelihood in the challenging economic times of 1980s America. Low crop prices, pending federal loans, and environmental devastation render their family farm unprofitable, and as they face foreclosure by the bank, the husband despairs while his resilient wife does her best to keep the family together.

The Cowboys (1972)

Western; 134 minutes; rated PG.

John Wayne is an aging Montana rancher facing financial disaster when his hired men abandon him for the gold rush of the mid 1870s. Unable to find any local cowboys, he hires schoolboys to run his cattle drive, teaching them to rope, brand, and herd cattle and horses. The rigid Wayne character begins to soften his view of the young cowboys as they learn hard lessons about work and responsibility, especially when they are attacked by a cattle-rustling gang.

Cradle Will Rock (2000)

Drama; 132 minutes; rated R.

Under the New Deal's Federal Theater Program, Orson Welles stages a controversial musical about a steel workers strike while real labor unrest erupts across the country. With an all-star cast, this witty



drama observes the perspectives of the wealthy through the working class in Depression-era New York City.

***Desk Set* (1957)**

Romantic comedy; 104 minutes; not rated.

Katharine Hepburn is a reference librarian at the "Federal Broadcasting Network," and Spencer Tracy is the computer genius who's created the new "electronic brain" designed to streamline Hepburn's and her co-workers' jobs. Their resulting battle of wits pits Hepburn's fear of being replaced by machines against her growing attraction to Tracy.

***The Devil Wears Prada* (2006)**

Comedy; 110 minutes; rated PG-13.

In the film adaptation of Lauren Weisbecker's best-selling novel, Anne Hathaway plays Andy, a naïve young woman who takes a job as a personal assistant to a powerful, intimidating fashion magazine editor played by Meryl Streep. Andy soon faces the crisis of balancing success in a cutthroat business with happiness and satisfaction in her personal life.

***Gung Ho (Working Class Man)* (1986)**

Comedy; 104 minutes; rated PG-13. Not yet available on DVD.

Ron Howard directs Michael Keaton as a former Pennsylvania auto factory foreman who persuades a Japanese auto firm to reopen the factory that once supplied most of his hometown's jobs. But when the Japanese bosses hire Keaton to enforce their policies among his American co-workers, differences in cultural mores, production practices, and work ethics threaten to re-close the plant.

***Harlan County, U.S.A.* (1976)**

Documentary; 103 minutes; rated PG.

Barbara Kopple received the first of two Best Documentary Oscars for this film about the 1973 coal miners' strike in Harlan County, Kentucky. Kopple and her crew spent years documenting the conflict between the Eastover Mining Company and the miners, who were striking for safer living and working conditions, fair labor practices, and decent wages. Rather than using narration, Kopple chose to let the people speak for themselves, including interviews with sufferers of black lung disease, and footage of a group of miners who take their picket line to the New York Stock Exchange.

Independent Lens

Four documentaries listed below; 60 minutes; not rated.

PBS's acclaimed series introduces new documentaries made by independent filmmakers who take creative risks and find untold stories in unexpected places. Go to

www.pbs.org/independentlens/index.html to watch trailers, read interviews with the filmmakers, and go behind the scenes to learn more about the subjects.

***Butte, America* (2008)**

Immigrants came from around the world to work in American mines, and Butte, Montana, was transformed from a small mountain settlement into an urban metropolis of the copper mining



industry within two generations. Butte's enormous productivity influenced America's material and economic well-being in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and its story illustrates the rise of unions, the eclipse of manual labor, and the ascendancy of multinational corporations.

The Fight in the Fields (2004)

Combining archival footage with present-day interviews, this documentary follows the first successful organizing drive of farm workers in the United States, and also recounts the many failed attempts that led up to this victory. It presents a social history with Cesar Chávez as the central figure, who along with the United Farmworkers Union used nonviolence to pursue the civil rights and dignity of Latino farm workers in the United States.

Los Trabajadores/The Workers (2002)

Focusing on the lives of two day-laborers in Austin, Texas, *Los Trabajadores* transports us back and forth across the international border and brings to life the controversies and obstacles immigrant workers and their families face in both the United States and at home.

Maid in America (2005)

As seen through the eyes of three Latina immigrants working as nannies and housekeepers in Los Angeles, *Maid in America* reveals the challenges these women face as they pursue "the American Dream," their significant roles in American households, and the globalization of motherhood.

Ken Burns' America: *Brooklyn Bridge* (1981)

Documentary; 60 minutes; not rated.

Burns chronicles the history and construction of New York City's storied Brooklyn Bridge, a reflection of American optimism and enterprise as well as of individual perseverance and sacrifice. When German immigrant and bridge designer John Roebling died in an accident sustained on the site, his son Washington and his wife Emily completed construction of the Gothic beauty, supervising the project and its dedicated workers despite fires, fatal accidents, corruption, and diminishing popular support.

Made in L.A./Hecho en Los Angeles (2007)

Documentary; 70 mins; not rated. Available at <http://www.madeinla.com/>.

This Emmy award-winning documentary follows the story of three Latina immigrants working in Los Angeles garment sweatshops as they struggle to win basic labor protections from a trendy clothing retailer. Enduring 14-hour days and oppressive, dangerous conditions, the women never lose focus and are gradually transformed by the experience.

Matewan (1987)

Drama; 94 minutes; rated PG 13. Not yet available on DVD.

John Sayles directs this portrayal of events surrounding the real-life Battle of Matewan, one of the most violent incidents in the West Virginia Coals Wars of 1920-21. In the film, well-intentioned labor leader



Chris Cooper's efforts to organize the coal company workers spark tensions of both class and race between the miners and the company men.

Modern Times (1936)

Comedy (silent); 83 minutes; rated G.

In his brilliant satire of modern industrialization, Charlie Chaplin comments on the desperate conditions many people faced during the Great Depression. His "Little Tramp" character struggles to survive as a factory worker employed on an impossible assembly line. He suffers a mental breakdown, recovers, and bravely endures a series of misadventures in the face of overwhelming modern-day forces.

The Molly Maguires (1970)

Drama; 124 minutes; rated PG.

The Molly Maguires were a real-life, secret organization of Irish coal miners in 19th century Pennsylvania established to fight the exploitation of oppressive mineowners. In this fictionalized account, Richard Harris plays a private detective charged with infiltrating the organization and exposing its passionate leader, portrayed by Sean Connery. The film reveals the similarities of the two opponents despite their extreme positions, as well as the moral complexities of the contentious situations.

Nine to Five (1980)

Comedy; 110 minutes; rated PG.

In this romp about gender relations in the workplace, Jane Fonda, Lily Tomlin, and Dolly Parton are fed up with their "sexist, egotistical, lying, hypocritical bigot" of a male boss. Their revenge fantasies become all too real when they think they've inadvertently poisoned his coffee. They devise a ploy to cover their tracks that overthrows their boss as well as the company's patriarchal old boys' network.

Norma Rae (1979)

Drama; 118 minutes; rated PG.

Based on Crystal Lee Sutton's life as a textile worker in North Carolina, Sally Field gives an Oscar-winning performance as Norma Rae Webster, a Southern millworker who successfully organizes an election to unionize the cotton factory. Under the guidance of a New York unionizer, Norma Rae gains confidence as she organizes her fellow workers to fight for better conditions and wages, despite intense pressure by company management.

Rising from the Rails (2006)

Documentary; 47 minutes; not rated.

Based on the best-selling book by Larry Tye, this documentary chronicles the Pullman Porters, generations of African American men who served wealthy white passengers on luxury trains during the golden age of rail travel. Pullman Porters became patriarchs of black labor unions and trailblazers in the struggle for African American dignity and self-sufficiency, and their organizing skills and ideas about freedom helped give birth to the Civil Rights Movement.

Roger and Me (1989)

Documentary; 90 minutes; rated R.



Director Michael Moore gives a personal yet satirical account of the rise and fall of the automobile industry in his hometown of Flint, Michigan, in the mid-1980s. Moore interviews workers and families affected by the closing of the General Motors plant, and vainly attempts to gain an interview with GM CEO Roger Smith, the man responsible for the massive layoffs that eliminated more than 30,000 jobs and left the town destitute.

Salesman (1968)

Documentary; 90 minutes, not rated.

Documentarians Charlotte Zwerin and the Maysles brothers (*Grey Gardens*) follow four Mid-American Bible Company salesmen as they travel New England and Florida trying to sell expensive volumes in low-income neighborhoods. The film provides an indelible portrait of life on the road for the door-to-door salesman in America.

Salt of the Earth (1954)

Drama; 90 minutes; not rated.

Billed as the “only blacklisted American film,” *Salt of the Earth* prompted a dramatic reaction among unions, politicians, and journalists at the time of its release, and has a cult following today. Based on the 1951 strike against the Empire Zinc Mine in New Mexico, it illustrates the company’s prejudice against Mexican-American workers who strike for health and safety improvements as well as for wage parity with Anglo workers at other mines. Director Herbert Biberman used actual miners and their families as actors in the film, which is also considered an early treatment of feminism due to the wives’ pivotal role in the strike against their husbands’ wishes.

Silkwood (1983)

Drama; 131 minutes; rated R.

Meryl Streep portrays real-life Oklahoma plutonium worker Karen Silkwood, who becomes active in the union due to safety violations at the Kerr-McGee plant where she works. She’s soon exposed to radiation on the job, and conducts her own inquiry into the accident once the official investigation is compromised. Silkwood dies in a car accident under suspicious circumstances before her investigation is complete.

Swing Shift (1984)

Drama; 100 minutes; rated PG.

Rich in period atmosphere, this portrayal of life on the home front during World War II was directed by Jonathan Demme and stars Goldie Hawn as a young woman who takes a Rosie the Riveter-type job producing war planes on a factory assembly line. Complications ensue when she falls for co-worker Kurt Russell while her husband is away fighting in Europe.

Working Girl (1988)

Romantic Comedy; 116 minutes; rated R.

Melanie Griffith plays an ambitious secretary from Staten Island who dreams of climbing the corporate ladder. When she discovers that her boss has stolen her idea and passed it off as her own, Griffith uses



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her connection to investment broker Harrison Ford to take over the deal. Mike Nichols directs this story of class and gender relations in corporate Manhattan.