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The Retrieval of Labour History in the United States: A review of two recent films on the class war in the West Virginia coal fields

Errol Black and Joe Dolecki

IN A RECENT ARTICLE in *Monthly Labour Review*, Roy Rosenzweig observes that:

> Within the universities, the field of labour history is flourishing as never before. First-rate scholarly books and articles issue forth regularly from the university presses.... Yet, as even an unsystematic survey shows, popular presentations of labour history...are much more difficult to find.

He goes on to suggest that this ghettoization, this failure to make labour history accessible to the people of the United States, is attributable to "...a general conspiracy of silence..." which is reflected in the limited coverage of labour history in the contents of popular history publications; the dearth of museums, or even exhibits in museums, which focus on the development of the labour movement and the great struggles of working people; the neglect and bias in the treatment of labour history and labour issues in the text books used in high schools; and the failure of Hollywood and the cinematographic popular arts to recognize the significant role which the labour movement and class conflict have played in shaping the character of American society. It is this latter issue of labour and the movies which is of interest to us here. Rosenzweig asks the question: "How many Hollywood movies have depicted great labour conflicts or the stories of labour leaders?" His answer: "The only two recent ones that I can think of are *The Molly Maguires* and *Norma Rae*, both made by the same director, Martin Ritt."[1]

Norman Jewison's *F.I.S.T.* could be added to the list, but this addition would not alter Rosenzweig's point, which is that Hollywood has not shown much interest in making movies about labour issues, or, to be more precise, movies which probe and attempt to elucidate the nature of class relations and class conflict in American society. Renegade and independent film makers have attempted to redress this

[1]Roy Rosenzweig, "American labour history: a conspiracy of silence?" *Monthly Labor Review*, (August 1987), 51-2.

Errol Black and Joe Dolecki, "The Retrieval of Labour History in the United States: A Review of two recent films on the class war in the West Virginia coal fields," *Labour/Le Travail*, 24 (Fall 1989), 253-264.

situation, as in, for example, *Salt of the Earth* (1953) and *Harlan County, USA* (1976), but these movies were denied access to the mass-distribution network of North American cinemas. (*Harlan County, USA* was shown on public broadcasting channels in the United States.)

More recently, two films have been produced which deal with the story of the class wars in the coal fields of West Virginia in the early 1920s. One of these films, *Even the Heavens Weep: The West Virginia Coal Wars*, is a quasi-documentary, financed by the West Virginia Humanities Foundation, produced by Beth Nogay and directed by Danny L. McGuire. It was released and shown on the public broadcasting network in 1985. The second film is a commercial movie made by John Sayles (who has a solid reputation as a film maker based on his previous movies, *Return of the Secaucus Seven*, and *The Brother From Another Planet*) with the backing of "...Cinecom, a nontraditional company specializing in films that don't reach for the lowest common denominator."[2] These films do precisely what Rosenzweig claims needs to be done: namely, they retrieve an important part of American labour history which has been all but obliterated from public consciousness. However, before considering these films in detail, it may be useful first to situate developments in the West Virginia coal fields in the context of what was happening throughout the United States.

As Gregory Kealey has demonstrated, the years immediately following World War I marked the culmination of a a general revolt of labour which affected all of Europe and North America.[3] This conflict was especially intense in the United States, with a general strike in Seattle in 1919, as well as bloody and protracted work stoppages which involved millions of workers and affected virtually every industry and community in the country. The workers involved in these confrontations were seeking wage increases to offset the 14 per-cent decline in real wages experienced during World War I, an end to the brutal and inhumane conditions of their employment, and, in many instances, recognition of their unions. Their opponents, industrial capitalists and the ruling classes, were determined to prevent the spread of unionism and to preserve the "right" to exploit workers. In virtually every situation where it seemed that workers were gaining the upper hand, the state, often with the tacit endorsation of the American Federation of Labor (even in strikes, such as the great steel strike of 1919, which nominally were AFL strikes), intervened to ensure labour's defeat.[4]

Part of the story of this era in American labour history is told by the data in Table 1.

[2]Pat Aufderheide, "Coal Wars," *Mother Jones*, (August/September 1987), 26.
[3]Gregory S. Kealey, "1919: The Canadian Labour Revolt," *Labour/Le Travail*, 13 (1984), 11-44.
[4]For accounts of this era in American labour history, see Richard O. Boyer and Herbert M. Morais, *Labour's Untold Story* (New York 1955); Jeremy Brecher, *Strike!* (Boston 1972).

TABLE 1
Union Members and Strikes in the United States, 1912-1926

Year	Union Members	Strikes	Recognition Strikes	
			Number	As % of Total
1914	2,687,000	1,204	253	21.0
1915	2,583,000	1,593	312	19.6
1916	2,773,000	3,789	721	19.0
1917	3,061,000	4,450	799	18.0
1918	3,467,000	3,353	584	17.4
1919	4,125,000	3,630	869	23.9
1920	5,048,000	3,411	622	18.2
1921	4,781,000	2,385	373	15.6
1922	4,027,000	1,112	208	18.7
1923	3,622,000	1,553	308	19.8
1924	3,536,000	1,249	244	19.5
1925	3,519,000	1,301	219	16.8
1926	3,502,000	1,035	206	19.9

Source: Bureau of the Census of the U.S. Department of Commerce, *The Statistical History of United States from Colonial Times to the Present* (Stamford, Conn. 1965), 98-99.

Although these strikes occurred literally everywhere in the United States, the largest, longest and bloodiest confrontations were in the American coal fields, "... with sporadic strikes, national strikes, and armed battles running from 1919 into 1922."[5] As Jeremy Brecher notes, there was a major insurrection of Illinois miners in 1919 against both the mine owners and the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), under the leadership of John L. Lewis. This insurgency led to a national strike of 425,000 miners on 1 November 1919. They were ordered back to work by the federal courts on 8 November, but defied both the courts and Lewis, remaining out for another month — until the intervention of President Wilson, who granted a 14 per-cent wage increase and provided for the establishment of an arbitration commission to settle other issues in dispute. There was widespread dissatisfaction with this outcome, and in 1920 coal production was disrupted by wildcat strikes in most coal-producing states.

In 1920, the centre of the conflict shifted to West Virginia. *Even the Heavens Weep* skillfully combines archival material, commentary by historian David Corbin, by journalist and author Lon K. Savage (*Thunder in the Mountains*), and by Fred Barkley, professor of industrial relations at the West Virginia School of Graduate Studies, with the observations of contemporaries and their descendants to fashion a richly detailed and useful documentary of this conflict.

[5]Brecher, *Strike!*, 130.

The film opens with a brief history of the growth of the coal fields in West Virginia and the rise of the UMWA. It then picks up the story of the conflict with the strikes at Cabin and Paint Creeks in 1912. and follows it through its climax in the Battle of Blair Mountain in 1921. In brief, union organization came later to the West Virginia coal fields than to other coal-producing states because of the lack of familiarity on the part of workers with the nature and traditions of unionism, because of a geography which isolated miners in the mountain hollows where mines were located, and, most of all, because of the near-pathological opposition of the mine owners (particularly the owners of mines in the southern part of the state) to unions. Under these conditions, the power of the owners over the miners was almost absolute. As Corbin relates, the coal bosses owned the houses the miners lived in; they built the school and the church, and they hired the teacher and the preacher; they paid the miners in company scrip and compelled them to buy at the company store; they ignored state safety laws — it was cheaper to replace the thousands of miners killed in slides and explosions than it was to adopt safety measures which might prevent their deaths. They also cheated the miners by short-weighing their tonnage, a practice called "cribbing." Finally, the mine owners controlled most communities in the vicinity of the mines, either directly or indirectly, through corruption of local governments and police forces. Miners who complained about these conditions were summarily dismissed, evicted from company housing, and driven away from the mines.

By 1912, most of the northern fields were unionized. That year, however, 15,000 unionized miners at Paint and Cabin Creeks went on strike to back up their demands for union recognition, checkweighmen to prevent the miners from being shorted on tonnage, free assembly, the right to trade at any store in the area without punishment, the nine-hour day, and enforcement of state safety laws. Management responded by hiring 300 Baldwin Felts agents from Bluefield to evict the miners and drive them off company property, so that they could be replaced by scabs brought in from elsewhere. The mine owners fortified mine property with concrete bunkers equipped with machine guns. The miners were driven into the hills where they were forced to find shelter in caves, tents, and the like.

As the strike continued, miners elsewhere in the state rallied to the cause, and at one point, 6,000 miners gathered at the headwaters of Cabin Creek, intent on driving out or killing the company guards. This resulted in the intervention of the state governor, who declared martial law and sent in state troops to protect company property. According to Corbin, this established a pattern which would be followed in all subsequent strikes: "The government would stay out of the strike as long as the coal owners were in control. Once the miners were in control or on the verge of victory, the governor would intervene." These strikes eventually ended in 1913 when the governor imposed terms of settlement.

The film's discussion of these strikes and subsequent conflict juxtaposes comments by Corbin and his collaborators with observations by some of the people who were directly involved in these struggles. Of course, there is a marked

difference in the way in which they describe and interpret the events. In particular, Savage and Barkley have a tendency to bend over backwards to offer a rationalization for the behaviour of the mine owners and the state. The people who witnessed these events feel no such compulsion. Thus, in his discussion of the owners' actions, Savage argues that: "The Coal operators felt justified in their actions. The law was on their side. They followed the law. They felt they had to have the houses to keep the mines operating, which was their main concern. They just went too far. The miners were harassed even after they left company property." One of the old-timers is much more succinct in his assessment of the owners: "They was murderers. That's all they was."

The historian — Corbin — describes an event of February 1913. An armoured train, with a coal operator in charge and loaded with deputies and Baldwin Felts agents, opened fire on a tent colony of striking miners in the valley of Holly Grove in the dead of night. One person was killed; dozens were wounded. The coal operator wanted to reverse the train and give the miners another round. The Baldwin Felts opposed this idea. Corbin indicates that this was one situation in which the Baldwin Felts agents showed more humanity than the coal operator. (He does not consider the possibility that cowardice and not humanity lay behind the agents' opposition.)

Hostilities diminished in the coal fields during World War I. In this period, the wages of miners lagged behind inflation, while the profits of the mine owners doubled. At the end of the war, the main hold-outs against unionization in West Virginia were the coal owners in Mingo, Logan, and McDowell counties. There, the miners remained subject to the absolute control of the miner owners. Organizers were sent in by the UMWA, but were driven out by deputy sheriffs and the Baldwin Felts. So bad were conditions that rumours circulated that company goons were killing miners and their families. As a result of these rumours, 3,000 miners assembled along Lens Creek near Charleston in early September 1919, with the intention of liberating Logan county by force of arms. The march ended when the miners had satisfied themselves that the reports coming out of Logan county were exaggerated.

In spring 1920, the UMWA launched a major campaign to organize renegade mine owners in the southern counties. That May, a strike broke out in the Matewan district of Mingo county over the firing of miners who had joined the union. The companies responded by evicting the miners and replacing them with black workers brought in from Alabama and other states, and with Italian workers who had immigrated to the United States from Milan. Baldwin Felts agents were hired to protect company property, guard the scabs, and to harass and intimidate union organizers and union sympathizers. The strike at Matewan was atypical, because many of the replacement workers ended up supporting the strike and joining the union.

The town of Matewan also was atypical, because its police chief, Sid Hatfield (an ex-miner and member of the famous Hatfield clan), and its mayor refused to

cede their authority to the miner owners and the Baldwin Felts. The conflict between Hatfield and the miners on the one hand, and the Baldwin Felts agents and the mine owners on the other, culminated in a shoot-out in the town which left ten men dead: two miners, the Mayor, and seven Baldwin Felts agents. This event — the Matewan Massacre — gave a tremendous boost to the morale of miners, probably because it was one of the few times they had taken on the bosses on their own terms, and come out of it with an unequivocal victory. Within a short time, 90 per cent of the miners in Mingo county had joined the union.

The Matewan massacre is the subject of John Sayles's movie. Sayles has explained his reasons for making a film about this incident, and also what he hoped to achieve with it, in a recent book. Sayles wanted to make a movie about Matewan, because the events in this obscure place in the West Virginia mountains were a microcosm of the American experience:

> All the elements and principles involved seemed basic to the idea of what America has become and what it should be. Individualism versus collectivism, the personal and political legacy of racism, the immigrant dream and the reality that greeted it, monopoly capitalism at its most extreme versus American populism at its most violent, plus a lawman with two guns strapped on walking to the centre of town to face a bunch of armed enforcers.

He adds that in preparing the script, he decided to give the movie its creative tension by focusing on the violence of Matewan — and implicitly on the violence which has characterized relations between the classes in America:

> ...The first major decision I made in writing *Matewan* was to not just pick a side and then root for that side to be left standing when the smoke cleared, but to question the violence itself, to question it politically, strategically, morally.

In short, Sayles's purpose in making this movie was to tell the story of the Matewan massacre and to probe the nature of violence in the Matewan incident and class conflict in general.[6]

How well does he do? We would argue that Sayles has done a masterful job. The movie opens with a scene underground in which word circulates that the owners have cut wages, and it ends with the massacre. In between, Sayles recreates the conditions which led the miners of Matewan — and elsewhere in the state — to counter the violence inflicted on them by the mine owners with violence of their own. The story is presented in a straightforward manner, with no embellishment and none of the sorts of diversions which characterize most commercial movies dealing with serious issues. The result is at once profound and compelling.

Sayles shows that the mine was the dominant factor in the lives of everyone in the region; all else was incidental. He probes the psychology of the different groups involved in the conflict through his main characters: Joe Kenehan, the union organizer (a former Wobbly and a pacifist), who urged the need for a solidarity

[6]John Sayles, *Thinking in Pictures: The Making of the Movie 'Matewan'* (Boston 1987), 10, 16.

which extended across racial and ethnic lines, and who counselled against violence because it would give the bosses and the authorities a pretext to crush the strike and destroy the union; Danny, who serves in a dual capacity as an old man who narrates the events of 1920, and as a young boy torn, at the time, between the wisdom and logic of Kenehan's arguments against violence and the bloody reality of the violence inflicted on the miners by the mine owners; C.E. Lively, company spy and *agent provocateur*, who worked assiduously to undermine the strike and the solidarity of the workers; the Black and Italian workers, brought in as scabs, who risked violence by the bosses and the Baldwin Felts to join the cause of their fellow workers; the women who had lost their husbands to the mine and were waiting to lose their sons; the sadistic creeps who "earned" their keep by terrorizing the miners (and anyone and everyone sympathetic to the miner's cause); and Sid Hatfield, whose hatred of the mine bosses and their hired bully-boys stemmed from his dislike of outsiders and their disruptive influence on the lives of "his people."

The one major flaw in the movie is that Sayles neglects to include the mine owners, the people who gave the orders to cut wages, recruit scabs and evict and terrorize the miners. They may not have played a conspicuous role in the violence against the miners (as they did in the Cabin Creek and Paint Creek strikes in 1912), but they were giving the orders and were responsible for the violence. Certainly, they have an implicit presence in the movie — everything which is done, is done in the name of the owners, and the story would have been strengthened if they had been given a concrete presence.

Sayles also explores the influences which shaped and constrained the actions of the workers and their families. A major obstacle to the development of solidarity and trade-union consciousness among the miners was their fundamentalist religion, according to which it was God's design for them to submit to the conditions of their wage-slavery, and to look to God for their salvation rather than to the unions and the "reds." There was, as well, the pervasive influence of racism, which meant among other things that even in those instances when black workers made common cause with white workers, they were marginalized.

In developing the story and moving it relentlessly toward its bloody conclusion, Sayles highlights incidents that were commonplace in the coal fields of West Virginia — and in other coal producing states — during this era: gratuitous murder of miners by company goons; indiscriminate assaults on tent villages to which miners retreated when they were evicted from company property; strain and tension among workers generated by the presence of a spy within their ranks; and the miners' endless discussions about union objectives and how they should respond to the violence inflicted on them by the owners.

Sayles is particularly effective in illustrating how workers of disparate backgrounds discover their common humanity in the context of struggle. At the beginning of the movie, the workers are divided by hostility and suspicion. Thus, early on there is a violent confrontation between striking miners and the black workers being brought in to replace them. Sayles depicts similar hostility to the

Italian workers. The suspicions and hostility remain, even after the Black and Italian workers join the strike. But gradually, during the course of the shared experience of the struggle, the workers discover their commonality. Sayles uses the small gestures of humanity — the gift of a rabbit, the coming together in song, a baseball game, and the sharing of grief when miners are murdered — to portray the building of solidarity through struggle. *Matewan* ends with a brief narrative account of the aftermath of the massacre which alludes to the fact that it led to the "Great Coalfield War."

We are enthusiastic about this movie. However, our enthusiasm is not shared by everyone. In a recent review in *Radical History Review*, Stephen Brier reaches a conclusion opposite to our own, claiming that Sayles has "...flattened out, over-simplified and thus distorted a complex historical event." Let us deal with Brier's key criticisms.

First, he asserts that the Matewan incident is depicted without reference to its historical context:

> The film's coal miners, for example, are depicted as lacking any connection to the past or to any kind of prior collective experience. They and their community are presented *de novo*, buffeted as if for the first time by faceless forces...beyond their control. The miners confront the decision to strike and the company's violent response without any sense of working-class ideology or prior organizational experience. All such ideology and experience reside in the film's heroic outsider, Joe Kenehan.[7]

This criticism is, to put it bluntly, ill-founded. From *Matewan's* opening frame it is clear that this is not the first time that the miners have challenged the mine owners. Moreover, throughout the film there are frequent references to prior experiences which make it clear that the individuals involved in this particular strike are dealing with it on the basis of those experiences — personal and collective. Brier also overlooks the fact that most such conflicts do have a *de novo* aspect about them: individuals change, conditions change, the tactics of adversaries change, and so on. Consequently, every confrontation is different and requires learning and adaptation in the face of the exigencies of the moment. Similarly, in his interpretation of the Kenehan character, Brier seems unable to grasp the nature and importance of debate and internal struggle within unions and among groups of workers. Kenehan was sent into the region by the UMWA to help in the organization of the mines. It does make sense that the miners would listen to his arguments, consider and (in varying degrees) be influenced by them. However, contrary to what Brier argues, Kenehan was not the sole repository of "ideology and experience in the film." Indeed, the union was factionalized, and many of the miners were attracted to the arguments of Kenehan's main antagonist within the union, C.E. Lively. The twists and turns in the conduct of this strike — or any strike for that matter — were shaped in part by the ebb and flow of the influence of the individuals and groups who participated

[7]Stephen Brier, "A History Film Without Much History," *Radical History Review*, 41 (1988), 122, 127.

in them.[8] It is this essential point that *Matewan* succeeds in making.

Brier suggests that because of the way in which Sayles presents the material, "[t]he workers' beliefs and actions ... seem random and manipulated, reactive rather than proactive." Toward the end of his article he repeats the claim in even stronger terms: "The film's largely inarticulate miners end up as cyphers who lack the necessary motivation to explain their choices or learn from their experiences." These assertions are negated by the event that serves as the climax of the movie: the massacre. Prior to that climax, C.E. Lively (the chief proponent of violence) has been exposed and discredited, while Joe Kenehan (the pacifist, who consistently warns against violence on political, moral and strategic grounds) has been "redeemed." Brier's argument would lead to the conclusion that the massacre should never have occurred. But it does. Why? This is because the miners have puzzled out that in their situation, the only mature response "...of fully sane and industrialized workers to conditions they understood and hated and wanted to change" was to respond in kind to the violence of the owners.[9]

Brier further criticizes *Matewan* because it "...lacks any sense of capitalism as a system, or of individual capitalists as human agents."[10] It is true, as we have noted, that the mine owners are not portrayed in the movie. It is not, however, true that the movie lacks any sense of capitalism as a system. Indeed, we would argue that one of the strengths of *Matewan* is that it does convey the exploitive and oppressive character of the system under which men laboured in West Virginia mines in the 1920s (and under which both men and women labour today in the mines and workshops of North American capitalism). Moreover, the film conveys this without relying on the type of 'personalization' which Brier finds objectionable, or on the type of heavy-handed preachiness that he perhaps would find desirable.

Finally, Brier castigates Sayles for not doing what historians do, or are supposed to do: finding "...an appropriate dramatic, or if need be didactic, way to convey the important aftermath of the Matewan Massacre."[11] We would argue that Sayles has done his job if viewers of the movie are stimulated by its "passionate and implicit not didactic morality"[12] to learn more about the conflict in the West Virginia coal fields and to relate what they learn to the conflicts of today.

Even the Heavens Weep does provide the documentation of the aftermath to the Matewan massacre which Brier wishes that Sayles had provided. As *Even the Heavens Weep* recounts, Sid Hatfield and some of the miners who had participated in the shooting were tried for murder in fall 1920. The jury acquitted them. Hatfield

[8]Bryan D. Palmer's *Solidarity: The Rise and Fall of An Opposition In British Columbia* (Vancouver 1987) is instructive on this point.

[9]Brier, "History Film," 122, 127, 124. This quotation renders in part the conclusion of David Corbin, *Life, Work and Rebellion in the Coal Fields* (Urbana 1981), cit. in Brier, "History Film."

[10]*Ibid.*, 123, 125-6.

[11]*Ibid.*, 125.

[12]This paraphrases a quotation attributed to D.H. Lawrence in Paul Leaf, *Comrades* (New York 1985), 105.

and Ed Chambers were charged again in 1921. When they showed up for their arraignment in McDowell County on 1 August, they were gunned down on the courthouse steps by Baldwin Felts agents. The Matewan incident had given the miners a popular hero in the person of Sid Hatfield. The McDowell county shootings gave them a martyr. A woman who was present at the funerals said that the entire mountainside was covered with miners. It was raining, which impelled the lawyer who eulogized the slain men to ask: "Is it a wonder that even the heavens weep?"

In response to the assassinations of Hatfield and Chambers, Frank Keeney, head of the UMWA in West Virginia, called for a rally in Charleston on 7 August. Mother Jones was there. So were 5,000 West Virginia miners. Keeney attempted to meet with the governor to ask him to protect union organizers in the southern counties. When the governor refused to meet with him, Keeney told the assembled miners that they had no rights in the state and therefore had no recourse but to fight.

On 21 August, 7,000 armed miners mobilized at Marmet (about 10 miles from Charleston). Mother Jones told them to go home, as she had a telegram from President Harding saying he would act to help the miners. Frank Keeney and Bill Blizzard told the miners the telegram was a fake. Three days later, miners started the 70-mile march to Logan and Mingo counties.

Historian David Corbin claims that this army of miners was well-trained and highly disciplined. As veterans of World War I, they knew something of how to deploy in troops and flank formations. They had a uniforms of sorts — a red bandana around the neck, and denim coveralls. They were called "rednecks." An eyewitness to the events describes the army as made up of "old men, young men, middle-aged men; men with the latest rifles you could buy, men with old muzzle loaders."

Governor Morgan ordered the miners to turn back, "or they would face federal troops and the leaders would be charged with treason." With this threat hanging over their heads, Frank Keeney called on the miners to disperse. They heeded his call, but the march resumed when 70 state police and 200 deputies raided one the miners' camps and killed five miners. On 28 August, the miners reached the foot of Blair Mountain, which had to be crossed to reach Logan and Mingo counties. Awaiting them on the mountain top was an army of 3,000 — deputies, state police, Baldwin Felts agents — armed with machine guns, submachine guns, tear gas and explosives. By 1 September the miner's army had swelled to an estimated 10,000. Preparations were made for the capturing the mountain, and for the subsequent liberation of the miners in Logan and Mingo counties. Then on 3 September, President Harding sent in 2,500 federal troops to put down the insurrection. The miners surrendered. This did not end the conflict in the coal fields of West Virginia, but it did end their latest challenge to established authority and the power of the mine bosses.

To this point, the film presents its story straightforwardly and dispassionately. It is a powerful and moving one. But at its conclusion, the film degenerates,

becoming melodramatic and maudlin. Thus, its narrator Mike Conners describes the Battle of Blair Mountain as "a turning point for America." It represented a conflict between the nineteenth-century belief that "those with wealth and power had a right to control the destiny of those who toiled [and] the new century's insistence that there were limits to what you could do to human beings for profit and power. The shame of Blair Mountain was that it stood as ... a symbol for the violence of an era. Its glory, that so many came to insist that the new age begin."

Although the film acknowledges that it took another decade or so before the miners of the southern counties secured trade-union rights (that is, not until after F.D. Roosevelt's election), the clear impression it leaves is that the miners' rising eventually created a situation in which workers gained their rights, and unions and owners were able to live in harmony within the context of American capitalism. But at the very time the film was being made, events in the United States were giving the lie to this version of American labour history. Trade unions were under attack, and remain under attack both by employers and the state; and many of the gains made by workers in their struggles during the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s have been stripped away. Indeed, recent figures indicate that, as a proportion of the employed non-agricultural labour force, trade-union membership stands at around 15 per cent: the same level it was in 1936.

Nor does the film address the legacy of these momentous struggles to West Virginia itself. What difference did these battles make in the development of West Virginia? What lasting impact did they have upon the size and character of the trade-union movement in this state? What manifestations of this legacy of struggle remain today? This is not the place to address these questions, but the data in Table 2 hint at the nature of this legacy, and suggest the importance of using history in interpreting the present.

TABLE 2
Trade Union Membership in South Atlantic States, 1912

State	Union Membership	Union Membership as Percent of Employed
Virginia*	232,000	10.9
West Virginia	176,000	28.9
North Carolina*	208,000	8.9
South Carolina*	68,000	5.8
Georgia*	279,000	12.7
Florida*	359,000	9.6

*Right-to-work states.

Source: Bureau of the Census, U.S. Department of Commerce, *Statistical Abstracts of the United States*, 1987, 408-09.

Matewan, unlike *Even the Heavens Weep*, is an exceptional movie. It deals with an important event in American history; the issues it addresses, and the questions it raises, are as pertinent now as they were 70 years ago. Moreover, it is a well-made movie. Most critics have proclaimed its artistic success. It also should have been a commercial success. But it hardly has triumphed at the box office. Why? Perhaps the answer is to be found in Roy Rosenzweig's notion of a "conspiracy of silence," whereby *Matewan* was condemned to the margins from the outset by a set of rationalizations that construct "commercial" potential in ideological ways.

In summary, these two films exemplify the sort of potential which exists to retrieve and present important events in North American labour history. But, as Rosenzweig points out, it is not adequate simply to retrieve. We also must avoid the sin of misrepresentation, "a pervasive tendency to underplay fundamental conflicts between bosses and workers and to overemphasize the potential of consensus and compromise."[13] Sayles manages to avoid this problem by letting the story speak for itself — through the characters and through the events. The makers of *Even the Heavens Weep* try to avoid misrepresentation, but ultimately are unsuccessful. This is due to the apologetics of some of the "experts" who provide its commentary, and to the filmmaker's predisposition to turn the outcome of a significant struggle in the coal fields of West Virginia into a decisive victory for working people (which it was not), and a (putative) turning point in American labour history.

[13]Rosenzweig (1987), 52.