

Labor Filmmakers UNITE!

By Deborah Kaufman



A dissident event in the heart of George W. Bush's capital, the first DC Labor FilmFest took place at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., September 6-9. Sponsored by the AFL-CIO, the American Film Institute and the Debs-Jones-Douglass Institute, the festival featured not just films and filmmakers but labor leaders and grassroots activists who, along with the standing-room-only crowds, participated in what was clearly a watershed undertaking.

One of the festival's principal organizers, AFL-CIO Union Cities coordinator Chris Garlock, said the sponsors wanted to create a forum that would both challenge the way the labor movement is seen and the way it sees itself in relation to power and culture. Curated by a committee of the three sponsoring organizations, the movies chosen—fiction features including *BREAD AND ROSES* (Ken Loach) and *LA CIUDAD* (David Riker) and documentaries such as *LIFE AND DEBT* (Stephanie Black) and *SECRETS OF SILICON VALLEY* (the author and Alan Snitow)—reflected a world made more complex by a global economy and, as a result, were more thematically challenging than an earlier generation of labor films like *NORMA RAE* or *HARLAN COUNTY, USA*.

In recent years, many people have come to view unions as bureaucratic and conservative, as bastions of philistinism, as opponents of the avant-garde. This festival worked hard to shatter that image. The perils of globalization, the plight of immigrant workers and the convergence of labor with the civil rights movement were all central themes, as audiences saw that "labor film" is not limited to agitprop strike footage. Indeed, the curators of the festival made it clear to all that labor film in the new global economy will not simply be "the comedies and dramas of working life," as film critic Pat Aufderheide described in her essay *What is a Labor Film?*, written for the festival program guide. Labor film today will tell stories that magnify the central issues of our culture and the choices individuals make during this time of radical social and economic transformation.

And it is such a time. Over the last 25 years, the ascension of the corporate agenda and the decline of organized labor have paralleled an unprecedented turn from collectivity to privatization and a valorization of the culture of individualism, the principles of "meritocracy" and the ideal of entrepreneurship. In the world of film outside the Hollywood studios, we have seen this manifested in the decline of federal and state funding for the arts, in the rise of diary film as the preferred mode of documentary and in an obsession with style, new

technology or a private aesthetic stance rather than a social statement.

In the foundation world, the top priority, even among liberal and progressive funding institutions, has been "measurable results," which seems to reflect growing doubts about the impact of independent cinema as well as a capitulation to the ratings game. Activist media organizations such as the Independent Media Centers (IMC) nationwide, *Sleeping Giant* in the Bay Area or *Working Films* in North Carolina exist in the margins of the independent media world, largely on the basis of the drive, strategic risk-taking and political commitment of their members. Through community-based production and distribution, they have revived the direct contact between film and protest, a connection which is hard to maintain when one produces for PBS, much less for commercial TV. The IMC's *THIS IS WHAT DEMOCRACY LOOKS LIKE*, a riveting look at the World Trade Organization protests in Seattle—and a film which could have fit easily into the DC Labor FilmFest's program—has inspired tens of thousands of people and has been distributed via nontraditional networks such as underground *samizdat* were during the Soviet regime.

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A labor film festival takes on great meaning in this context, and one could certainly feel it in the air in Washington. What's different about this festival, said co-chair Jos Williams, President of the Washington D.C. Labor Council, is that "these films are about people like us." But the differences went further, as films addressed the labor movement's return to a more radical political and cultural stance. The opening night of the film festival featured a frontal attack on globalization: our documentary *SECRETS OF SILICON VALLEY*, about the downside of the Internet revolution, and Stephanie Black's *LIFE AND DEBT*, an examination of the roots of Third World debt as seen through the eyes of Jamaicans. AFL-CIO leaders, filmmakers and labor activists set the framework for the rest of the festival through spirited introductions and intense after-film audience discussions that were as much about the success and failure of actual organizing efforts as they were about film and filmmaking.

The festival continued with David Riker's *LA CIUDAD*, a neorealist tour de force on the contemporary immigrant experience in New York City, and Ken Loach's popular drama *BREAD AND ROSES*, about the successful Justice for Janitors campaign in Los Angeles. These films confront the union movement's struggle to change its current image (and too often, its reality) as a bastion of white male exclusivity. My partner Alan Snitow and I saw this firsthand during

the festival. We met with staff members of the Building Trades Department of the AFL-CIO for an eye-opening discussion which acknowledged not only that construction unions must reach out to immigrant workers but also that immigrant workers must change the labor movement itself at all levels.

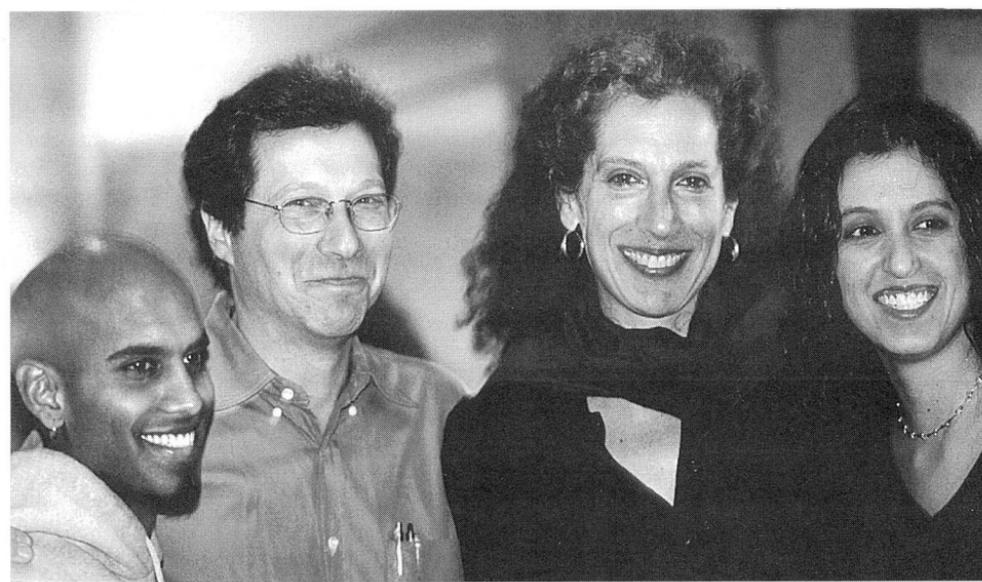
The festival reflected this openness to self-criticism and debate. Films such as *BREAD AND ROSES* and *SECRETS OF SILICON VALLEY* contain stinging criticism of aspects of the labor movement, criticism that in the past would have been covered up as dirty laundry.

Perhaps the most exciting evening at the festival was the Saturday night program. Standing wall-to-wall on the Kennedy Center's red carpets was a colorful crowd of young women in spiked heels, Doc Martens and multiple piercings, many wearing stickers that read "Bad Girls Want Good Contracts." They were there for Julia Query and Vicki Funari's documentary *LIVE NUDE GIRLS UNITE!*, about the struggle of strippers to unionize San Francisco's *Lusty Lady*. When Query took the stage to say "I hardly go to festivals anymore, but there are so few labor festivals I just had to come to this one," it was enough to bring the house to its feet roaring with applause. The post-film speakers from *Pride at Work* and the Working

Women's Department of the AFL-CIO made it clear how inspired they were by the long-term commitment to workers' rights shown by the dancers in *LIVE NUDE GIRLS UNITE!* New voices are undoubtedly being welcomed by the unions.

That act might have been hard to follow, but next up was the only historical documentary in the festival, David Appleby, Allison Graham and Steven Ross's *AT THE RIVER I STAND*. This moving film chronicles the sanitation workers' strike that drew Martin Luther King Jr. to Memphis, where he delivered his famous "I have been to the mountaintop" speech the day before his assassination. Memphis strike participant and King confidante Jesse Epps was the post-film speaker, and he rose from his seat on stage to challenge the audience: "There must be a partnership between labor and the community!" As if to underscore the labor movement's continued support for civil rights today, a contingent of striking Washington, D.C., home health-care workers, all African American women, rose to their feet and received a standing ovation from the packed house.

The festival concluded only two days before the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, acts which would reinforce the conservative drive to marginalize individuals and movements that dare to challenge the status quo. Because the labor movement has been central to new coalitions that challenge globalization, labor activists fear they are



SECRETS OF SILICON VALLEY co-directors Alan Snitow and Deborah Kaufman are flanked by activist Raj Jayadev (left) and organizer Magda Escobar (right).

likely to be early targets of the Bush Administration's Homeland Security's tactics.

With this first DC Labor FilmFest, the AFL-CIO is sending a strong signal to independent filmmakers that it is ready once again to support working class and radical cultures—a project that labor abandoned many years ago and an effort which will mobilize more support for justice and human rights. The DC Labor FilmFest gives hope to both filmmakers and social change activists, people whose work will need such inspiration after the cataclysm of September 11. Or-

ganizers of the festival are considering a national tour and already planning for next year's event. □

Deborah Kaufman is co-director, with Alan Snitow, of SECRETS OF SILICON VALLEY. Their documentary was invited to screen at the DC Labor FilmFest.

Filmmakers interested in submitting work for next September's DC Labor FilmFest should contact Chris Garlock at dcstreetheat@earthlink.net.

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