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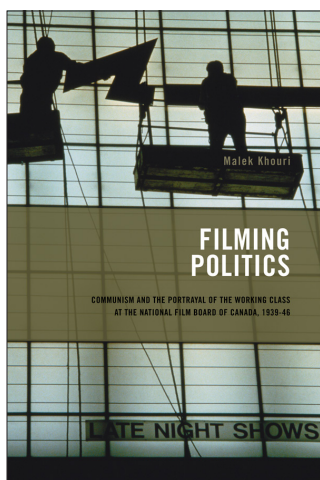
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## FILMING POLITICS: COMMUNISM AND THE PORTRAYAL OF THE WORKING CLASS AT THE NATIONAL FILM BOARD OF CANADA, 1939-46

by Malek Khouri

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## 6 WORKERS AND THE POLITICS OF FIGHTING FASCISM: NFB FILMS BETWEEN 1942 AND 1945

By July 1941 the dissolution of the Canadian Government Motion Picture Bureau (CGMPB) and the transfer of its operations to the NFB were both concluded. This consolidated Grierson's control over the NFB and allowed him relative autonomy over its operation. The changes also coincided with the Soviet Union's entry into the war against Germany. Consequently, a new political atmosphere was beginning to take shape. The Soviet Union was now a war ally and communists and their supporters were back at the core of political action throughout the country, mobilizing against fascism and praising the role of the Soviet Union and communist-led resistance against it throughout Europe. Within the same context, labour unions and militant working-class organizations, as well as Popular Front supporters, were once again organizing and mobilizing people against fascism.

Clearly, the war was now being perceived differently, particularly when it came to Labour. In a nutshell, the role of workers in the war now assumed a radically different political outlook and goal. At the NFB, films increasingly provided a new point of view, both on the role of labour in the war and on the post-war social and economic opportunities. The films stressed the leading role of workers, not only in relation to participating in the war and supporting the war efforts, but also on the level of achieving a leading political role in building post-war society. This chapter explores how NFB films between 1942 and 1945 linked working-class tasks during this period with the struggle against fascism, support for the Soviet Union and advocating women's equality and political leadership.

Labour and left supporters of Popular Front policy shifted away from their earlier position on the war almost immediately when Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union began in June 1941. Instead of considering the war in Europe as an inter-imperialist struggle between two capitalist blocs, the communists now characterized it as a war aimed at stopping fascism and defending democracy. In July 1941, the Communist

Party issued a statement calling upon labour organizations and all progressive forces to support the King government in its war mobilization efforts. It also advocated forging a united front of all democratic forces to fight against fascism and to aid the Soviet Union. The party called for the creation of a National Front, cutting across class and party lines in the common struggle against fascism.<sup>1</sup>

The issue of Canadian anti-fascist unity would now become a recurrent theme in the speeches of the lone woman and supporter of the Communist Party in the House of Commons, Dorise Nielsen. For Nielsen the main task now was to ensure that the war against fascism was won:

In my opinion the greatest need of this nation to-day is for unity to win the war. That should be the overriding consideration of everyone; nothing should come before that. Unity to win the war is our first duty, and then there should be a unity of all forward thinking people after the war to build the good life for Canadians, to give jobs and security on the land and to provide peace. The issue of socialism now splits and divides our people and prevents that national unity which is necessary for the winning of the war and the peace.<sup>2</sup>

Nielsen's approach clearly laid out how communists now identified their political priorities. In this regard, she echoed their return to a less sectarian policy, involving broader segments of the population and wider cross-sections of activists on the left and liberal political spectrums. This would reclaim the political losses suffered by the party earlier due to its confused and extremist left-wing approach, and would broaden the appeal of its policies among Canadians.

Between 1942 and 1945 the NFB produced over 400 titles including trailers and newsreels. The staff of the Board grew from two in 1939, to 751 by the year 1945.<sup>3</sup> Many of the films produced during this time were part of the *Canada Carries On* and *The World In Action* series, both of which focused on the news of the war and on supporting the war mobilization effort. Another large number of films concentrated on labour relations and the role of workers and farmers in economic and social development.

Many of the other films produced at the time covered topics such as tourism and the arts, as well as issues of ethnic diversity and solidarity and some discussions with First Nations' traditions. There were also a good number of animated films addressing various topics and interests. While most NFB films were originally produced in English, French voice-over versions were made for some films, particularly those produced in the *Canada Carries On* series.

While earlier war films avoided making reference to the political significance of the fight against fascism, those that were produced after Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union provided a cohesive analysis of the nature and significance of this struggle. In most cases views expressed in the film echoed the policies put forward by the Communist Party of Canada (then known as the Labour Progressive Party). The war against fascism was now characterized as one that labour and all classes fought together for the goal of achieving democracy and peace. Solidarity with the Soviet Union and its fight against the Nazi invasion was considered fundamental to the success of the struggle against fascism. NFB films now urged people in Canada and the rest of the western world to learn from the Soviets' experience, particularly their overcoming of the economic and social ills of the "old chaotic and uncoordinated" economy, and in building the social and political infrastructure for the victory against fascism.

The struggle for democracy was professed as interchangeable with political grassroots ideas such as broadening the involvement of people in politics and attaining full economic and political rights for working people. The involvement of labour and the working class and the full participation of working women were now also seen as essential ingredients for victory. In dealing with the social and economic conditions of workers, NFB films underscored the need to guarantee labour a decent and sufficient social safety net and a healthy and safe work environment. In the following section, I focus on the NFB films' association between the role of the working classes and the war, solidarity with the Soviet Union, and building of unity in the fight against fascism.

## **THE WORKING CLASS, THE SOVIET MODEL, AND UNITY IN FIGHTING FASCISM**

As mentioned earlier, the issue of solidarity with the Soviet Union became the subject of fierce discussion within the labour movement during most of the first half of the twentieth century. Opinions for and against characterizing the Soviet Union as a working-class state were of significant importance to debates within working-class and left circles. When Hitler launched his invasion against the Soviet Union, the issue of solidarity with the Soviets became a critical component in the discourse among large sections of militant labour activists and their communist and left allies. Even Trotskyist leftists who continued to oppose Stalin's regime gave military support to Soviet resistance (Trotskyists rationalized this approach as a temporary political engagement in the war not necessarily on the side of Stalin, but against the capitalist attempt to

destroy the Soviet Union's 'deformed workers' state'). This high level of solidarity with the Soviet Union was clearly also a central component of the communist-instigated "National Front" and in the mass movement spawned by it.

Most NFB films during this period assumed an aggressive anti-fascist tone. More specifically, the discourse of the NFB films on the war became much closer to the one advocated by the National Front than to that promoted by the government. Their approach also became more explicitly supportive of the Soviet Union, not simply as a war ally but also as a political partner. The films urged respect and support for the Soviet system's socialized planning, and celebrated its ability to mobilize and utilize tremendous social and economic resources for the benefit of its people and in the fight against fascism.

The *World in Action* series began in June 1942 with the goal of reaching out to wider international audience with two specified objectives: relating "local strategies to world ones," and influencing and directing "the political attitudes of North American audiences toward an internationally oriented post-war ethic."<sup>4</sup> With these tasks in mind, several films in the series urged Canadians to look at the experiences as well as the social and political structures of other countries (such as the Soviet Union) by way of learning about the strategies of fighting fascism and to become more effective in the struggle against it. By the last year of the war, the series would specifically promote mutual respect between different social and economic systems as a basis for international relations and as an essential feature for building world peace and saving humanity from poverty, need, and inequality.

Stuart Legg's film *Geopolitik – Hitler's Plan for Empire* (1942) traces historically the ascendance of fascism in Europe. The film implicitly denounces the west's earlier complacency in confronting the rise of fascism and cites western governments' reluctance to support the fight against fascism in Spain. The inability to stop Franco eventually strengthened fascism and helped it achieve an important goal in its larger plan for world domination, the film argues. The commentator reminds us that Hitler's goal of world control, rooted in Karl Haushofer's strategy of Geopolitik, attained its first success after the creation of the "western route to empire" in Spain. Only then, the film suggests, did western nations wake to the danger of fascism.

In the context of earlier political debates about Stalin's treaty with Hitler, and the embarrassing position in which the Communist Party found itself, the film's position was effectively rationalizing earlier communist positions. After all, communists in Canada and around the world always accused the Chamberlain government of Britain of appeasing fascism and of aiding Hitler in his preparation for the push against the Soviet Union. Communists also consistently cited pre-war Soviet appeals to western

powers and the League of Nations, which called for creating “a system of multilateral alliances for defence against Nazi Germany” and how these appeals were always rejected.<sup>5</sup> In the same breath, communists considered the September 1938 signing of the Munich agreement between Hitler, Chamberlain and Daladier as the pretext that pushed Stalin to sign the non-aggression treaty with Germany in August 1939, and shortly after, the Friendship Treaty. Hitler invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, two days after which Britain and France declared war on Germany. Canada declared war on September 10. Given this background, *Geopolitik – Hitler’s Plan for Empire* assumed an extremely important significance. In hindsight, the film puts the onus squarely on western powers regarding the ensuing events in Europe.

In the 1942 film *Inside Fighting Russia* (also titled *Our Russian Ally*) Legg and scriptwriter James Beveridge describe how “drawing on vast resources of labour and materials, and strengthened by new faith and leadership, the Soviet Union was able to change the course of World War II.” The film then pays tribute to the resistance conducted by the Russian people “who withstood enemy attack, fought back, and disrupted Hitler’s timetable.” It sympathetically refers to how “the Red Star has stopped the Nazis” and contrasts “old starved Russia” with the “new Russia of Lenin.” In another segment of the film, there is reference to international workers’ solidarity with Russia. The film points out that when the Soviet Union came under attack, “British workers, and Canadian workers in Montreal rushed to send new tanks to our new ally.” Lorne Greene’s voice reminds us of Russia’s secret weapon in the fight against fascism: “they are strong because they have the faith.” There can no doubt about what faith Greene was referring to here. The film clearly links Soviet successes on the military front to their socialist economic and political system. *Inside Fighting Russia* suggests that the country’s utilization of its collective energies to fight fascism is a direct result of the effectiveness and strong organization of the Soviet system itself. The film favourably discusses the idea of socialized economy and how it improves the workers’ stake in society. It suggests that in the new Soviet society “workers work not for a greater share of production but for a greater production in which to share.” The film shrewdly offers this argument in conjunction with a new interpretation of the notions of democracy and democratic practice.

With all its expressions of solidarity with the Soviet Union and its sympathy for the role of workers in governing and building the Soviet state, however, the film avoids posing the capitalist and the socialist systems directly against each other. Instead, it allows room for its audience to appreciate the specificity of each system’s experience. As *Inside Fighting Russia* concentrates on discussing issues of social cooperation, social justice and democratic values and ideals, it inadvertently suggests that each society has

its own dynamics that eventually determine how it upholds and applies these ideals. Subsequently, differences between capitalism and socialism are portrayed as elements that should not constitute an obstacle to their cooperation in fighting fascism. And since fascism is the antithesis of *all* democratic values and ideals shared by humanity, alliance between the west and the Soviet Union becomes a logical and beneficial choice.

To the background of images of women and men at work, the film presents the Soviet socialist experience, not as an antithesis to capitalism but as an alternative which employs a new form of democracy based on the motto: “one for all and all for one.” The film describes the Soviet system, and how as a result of the Russian Revolution people were able for the first time in history to embark on planning their future using a grassroots collective control and administration. *Inside Fighting Russia* therefore conceives of the new Soviet system as one that expands the notion of democratic rights by involving its citizens in building their homeland, and by giving them the right to directly administer its resources and share the benefits of its successes. Such allusions to democracy are clearly inspired by a fundamentally counter-hegemonic philosophy, which in many ways expands beyond the traditional and simple interpretation of democracy as free elections. The film’s elucidation of democracy is more in sync with a grassroots direct-democracy model (which the Soviet system adopted on paper but departed from by the mid-1920s). Given the broad parameters of how communists and their Popular Front policy inferred the notion of democracy, the film certainly had familiar resonance among the audience of the time. No one could have had any doubt about how the film was essentially endorsing a Marxist viewpoint on the issue. At its first release, the film ran for two weeks in a Washington, D.C. newsreel theatre, the Trans-Lux, and became one of the most popular films to be produced by the NFB at the time.<sup>6</sup>

Similar themes are offered in Tom Daly’s *Our Northern Neighbour* (1944). Once again, the emphasis is on the fighting alliance with the Soviet Union, and on solidarity with a Soviet system which symbolizes and enhances the common goals of humanity in progress, social justice and peace. The film discusses the pre-war events leading to the signing of the non-aggression pact between Stalin and Hitler. As Legg did in *Geopolitik*, Daly goes back to the issue of the west’s own failure to recognize the danger of fascism. But this time the film more explicitly points out the signing of Munich agreement between Britain, France and Germany in 1938.

Then the film traces the history of the Russian revolution and points out its achievements. It stresses the revolution’s success in gaining the support of working people inside Russia and around the world. The new system is described through its accomplishments in modernizing the country to the extent of becoming the “world’s



second largest industrial power.” As we saw in *Inside Fighting Russia*, Daly’s film attributes Soviet successes to people’s “faith and determination,” and their reliance on cooperative and collective methods of governing their country.

Daly’s film also assures the west of the peaceful intentions of the Soviet Revolution. To support his point, the film cites Stalin’s infamous feud with Trotsky on the idea of building socialism in one country. Stalin’s “sensible” approach on the issue of international socialist change is contrasted with Trotsky’s “dogmatic” and less realistic one. Gary Evans explains:

The commentary suggested that Joseph Stalin, a quieter voice than Trotsky, was leading Russia to build a pattern of socialism for all the world to see. The Russian citizen was preparing for the promise of ultimate freedom and good living after all these lean years. The film ended with the internationalist message, “we seek the cooperation of all nations, large and small, to eliminate tyranny and slavery, oppression and intolerance.”<sup>7</sup>

Clearly, the film delves into the heart of the debates that were shaking the communist movement around the world since the mid-1920s between the pro-Trotsky and pro-Stalin factions. For its part, *Inside Fighting Russia* does not mince words as to whom it supports and where it stands. This was understandable given that one of the cornerstones of the debate between the two groups concerned the tactics of the Popular Front itself, which the left of the communist movement was vehemently opposed to on principle.<sup>8</sup>

The theme of solidarity with Soviet Russia is reiterated in other NFB films. In Joris Ivens’ 1943 *Action Stations*, the story is of a Canadian corvette that goes into convoy duty in the North Atlantic, sights a submarine and sinks it. However, the film uses the story of the battle as a pretext for expressing support for providing concrete military assistance to the Soviet Union. Towards the end of the film Lorne Greene’s voice urges: “Weapons for Russia – weapons to fight for freedom.”

Other films refer to different aspects of Soviet contribution to the war, particularly its articulation of new war tactics. Once again these films emphasize the need for western governments and societies to learn from the Soviet experience and its success. In *Forward Commandos* (1942) Raymond Spottiswoode draws attention to how the west could benefit from adopting the method of guerrilla warfare in the fight against Nazi Germany. It points out tactics used by the Russians and grassroots communist-led resistance groups throughout Europe as examples that were being used increasingly by armies in Canadian camps and the Libyan deserts. One particular tactic mentioned is training troops to carry the battle onto and behind enemy lines. The same theme is

repeated in Legg's *Battle is their Birthright* (1943), which contrasts the methods used by the Soviets to mobilize their forces with those used by the Nazis and their allies. The film refers to the blind military obedience of Japanese and Nazi youth and compare it with the "citizenship education" and grassroots mobilization in the Soviet Union and under the auspices of the United Front resistance forces in China.

Legg's film calls for initiating international efforts to battle food shortages in Nazi-occupied territories. As it alludes to how occupied countries have been forced to hand over their farm produce to Germany, leaving their own populations without food, the film suggests that western countries are obliged not only to feed their own armies overseas, but also to meet the challenge of feeding hundreds of millions in Europe and Asia.

All the films cited above focus on the value of collective heroism, but this theme is even more clearly pronounced in *This Is Blitz* (1942, Stuart Legg), *Forward Commandos* and *Zero Hour* (1944, Stuart Legg). Interest in this theme unmistakably contrasts with how earlier war films from 1939 to 1941 focused on the notion of individual heroism. The three films urge putting into practice the ideals of cooperation and people's unity and consider this a critical ingredient for success in battling fascism. By the end the war, films such as *Behind the Swastika: Nazi Atrocities* (1945, no credited director) would also pay tribute to the utility of and reliance on collective resources and methods as a major contributor to the victory against fascism. Films would also specifically describe how Nazis dreaded and looked down at these practices as ideologically debauched. *Behind the Swastika* illustrates fascism's special hatred for those who fought the war based on the principles of democratic and humanitarian ideals of equality and freedom. It graphically depicts examples of Nazi crimes in concentration camps and prisons and elucidates: "Jews and gentiles who believed in democratic principles were targeted" and "Russian prisoners of war received particularly savage treatment."

In the 1942 film *Inside Fighting China*, Stuart Legg argues that unity between people from different political viewpoints is essential for defeating fascism and other forms of oppression. Such unity is also crucial for building a better and more prosperous future. Sending home a familiar message on the need to overcome political differences, Legg cites the example of the Popular Front in China, where Nationalists and Communists joined together in the resistance against the Japanese invasion in the late 1930s.

The film presents footage shot in political rallies, schools, fields, and factories where Communist and Nationalist sympathizers discuss and address economic and social needs and problems. The commentator argues that even "as the enemy has conquered, people still needed to learn how to conquer poverty, promote the well being of people and labour for the common good." *Inside Fighting China* therefore links resistance

against fascism to building a new Chinese society based on freedom from poverty and want. As he argues the case for people's unity, Legg uses images of unemployed people in western countries during the Depression as they stood in line to find jobs and as they fought with the police in demonstrations. He reminds us that earlier western governments' ignoring of economic and social problems eventually also led them to ignoring the growing menace of fascism which fed on social instability and lack of equitable social systems. The film also condemns the inaction of western governments in relation to the pre-war Japanese invasion of China. In a phraseology that echoes those used in statements by leaders of communist and Popular Front movements in Canada and around the world, the film affirms that to counter all kinds of oppression people need to "organize and unite."

Other films from the same period more explicitly elaborate on various historical aspects of the rise of fascism in Europe. In Stuart Legg's *The Gates of Italy* (1943), for example, social and economic injustices are considered as major elements that contributed to the rise of fascism to power. As it traces the history of fascism in Italy, the film argues that Mussolini's manipulation of the Italian working class and the "impoverishment of the Italian people," in addition to his demagogic misrepresentation of socialist ideals in order to get the support of the Italian population, eventually led many Italians in the direction of supporting fascism. As a result, Italy under Mussolini became a major source for labour "overexploitation and enslavement." Legg explains that the goal of fascist governments was to provide the dictatorial political framework for guaranteeing harsher and higher levels of exploitation of the labour force. Nazi Germany, the film argues, was capable of building its war machine relying mostly on the highly exploitative working conditions of its labour force.

A similar analysis is brought forward in films from the series, *The World in Action*. This time, however, the emphasis is on the situation in France prior to the war and on how social instability affected the aptitude of the country to resist the Nazi invasion in the early years of the war. Stuart Legg's *Inside France* (1944) argues that this apathy further helped support for the collaborationist pro-Nazi Vichy government. Legg paints a dark picture of France in the period between the two world wars when the country was struck by riots, strikes, and economic stress. He describes how fascist elements within France attempted to destabilize the situation for the democratically elected Popular Front government in the mid- to late 1930s. He points out later dissension between supporters of the pro-Nazi government and those supporting the resistance. As with other films dealing with the subject of unity, *Inside France* stresses that social factors and the inability of governments in the west to address social concerns and problems led to increased support of fascism. Fascism is therefore conceived not as

an idea that attracts people because of an innate human tendency to hate and to seek violence against each other, but rather as a distortion of human nature which grows within atmospheres of instability. The causes of such instability, however, cannot be separated from the realities of social inequality, poverty, exploitation and alienation.

One film in particular raised a major controversy upon its release. Legg's *Balkan Powder Keg* (1944) drew a picture of events in Greece and Yugoslavia, where Popular Front and communist-led resistance movements played a major role in driving out German armies of occupation. As Whitaker and Marcuse explain, as early as 1944 the British government was already in direct conflict with the communist-led resistance in Greece. This conflict eventually led to the Greek civil war and to the creation of the Truman Doctrine of intervention against Communism.<sup>9</sup> In Canada this was a particularly sensitive issue:

Mackenzie King had recently been burned by an angry response by Winston Churchill to what the British prime minister took to be some slight by the Canadian government on the British position in Greece. Now King was disconcerted to learn that a Canadian-made film about to open to wide circulation in the United States in January 1945 took what his adviser Norman Robertson called a "forthright" and "liberal" editorial attitude, with its plain talk about royalist dictatorships in Greece and Yugoslavia and its sympathetic presentation of the viewpoint of the working-class resistance movements that found themselves in conflict with British troops. This was a red flag to King, who was excessively cautious at all times about foreign relations, especially with his senior allies, Churchill and Roosevelt. Robertson carefully pointed out that the NFB "has done a good deal of excellent work and has shown quite remarkable powers of enterprise and initiative usually lacking in agencies of government." This was because "it has been relatively free from the restrictive controls by the more cautious Departments, such as... External Affairs." King, to the contrary, decided that External Affairs should be consulted by the NFB in making films touching on foreign relations. As for *Balkan Powder Keg*, it was ordered withdrawn from circulation, twice.<sup>10</sup>

The affair with the film was a clear sign of things to come as the war was nearing its end. It indicated that the relationship between the Board and the government was not totally without problems. As such, these problems underlined the boldness and the level to which NFB films ideologically and politically challenged hegemonic politics and values. It is fair to say, however, that the confrontation over *Balkan Powder Keg*

was almost unique in its magnitude and outcome. For the most part, NFB films were mostly produced and screened without direct government interventions and hurdles.

## **THE ROLE OF WORKERS IN THE WAR**

An important element in Grierson's and Legg's advocacy of unity in fighting fascism had to do with how they linked it to defending the ideals of democracy and social justice. This was advocated in films that focused on western countries and/or those that focused on the political and social situation in the Soviet Union. In both cases, the welfare of workers and their role in providing a decisive foundation for defending democracy constituted a recurrent topic.

As we saw earlier, many labour militants and union organizers during the days of the confusion around the role of the Soviet Union in the war were reluctant to throw their support behind the government's war mobilization effort. However, after Hitler's invasion of Russia, a different situation emerged within the Canadian labour movement. This situation eventually influenced and reshaped the ideological nature and the level of labour's involvement in supporting the war efforts.

By June 1941 the Communist Party – still operating illegally – began to call for mass mobilization in support of the war. The main political premise for the party's new position was that the defeat of fascism required unity of all social and political forces. The party stressed the paramount importance of full labour participation in mobilization efforts. It argued that unity between workers and other classes and sections of society would be better served through creating a new social and political pact, one that guaranteed a better and more effective setting for building solidarity against fascism. The party used its focus on unity to press the federal government to grant full rights to labour unions, to enshrine and respect principles of collective bargaining, and to ensure the equal participation of workers in the organization of Canada's war effort.<sup>11</sup>

By the summer of 1942 a Canada-wide Communist-Labour Total War Committee (CLTWC) was created with the goal of providing labour support for the war. The Committee launched a campaign to pressure the King government to introduce conscription and step up its contribution to the war in Europe. It also demanded that the government intervene against companies that provoked strike situations, and that a revision of the federal government's labour policies concerning wages, collective bargaining, labour-management relations and participation in the war effort should

be undertaken immediately.<sup>12</sup> In return, the Committee pledged labour peace at the workplace for the duration of the war. The Communist Party policy as embodied in the CLTWC pronouncements reflected a new approach on the role of labour in the war. It also complemented Popular Front strategies adopted and variously implemented by communist parties around the world at the time.

Fighting fascism was now considered synonymous with respecting and advocating unity among Canadians. The issue of respecting the rights of labour and its supporters, was echoed in the House of Commons by Communist Party supporter Dorise Nielsen on several occasions. In one particular speech, Nielsen warned that the continuation of government measures against labour activists was jeopardizing the entire cause of fighting fascism:

The Canadian Seamen's Union [at the time a Communist-Party-led union] is trying to enlist six thousand young seamen to go into the merchant marine – a dangerous and difficult job, for which a young man needs to be well versed in the ways of the sea. The union is not having all the success it would like in obtaining these six thousand men, and I will tell why – because the president of the union is interned in the Hull goal. If he were free, I should like to guarantee to hon. Members that this man Sullivan could recruit six thousand men for the merchant marine. If this is an all-out war effort, you cannot afford to neglect the help of any single man or woman who is ready to do something to enlist the sympathies of the people.<sup>13</sup>

This shift in the positions of the labour movement and the communist left towards the war reinvigorated the enthusiasm for fighting fascism among workers. It also helped improve the organizational skills of communists among workers. All this reshaped how the politics of fighting fascism were construed ideologically among many Canadians. It also meant that Popular Front arguments in this regard were strengthening and sharpening their ideological and organizational influence among broader sections of the Canadian population. As a result, the cultural discourse on the war was also being revamped. While earlier NFB films mainly stressed official government positions on the war and almost entirely ignored the role and input of workers and labour unions, most films that were produced after 1942 offered a different valuation of these issues.

Workers' enthusiasm in joining the fight against fascism and their eagerness to support the war increasingly became a central subject in NFB films. Equally as important, these films would now regularly stress that workers should be appreciated

not only for their actual enlistment to go to the front in Europe, but also for their role at home in providing the economic engine for the anti-fascist struggle.

*Thank You Joe* (1942, no credited director) tells the story of a Canadian soldier recalling his work in building trucks and tanks in Windsor and how this work directly and positively impacted his ability to perform his duties as a soldier. Without the ability of workers to perform on various fronts, the film argues, the country and its allies' capacity to conduct a successful war against fascism would be impossible. In *Bluenose Schooner* (1943, Douglas Sinclair and Edmund Buckman), we are escorted on a cod-fishing trip to the Grand Banks, courtesy of a group of fishermen from Lunenburg, Nova Scotia. The film celebrates the courage of a thirty-man fishing crew as they pursue their work in the midst of the ever-present danger of German submarines. The theme of workers' sacrifice in building a sustained base for fighting fascism and providing Canadians with the economic edge to survive the war is once again reiterated.

Other films, however, would also suggest that the enthusiasm of workers to join the battle in Europe occasionally posed an obstacle to their much-needed presence on the lines of industrial production. This theme is presented for example in Alan Field's *Coal Miners* (1943), which describes how soldier coal miners eventually return home on furlough to help with coal production. The film makes a point of emphasizing the importance of the multifaceted and central role of working-class people. Within this pretext *Coal Miners* discusses the participation of workers in the political process, and enunciates the need to give them a more proactive and role within the country's social and political leadership.

NFB films stressed the need to integrate and release the collective power and energy of society on the widest possible scale. They urged the coordination and mobilization of the country's work force and resources. To achieve this, they argued that the role played by workers in providing the concrete and material ingredients for victory should be rewarded by allowing them a higher level of involvement on the executive and leadership levels, i.e., both within the workplace and in politics. To this effect, films argued for an equal partnership between labour, business and government.

Citing Abraham Lincoln's infamous political pronouncement: "when the common people rise to find their liberty, not the gates of hell will prevail against them," *The War for Men's Minds* (1943, Stuart Legg) argues that unity on the home front is essential for defeating fascism. The film alludes to the creation of the Labour-Management Committees as an example of how such unity is achieved in practice. These Committees, the film suggests, encourage and enhance the eagerness of "the working man" to take part "in the people's war." The film then argues that what would eventually win the war is not "belief in the superman," but "having faith in the unity

of people.” As it argues the case for supporting people’s unity, *The War for Men’s Minds* warns of the consequences that might result if western nations were to fail, as they did before the war, the ideals of the French and American revolutions. It reminds its audience that only when we believe in the “supremacy of the common man” in a society that is “founded on cooperation,” and that “all men are created equal” will we be able to build a better future for the country and its people. The film marked Grierson’s and Legg’s “first attempt to predict and discuss the world beyond war.”<sup>14</sup>

Another group of NFB film made frequent reference to the relationship between producing weaponry on the factory shop floor and using it on the battlefield. These films emphasized the equal importance of the contributions made by workers and those made by soldiers on the front lines of the battle. By visually coupling clips of images from the warfront in Europe and industrial factories across Canada, these films underscored the variety of and the connection between the ways people can contribute to the defeat of fascism.

*Great Guns* (1942, producer Graham McInnes) and *Industrial Workers* (1943, no assigned director) describe in detail how the steel and pulp production of the Great Lakes is transformed into actual weaponry. Both films are charged with relentless barrages of shots depicting workers as they “mold steel into fighting weaponry.” In *Fighting Ships* (1942, Robert Edmunds and Graham McInnes), Robert Edmunds tells the story of a shipyard worker who feels that he has not been playing a vital role in the war. The worker is taken to watch the launching of a corvette and realizes that each job, however small, plays a major role in the ocean battles. A similar topic is relayed in *Ships and Men* (1944, Leslie McFarlane) where a tribute is made “to the men and women who built Canada’s merchant ships during the war and those who sailed in them.” Throughout the film images from the Merchant Seamen’s School are juxtaposed with shots of workers building a Canadian ship and finally launching it into action from the shipyard. An argument is made in support of an increased government role in providing training to help develop the skills of the Canadian work force.

*Keep ’em Flying* (1942, producer Graham McInnes) and *Ferry Pilot* (1942, producers Stuart Legg and Ross McLean) both discuss the vital position played by aircraft workers. They also stress the role of women workers in the aircraft construction industries. In the latter, Legg and McLean visually bridge the gap which geographically separates the aircraft factory, the civilian transport pilots, and the battlefield in Europe, to describe how the Allies created the “efficient and diverse systems of the Air Force Ferry Command.” A similar theme is echoed in *Target Berlin* (1944, Ernest Borneman), where we are introduced to the details of producing and building a Lancaster airplane, the first large bomber to be produced in Canada. The film describes how the plane’s



construction relies on the work of an army of “thousands of people.” Once again, the emphasis is on the collective contribution made by working people in different stations of work. In *Trees that Reach the Sky* (1945, Beth Zinkan) we follow the process by which labour converts a sitka spruce tree. It follows the tree’s transformation from the time it is felled until it is integrated into the edifice of a Mosquito bomber. The thread of images detailing the concreteness and materiality of the production process and the involvement of workers in various stages of construction binds and spurs the energy of the entire film’s plot structure.

*Trans-Canada Express* (1944, Stanley Hawes) introduces yet another facet of the contributions made by workers in support of the war effort. It depicts the chain of events that eventually led to the building of the Canadian railroad system “linking Canada’s 25,000 miles of territory.” The film discusses how the role of workers of all industries and in supply centres represents the “vein which fuels the Canadian economy throughout the country to sustain the defence capacities of the allied forces in Europe.” While the film only briefly deals with the efforts made by workers in building the railroad, it is clearly more concerned with the present day significance of the system and its workers in supporting the fight against fascism. Conspicuously absent from the film’s historical approximation of the railroad building epic, however, are the central role and major sacrifices made by Chinese immigrant workers in the construction of this system.

Another film, Ernest Borneman’s *Northland* (1942) describes the role of mining industry workers, and looks at the mining towns and camps of the Canadian north. The film travels across different mining locations and draws a vivid picture of the hard and dangerous job of workers as they ensure an uninterrupted flow of Canada’s energy resources. *Getting Out the Coal* (1943, no credited director) depicts how British miners big-cut and load coal on conveyors, and how machinery is then moved into battle positions. Both above mentioned films present powerful images and shots that are edited by way of inferring an epic portrayal of the toiling process and the enormous input by workers.

Robert Edmonds’ *Coal Face, Canada* (1943) specifically tackles the campaigns initiated by labour unions to mobilize people in support of the war. Co-produced with the United Mineworkers of America and Coal Operators of Canada, the film conveys the story of a young man who, after being discharged from the army, returns to his coal town and finds most things have not changed or improved from when he was there. As he takes a room with a miner who used to know his dead father, and he attends a union meeting and listens to workers speak about the war and their role in it, he realizes the importance of remaining home and contributing to producing coal as a critical task for achieving victory in the war. He eventually joins up to work in the town’s mine.

Aside from the idealized and at times simplistic portrayal of harmonious relations between trade union activists, *Coal Face, Canada* nevertheless positively addresses an important subject: the role of labour unions in educating workers about their rights and providing them with an assured sense of pride in their work and their contributions to society. The film affirms the crucial task and responsibility of unions in “defending the rights and improving the lives of workers.” Variations on these themes were offered throughout the 1943 industrial newsmagazine series *Workers at War*, but the series also emphasized the benefits of introducing publicly owned and operated economic projects.

Clips from various NFB films were introduced in the newsmagazine, which was screened in workplaces, union halls and other working-class community settings. The series emphasized the socialized character of modern industrial production and the crucial role played by publicly owned industries. It also contemplated the utility of these industries in developing the economic strength of the country, a strength upon which the victory over fascism depended.

In two specific instalments of the newsmagazine we are introduced to a team of 10,000 workers “who over a year’s work on the Saguenay River Dam were able to build a facility that would generate enough electricity to light every North American home.” This facility, one film affirms, would “produce the gum that provides aluminium for victory and peace thereafter.” Another film, *PX for Rubber* (1944, Graham McInnes) depicts the construction of the government-owned Polner Corporation Factory in Sarnia. It dedicates the achievements of this synthetic rubber production facility to the effort of workers from different ethnic origins: “the construction of the plant took the work of a 5,000-strong labour force of several racial origins including Polish, Russian, French Canadian, English, Czechs and Indian men and women.” These workers, the film adds, “laboured day and night in 1942 to build the facility.” Both films emphasize the importance and efficacy of publicly owned enterprises in creating stronger bases for “fighting fascism and winning the peace.” However, not all NFB films depicting workers in this period had the war in Europe as their main thematic backdrop.

Another set of films focused on the role of workers in ensuring economic and social progress and prosperity for the entire nation. For example they delineated the workers’ excavation of the country’s material resources and wealth, and how this contributed to the development of the economy and to strengthening the welfare of the entire society. In *Coal for Canada* (1944, no credit), we get a glimpse of the tough and dangerous working conditions in an undersea mine in Sydney, Nova Scotia. The film draws a picture of the entire production process. It traces in detail the dynamiting, loading and grading of the coal, and then shows how it is loaded on a freighter that

transports it to industrial centres across the country. *Salt from the Earth* (1944, no credit) infers a similar story that looks at the mining and processing of salt. The film takes us on a tour of a salt mine in the Nova Scotia town of Malagash. It describes how the work being performed in this mine is capable of supplying the world with its salt needs “for the next 500 years.”

The apparent simplicity of these films’ pronouncements involved much more complex propositions that were also at the heart of how Marxists argued the notion of labour value. These pronouncements offered an outlook that affirmed work and the labour value creation process as *the* central element within economic production. As such they inadvertently demonstrated an important component of Marx’s economic theory, which placed the onus of creating economic value on the qualitative and quantitative work power put into the production process rather than on capital investment and/or managerial input. NFB films consistently prioritized the value of work in fulfilling the economic and social needs of Canada. They pointed out the prudence of utilizing collective social energy and resources for the benefit of the entire society. Efficient and highly coordinated social and economic planning, and the equitable distribution of wealth, were both introduced as rational alternatives to the inefficiency of the old methods of production that mainly relied on the whims of profit-motivated private economic initiatives. Within this context, these films also prioritized government involvement in organizing and leading the production and distribution of the country’s economic wealth.

In addition to discussing issues related to industrial production, NFB films also tackled concerns pertaining to the agriculture sector. Utilizing the society’s work force to meet its economic and social needs was the theme of repeated interventions by Dorise Nielsen during the debates of the House of Commons. Agriculture was an important constituent in Nielsen’s pronouncements. In the following excerpt, she addresses the situation in the agricultural sector and makes some specific proposals:

[The question of labour] comes up whenever one thinks of agriculture. Perhaps there is a solution of that problem. I know already that high school and university students are again going to help in the fruit-picking areas. I would suggest that in certain areas the boys in the army might also go out and help. After all is said and done, I have heard that in many areas the boys are fed up with being restricted to their routine bit of drill and so on, and at certain times of the year they certainly could and would enjoy helping in some farm operations.<sup>15</sup>

As they dealt with the situation in Canadian farms, NFB films urged organizing labour resources to meet the production priorities of Canada and the world. Films like *Battle of the Harvests* (1942, no credit), *Farm Front* (1943, no credit), *The Farmer's Forum* (1943, no credit), and *Ploughshares into Swords* (1943, no credit) address the challenges facing the agricultural sector of the economy and stress the urgency of creating a rational balance between social food demands and the work resources required to satisfy them. The theme of systematizing social and economic energies was posed as a commonsensical way to approach the question of satisfying the food needs of society. But this issue was of substance not simply because of its relevance for Canadians, but also for the whole world community.

In response to the call to initiate collective international efforts to battle food shortages in Nazi-occupied countries, for example, some films focused on how these countries had been forced to hand over their farm produce to Germany, leaving their populations without food. Important examples are Stuart Legg's *Food: The Secret of the Peace* and Sydney Newman's *Suffer Little Children*, both produced in 1945. These films suggested that western countries were obliged not only to feed their own populations and oversee armies, but also to prepare to meet the challenges of feeding hundreds of millions of people in Europe and Asia after the end of the war.

## THE ROLE OF WOMEN WORKERS

The outbreak of the war in Europe resulted in major labour shortages that affected the general performance and output of the Canadian economy. The sudden and substantial increase in demand for war machinery and the mass recruitment of men in the armed forces resulted in an upsurge in demand for a higher level of participation by women in the Canadian work force. These changes took place at a time when the struggle for women's equality was still in its earlier stages.

On the one hand, the increased involvement of women in the work force occurred as the Canadian political establishment maintained a belligerently patriarchal attitude towards women. Arguing against admitting women into the armed forces, for example, the Minister of Defence James Ralston insisted that while he realized "how patriotic these ladies are in their desire to do war work," the fact remains that "everyone who desires to be directly engaged in war work cannot be so engaged."<sup>16</sup> Even working duties outside the battlefields were frowned upon as uncharacteristic of what women were supposed to be doing in real life. Several NFB films saw the increased involvement

of women in the industrial work force as a temporary response to the extraordinary specific demands of a war situation. They suggested that after the end of this exceptional situation, women would be expected to return back to their “natural” jobs at home.

As they made a case for the importance of women’s contribution to the war industry, the message in NFB films such as *Proudly She Marches* (1943, Jane March) was that this work would be merely temporary. The film even hints that such line of activity (e.g., working in heavy industries or as military personnel) is “unnatural” for women. As it points out the resourceful capacity of women who work as technicians, photographers, photographic developers, aircraft workers and technical experts, the message of the film remains focused on the provisional duration of women’s involvement in this line of work.

In *Home Front* (1944, Stanley Hawes), we are introduced to the story of “Canadian women shouldering the tasks of maintaining the home front and providing the support needed by the fighting men.” Women’s work in ammunition plants, garment industries, aircraft and other heavy machine factories is presented as an example of how women could work “side by side with men.” But while it talks about a future where society becomes more dependent on “the skills of women,” the film still conceives of women’s involvement in the work force as means “to release men for more urgent work.” Another film, *Wings on her Shoulders* (1943, Jane March) expresses “appreciation” for the jobs performed by women in the war aviation industry. The primary message, however, is that women are fulfilling those jobs “so that men could fly” their planes in war-torn Europe and contribute to the success of the air-strike campaigns against the Nazis. A similar message is presented in *She Speeds the Victory* (1944, Philip Ragan). The film once again urges women to enlist in the work force so they can “free men for battlefield duty.”

Clearly, all the above-mentioned films saw the increased involvement of women within the industrial work force as a transitory response to the demands of extraordinary war circumstances, after which women were expected to return to their natural jobs at home. On the other hand, the relatively well-entrenched leadership-level participation by women within the labour movement, and within various organizations and groups of the Canadian left, made an important impact in forwarding an alternative and ideologically counter-hegemonic discourse on the role of women in society. For their part, other NFB films expressed hope that developments that occurred as a direct result of the war would, and should, plant the seeds for a new attitude towards involving women in the work force. They also argued that the post-war period should witness greater emphasis on guaranteeing gender social and economic equality within Canadian society.

A set of films presented a bold new approach towards the topic of women and work. In *Handle with Care* (1943, George L. George), the discussion is focused on the role of Canada's munitions industries and one factory's reliance on a largely female labour force. A Montreal factory "owned by the people of Canada" is presented as an example to rebuff claims that women are incapable of performing complex work tasks. The film argues that the performance of women in the facility is a testimony to their ability to master "accurate and precarious work." In *Canada Communiqué No. 3* (1943), we are introduced to an "army of women shipbuilders" on the West Coast. These women workers, the film asserts, had proved their capacity to work in an industry that has been traditionally conceived as a "men's domain."

Other films reflected interest in creating a social support system that could help guarantee the future participation of women on a totally equal footing with men. Gudrun Parker's film *Before they are Six* (1943), for example, describes the need, feasibility and benefits of creating day nurseries, where working women can rely on the expertise of a trained staff to supervise the meals, health and play of their children as they get increasingly involved in the country's work force. Furthermore, several NFB films involved an unprecedented participation by women filmmakers.

Film historian Barbara Martineau compiled a list of fifteen films that were irrefutably made by women during this period. In these and other NFB films of the period, women filmmakers played "central roles in the overall output of documentary films."<sup>17</sup> She cites a filmmaker who made a major contribution to offering an alternative discourse on women during this period. While most women filmmakers were subjected to blatant discrimination in their wages and to a concerted effort to suppress their social and political views, one filmmaker in particular was able to become "actively involved in the production of war films at a decision-making level." This filmmaker was Jane March, the director of *Women Are Warriors* (1942) and *Inside Fighting Canada* (1942), among others.<sup>18</sup>

Martineau argues that in contrast to how other films dealt with the theme of women and war, and despite pressures to water down the original screenplay's socioeconomic analysis, Jane March's *Women are Warriors* offered a particularly powerful message about the role of women in society. The film explicitly linked the fight against fascism and the role of labour with the need for an alternate approach to the involvement of women in the work force both during and after the war. The film provides an intricate analytical approximation of how the demand for workers grew during the war, but also points out how women in different countries became involved in all aspects of the fight against fascism even before the war began. In this regard the film describes the contributions made by women in England, Canada and Russia and

insists that women were not leisurely idlers before the war, and that in their roles as “domestic workers, secretaries, and whatever work that was available for them at the time,” women were always part of the work force. Nevertheless, the film suggests the war itself brought major changes in conception about the role of women in society. In England, for example, “they now transported planes from factories to airfield, and operated anti-aircraft guns.” In Canada “women have joined active military support service and the work force in tens of war machine and munition factories.” In Russia they are fighting “on the front lines and act as parachute nurses, army doctors and technicians.”

The film paints a picture of the interactive relationship between issues such as women’s equality, liberation from fascism, and the forging of a new society where democratic values would be fulfilled in the context of the “liberation from want.” As she discusses the situation in the Soviet Union, March explicitly describes how “over twenty years ago the Soviet Union achieved what only today women are achieving in the West.” She is referring here to the constitutional rights achieved by women in the Soviet Union after the Bolshevik Revolution which provided the basis for them to “work equally with men” in all “social and economic sectors including as petroleum engineers and as farmers.” This multifaceted participation by women in all areas of work, the film suggests, also strengthened “the formidable ability of Soviet society to mobilize against Nazi Germany.” *Women are Warriors* concludes with a note which once again reminds its audience that when the war erupted, and as a direct result of achieving gender equality, women in the Soviet Union were ready to be active “on all the front lines of the battle.” Still, as Martineau’s article suggests, further progressive aspects of the film were undercut by the studio-dictated narration, particularly when it came to the vigorously feminist live-action cinematography – most of which came from Soviet stock shot selections.

Jane March’s other war film *Inside Fighting Canada* describes the transformation of the country into a “fighting machine” with women playing a major role in maximizing the level of war-arsenal manufacture. In the spirit of the democratic cooperation of its people, and as a nation “created by men and women,” the film argues that Canada has also become the foremost training-ground for allied airmen and for the recruiting and training of soldiers. The film directly refers to women workers in the lumber, farming and shipyard industries. It also makes a visual tribute to women farmers, truck drivers, those working on construction sites, and those in other industries. As it stresses the importance of women’s contribution during the war, *Inside Fighting Canada* emphasizes that this effort should not be conceived as “a temporary war measure,” and

that instead, it should be considered the start for a new era where women can equally contribute to building a better future for the entire society.

Piers Handling suggests that *Inside Fighting Canada* encountered strong opposition from the Ontario Censor Board; the Board delayed the release of the film, claiming “inaccuracies” in some of its data. He points out that the establishment’s hostility towards the film has to be looked at in connection with “some labour strikes and threats of strikes, demands for the resignation of federal cabinet ministers, and a great deal of open criticism of the wartime administration.”<sup>19</sup> One among a small number of films that explicitly posed connections between gender, social and economic liberation, it is hardly surprising that the Ontario Censor Board’s patience with the film’s daring message was so thin.

Stuart Legg’s *Inside Fighting Russia* (1942) also pays special tribute to the role of women in the war. In a similar manner to the way March approached the topic, Legg emphasizes the significance of the interactive link between social and economic aspects of the liberation of women in the Soviet Union. This liberation, he argues, strengthened that country’s ability to withstand enemy attacks, fight back and ultimately disrupt Hitler’s plans and timetable. To the background of images of working men and women, the film alludes to how the Soviet system envisioned a new outlook on the role of women in society. It suggests that women workers were now “represented at all fields and levels of the economy and culture.” It also gives examples of how, in the aftermath of the Nazi invasion, “Soviet women had no problem taking over the control and the operation of over 60 per cent of the industry in Russia.” This power, the film concludes, “enabled the country to effectively mobilize its resources against Nazi Germany.”

Clearly, however, the movement that at one point had been instigated by the Communist Party and the Popular Front did not conceive of the fight for women’s equality as part of an independent “women’s agenda” per se. Most labour and left wing activists and intellectuals looked at the issue of women’s equality as integral to the more encompassing goal of the social and economic liberation of the entire society. The 1992 independent film *Rebel Girls* (T.J. Roberts) presents an elaborate account of the political discourse of left-wing women labour activists of the period and how they looked at their own struggles, both as women and as workers.<sup>20</sup> The struggle for women’s equality was seen as an element that supplemented, rather than displaced, the “strategic priority” of liberating the entire society. As such, many NFB films that, on the one hand, promoted values of cooperation, social change, democracy, and labour rights would, on the other, show blatant insensitivity and sometimes total disregard towards the multiple forms of oppression suffered by working-class women.



Nevertheless, the discourse on women workers during the war as presented in many NFB films, in fact represented a watershed in how Canadians traditionally saw women on the screens of their film theatres. For the first time in Canadian history, NFB's films offered images of women performing outside of the traditional private spheres of their homes. These films also presented women playing new roles within the work force beyond nurturing babies and attending to the needs of their husbands and families. In contrast to what was being produced in Hollywood, much of which objectified women sexually or idealized them as mothers, daughters and wives, NFB films presented a different picture that was, at least, more reflective of the reality of women's roles during the war period. In this regard the hegemonic film discourse on women was being challenged not only on the level of how they were represented, but more importantly, in connection with providing an alternative perspective on the nature of patriarchy. Canadians were confronted with the issue of women's liberation not simply as an ethical or moral question, but as an economic, social and political question that concerned the entire society. It is within this context that NFB films effectively bestowed a counter-hegemonic outlook on one of the fundamental cornerstones in patriarchy's ideological pretext: its emphasis on the gender-based division of labour.

