

## NOTES, AND DOCUMENTS

### A MARTYR TO HIS CAUSE: THE SCENARIO OF THE FIRST LABOR FILM IN THE UNITED STATES

By PHILIP S. FONER

Although the motion picture was still in its infancy in the opening decade of the 20th century, the employers' associations were quick to realize the important role this new medium could play in the open-shop drive. Scores of anti-labor films began to appear during and after 1907; and their plots fitted precisely into the propaganda campaign of the open-shoppers. "Labor" unrest was attributed in these films either to jealousy, laziness, or drunkenness on the part of the workers or to mob violence incited by foreign agitators. The films bore such titles as *Lulu's Anarchists*, *Gus—the Anarchist*, *The Dynamiters*, *Murderous Anarchist*, *Dough and Dynamite*, *Lazy Bill and the Strikers*, *The Long Strike*, *When Women Strike*, *The Riot*, and *Good Boss*. "It is suspected," noted a contemporary journalist, "that behind this class of pictures, if the veil is removed, would be the National Association of Manufacturers."<sup>1</sup>

The plots of the movies clearly showed the influence of the open-shop drive. Most of the films blasted unions and pictured strikes as futile. Strike leaders were dynamiters, killers, aliens who not only gained nothing for the workers but left them worse off than before. Workingmen who followed the advice of their

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<sup>1</sup> *Cleveland Citizen*, Dec. 10, 1910. For a general discussion of the open-shop drive, see Philip S. Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States*, III (New York, 1964), pp. 32-60.

union leaders were described as “dupes of rascals.” One film showed a labor leader ruining an entire town by persuading the men to strike for better conditions. The movie ended with the factory owners moving their plant elsewhere to “teach the workers a lesson never to listen to agitators.”

The scab in these early movies was a social hero, while the boss was a good man. In the widely distributed film, *Right to Labor*, an “alien agitator with tremendous personal magnetism” persuaded the union to strike for more pay. Everyone went out but John—“the loyal one”—who defied the strikers, saying: “This is a free country. You have the right to strike. I have the right to labor.” In reply, the strikers “plot to blow up John’s house.” The plot fails; the scabs take over the leadership of the strike, and the film ends with the workers driving the “alien agitator” out of town, and voting to return to work at the same wage scale. The “loyal one” is promoted to superintendent. A few weeks later the men get their ten percent wage increase after all: “The boss said it was due to John’s good work during the strike.”

Vitagraph’s film, *Capital and Labor*, released in 1910, argued that the church could do more to improve the conditions of the workers than their unions. This film was advertised as having “a soothing charm of a most delicate love story” in which “the man of heart and moral courage (the minister) proves superior to the man of power and violence (the union organizer).” The film’s message that capital would bow to labor’s demands if “approached properly by the right people,” prompted the *Motion Picture World*, chief organ of the rising industry, to call *Capital and Labor* “one of the most extraordinary motion picture dramas of the year . . . powerful in its purpose.”<sup>2</sup>

These anti-labor films were so numerous that in 1910 the American Federation of Labor convention devoted special attention to the problem. The convention endorsed resolutions advising workers to protest, and protest strongly, to local theater management whenever these movies were shown, and if the protest did not produce results, to resort to other methods. Special instructions were issued to central labor bodies and local unions to protest “against the unwarranted misrepresentations

<sup>2</sup> *Motion Picture World*, April 22, 1910, 46.

in motion pictures of occurrences in strikes.” At the same time, the AFL convention urged the labor movement to begin the production of “moving pictures depicting the real life and ideals of the working class.”<sup>3</sup>

The first film produced under labor auspices was shown to audiences a year later, and was part of the McNamara defense movement.

On October 1, 1910, an explosion destroyed a printing plant of the Los Angeles *Times*, killing twenty-one *Times* employees. During April 1911, following detective work coordinated by William J. Burns, the brothers John J. and James B. McNamara were arrested, accused of dynamiting the *Times* building, abducted, and brought to Los Angeles where they were indicted for murder. The enemies of labor seized upon the fact that J.J. McNamara was secretary-treasurer of a major trade union—the International Association of Bridge and Structural Iron Workers (BSIW)—and that J.B. McNamara was a trade unionist, to use the case for a general accusation that the labor movement resorted to murder in order to realize its aims. The “Crime of the Century,” as the bombing incident was called, was a “*cause celebre*” in American labor history and had significant repercussions in the entire area of labor-capital relations.<sup>4</sup>

On May 5, 1911, when the McNamara brothers were arraigned, they pleaded “not guilty.” In a “Call to Labor,” issued the next day, the AFL Executive Council assumed responsibility for the McNamara case, and began organizing the defense movement. McNamara defense committees were set up in cities

<sup>3</sup> *Proceedings*, AFL Convention, 1910, 136; *Cleveland Citizen*, Dec. 10, 1910. In Sept. 1911 Socialists of Los Angeles opened a moving picture theatre where moving pictures as called for by the AFL convention could be shown. An enterprise was said to be in the making to furnish such films. One of the promoters made the following points in an interview in the *Los Angeles Record*:

“The worker, hat in hand, in front of the forgiving boss, has at last worked on our nerves; and we want a theater that will portray working class life without insulting us. . . .

“Where will you get your themes?” I inquired of the young man.

“From life,” he replied simply.

“You must know the old pictures were not at all true to life. They were often so untrue as to be almost slanderous. Our theater is the result of the rebellion of the audiences against what was given them.”

Anyone seeking information about the theater or the films proposed to be shown was urged to write to Frank C. Hillyard, 129 East Fifth Street, Los Angeles. (Reprinted in *Appeal to Reason*, Oct. 7, 1911.)

<sup>4</sup> For an analysis of the McNamara Case, see Philip S. Foner, *History . . .*, V, 1980, pp. 7-31.

and towns throughout the country. The defense fund was literally deluged with contributions. Thousands of workers wore pins and buttons sold by the AFL McNamara Ways and Means Committee. The buttons read, "McNamara Brothers Not Guilty," and "Justice for the McNamaras."<sup>5</sup>

Part of the defense movement was the production of a film. Entitled *A Martyr To His Cause*, and subtitled, "Incidents in the Life and the Abduction of the Secretary-Treasurer of the International Association of Bridge and Structural Ironworkers," the scenario was by Arthur McMackin. The film was produced by the Essanay Film Mfg. Co. of Chicago.

The premiere was held at the American Theatre in Cincinnati on September 23, 1911 where during the film's run it was seen by an estimated 50,000 people.<sup>6</sup> Large audiences in other cities came to see the film produced under labor auspices until on December 1, 1911, James B. McNamara pleaded guilty to "the crime of murder," in the dynamiting of the Los Angeles *Times*, and his brother, John J. McNamara, pleaded guilty as an accessory to the dynamiting of the Llewellyn Iron Works.<sup>7</sup> On the day following this confession of guilt, the film *A Martyr To His Cause* was withdrawn from circulation.<sup>8</sup>

While no copy of this film is extant, a copy of the scenario was placed in the incoming correspondence of the American Federation of Labor where the present writer discovered it. It is reprinted below for the first time.

The scenario begins with John McNamara, "a young man of 17 or 18 years of age," leaving home, bidding his father and mother goodbye. "He kisses his mother affectionately, shakes his father's hand, and promises the latter to be a good boy and play fair in all that he does." Then the film carries McNamara through his career as a structural iron worker, foreman, and secretary-treasurer of the International Association of Bridge and Structural Iron Workers, his arrest in the union's Indianapolis office, his illegal extradition, and his arrival and confinement in Los Angeles.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>6</sup> *New York Call*, Sept. 25, 1911.

<sup>7</sup> *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 2, 1911.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, Dec. 3-4, 1911.

<sup>9</sup> This is probably an allusion to the Haywood-Moyer-Pettibone case of 1906 in

Scenario of—

A MARTYR TO HIS CAUSE

Incidents in the Life and Abduction of the Secretary-  
Treasurer of the International Association of  
Bridge and Structural Ironworkers.

Sub title:

YOUNG JOHN J. MAC LEAVES HOME TO SEEK HIS FORTUNE.

Scene 1: Exterior of Mac cottage. John, a young man of 17 or 18 years of age, is seen leaving home, suit-case in hand, bidding his father and mother goodbye. He kisses his mother affectionately, shakes his father's hand and promises this latter to be a good boy and to play fair in all that he does. Then, taking his suitcase and waving his father and mother goodbye he goes down the walk and out of sight.

Sub title:

HE BECOMES A STRUCTURAL IRON WORKER.

Scene 2: On upper story of sky-scraper in course of construction. McNamara at the forge where he is heating rivets to red heat. The rivets are passed by him to another worker, who, in turn, throws them up to a man on a girder higher up. (There will be shown here, also, various interesting scenes about the building.)

Sub title:

THROUGH HIS INDUSTRY AND SOBRIETY HE IS PROMOTED  
TO THE POSITION OF FOREMAN.

Scene 3: Exterior of the office of the construction company, showing the in-completed sky-scraper in the back-ground. Men in line at the window getting their week's pay. Young Mac gets his and stepping out of the line opens the envelope which seems unusually heavy. From it he withdraws a note with his increased wages. The note reads:

Dear Sir:—

We are pleased to notify you that you are hereby promoted to the position of foreman under Mr. Riley. Report to his office Monday morning at Cincinnati. Congratulating you upon your success, I am,

Yours very truly,

(signed) Walter J. Farren,

Superintendent.

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the aftermath of the murder of the ex-governor of Idaho. These men had also been abducted—from Colorado—to stand trial on the basis of the confession of an informer named Harry Orchard. Clarence Darrow successfully defended the accused and exposed the frame up. (Foner, *History* . . . IV, 1965, pp. 40-59.)

(back to picture)

Young Mac is delighted and is congratulated by his various friends, when he informs them of his good fortune. His former foreman also congratulates him and wishes him Godspeed. He then turns away and with some of his friends goes out of the picture.

Sub title:

A FEW YEARS LATER ELECTED SECRETARY OF THE  
INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF BRIDGE AND  
STRUCTURAL IRONWORKERS.

Scene 4: Same as 1. Exterior cottage. Young Mac is bidding his mother goodbye at the steps of the cottage as he leaves for work. He stops as mail man comes up walk and hands him a letter which he tears open and reads:

(Show note on screen)

(Association Letter Head)

Indianapolis, Ind. (date?)

Dear Sir:—

We are delighted to inform you that you have been unanimously elected Secretary of the International Association of Bridge and Structural Ironworkers to take effect immediately.

With the heartiest congratulations, we are,

Yours very truly,  
General Executive Board,  
per  
President.

(back to picture.)

Mac turns to his mother and delightedly hands her the letter. She reads it, then throws her arms about her boy's neck. He kisses her and tenderly helps her up the steps into the house.

Sub title:

HE ASSUMES HIS DUTIES AS SECRETARY.

Scene 5: Office of the association at Indianapolis. Mac enters the office, is greeted cordially by one or two other officials of the association who congratulate him upon his election. He is shown his desk and seating himself he immediately sets to work.

Sub title:

"APRIL 22ND, 1911."  
THE ARREST.

Scene 6: Main office of association. A long table strewn with papers, at which seven or eight men are seated, among whom is the secretary and the president. The secretary is reading a report and there is a discussion of the paper when there is a rap at the door. Mac lays down the paper and opens the

door, when two policemen step in. Hockin<sup>6</sup> also arises and crosses the room to where the three men are talking together. Mac is asked to accompany the two policemen to the station, which he readily consents to do and crossing to the safe, closes it. Then he takes his hat and informing the other gentlemen that he will return soon, steps out with Mr. Hockin and the two policemen. The door of the conference room is left open and it is seen that there are two more policemen, standing outside. The policeman in charge of Mac and Hockin whisper something to these latter two, who nod their heads. Then the four go out. President Ryan is about to go on with the proceedings when he notices the other two men in the other room and going to the doors asks them if they have any business to present it immediately that they may continue with their meeting. One of the men replies that they have orders to remain there. Ryan then moves an adjournment which is concurred in by the others and they are about to leave the place when the two men tell them that they also have orders not to permit any of the members of the association to leave the office.

Scene 7: Exterior of building. McNamara, Hockin and the two policemen are seen leaving the building, while Mac question the policemen concerning what business the chief has with him. Neither of them can answer. They go out of view.

Scene 8: Main office of association. Group the same as before, the members of the board discussing the affair, the two policemen at the door. The door is opened by two others, in plainclothes, who asks for the president and tell him they have a search warrant, authorizing them to make a search for dynamite in the building. Ryan asks them to read it and they do so, whereat he courteously shows them through the association files and desks.

Scene 9: Police station, exterior. Mac and Hockin and the two policemen are seen entering the station.

Scene 10: Police court. Empty save but for the judge, one or two attaches.

Sub title:

**KEPT PRISONERS WHILE THE SECRETARY IS HURRIED  
OUT OF TOWN.**

Scene 11: Main office, association. Group same as before. The plainclothesman having finished his search of the files shakes his head as he finds nothing. The members then ask if they may go, but before the detective enters, another man enters, and tells them they cannot leave. He then questions first detective, who has been making a search, and shows his displeasure and chagrin at his having found nothing. He then says he will make a search himself. He first turns to the safe and asks the president to open it. The president does not know the combination and the detective, irritably demands that a locksmith be sent for immediately. One of the policemen goes out for the locksmith, while the chief detective begins rummaging in the files and desks.

Sub title:

**AND IN THE MEANTIME, HE IS SERVED WITH ILLEGAL  
EXTRADITION PAPERS.**

Scene 12: Court room. Judge is pacing restlessly up and down when the Los Angeles detective enters. The judge then asks Mac to step up to the railing and

reads him the extradition papers and tells him he must accompany the Los Angeles detective to the California city. Mac shows surprise and courteously asks the judge if he may use the telephone, indicating it, but the judge shakes his head. Mac voices his opinion that the proceedings are not regular and that he should be permitted to consult counsel but the judge again shakes his head.

Sub title:

#### THE FRUITLESS SEARCH FOR INCRIMINATING EVIDENCE.

Scene 13: Association rooms. The chief detective is anxiously watching the locksmith, who is at work on the combination of the safe. The door finally loosens and the locksmith pulls it open. The detective then bends down and rummages through the safe, pulling therefrom books, boxes, etc. which he places on the table. He shows that he is annoyed and chagrined when he finds nothing of an incriminating nature. Then turning to one of the officers he passes over the various books with instructions to take them to the judge. Ryan again protests but in vain and the books are sent to the judge, while the chief detective follows the policeman out.

Sub title:

#### THE WILD RIDE TO TERRE HAUTE.

Scene 14: Police court. Mac is still protesting to the judge that the action is irregu'ar but this official lends a deaf ear to his entreaties and the Los Angeles detective, tapping Mac on the shoulder, tells him he must accompany him. Still protesting indignantly Mac is hustled out of the courtroom, followed by Hockin, who promises to get him released.

Scene 15: Exterior police court. Automobile is drawn up at the curb. Just as they start to get in the machine the chief detective runs up, smiles with evident pleasure as he sees that Mac is in his hands and hurriedly ordering all into the car, tells the chauffeur to drive with all haste out of the city on the road to Terre Haute. Chauffeur hurriedly cranks his machine, gets in and the car spins out of view.

Scene 16: Car speeding on country road.

Sub title:

#### THE ARRIVAL AT TERRE HAUTE.

Scene 17: Railroad station. A train is pulled up at the station, when the automobile, with its five occupants, all dust covered from the long ride, pulls up at the station. The chief detective gets out, yanks Mac out after him, and roughly jerks him across the platform to the train, which they are seen to board. The train pulls out.

Sub title:

#### HIS ARRIVAL AND CONFINEMENT IN LOS ANGELES.

Scene 18: Exterior of jail, Los Angeles. Car containing Mac, his brother and several others, pulls up at curb, with the chief detective. They are ordered out of the machine and roughly jerked across the pavement and into the jail.

Sub title:

HIS MESSAGE TO ORGANIZED LABOR.

Scene 19: Cell. Mac, seated in his cell, is writing. As he finishes, flash on sheet, the following:

TO THE BROTHERHOOD OF ORGANIZED LABOR:

In this second attempt to crush and discredit the cause we represent<sup>9</sup> I realize fully the desperation of the enemies of labor arrayed against us, but I am of good heart, for it will fail. That I am innocent of any infraction of the law in word or act needs no emphasis from me, for the truth is mighty and will prevail right speedily; and for it I shall contentedly wait.

I send to all brothers and friends of the union labor the world over my earnest and affectionate greetings, with the assurance that it is no villainy of which we are afraid. I am also confident that it is not asking too much of the public to suspend judgment in these matters until opportunity for a full and fair defense has been afforded.

J. J. Mac———.

(back to picture)

Mac with head bent low, reads the paper, then dissolve into Scene 20: The home fireside. Close-up of mother, alone, weeping over a letter from her son.

(FINIS)

**IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT!!!**

**PLEASE READ — — —**

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