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University of Calgary Press

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Khouri, M. "Filming politics: communism and the portrayal of the working class at the National Film Board of Canada, 1939-1946". Series: Cinemas off centre series; 1912-3094: No. 1. University of Calgary Press, Calgary, Alberta, 2007.

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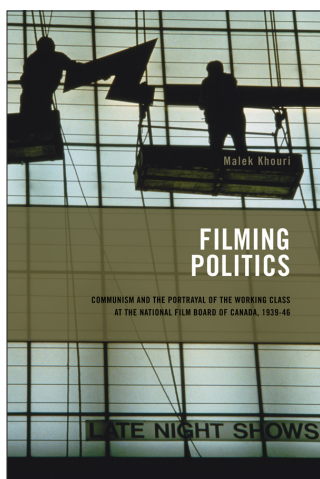
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## FILMING POLITICS: COMMUNISM AND THE PORTRAYAL OF THE WORKING CLASS AT THE NATIONAL FILM BOARD OF CANADA, 1939-46

by Malek Khouri

ISBN 978-1-55238-670-5

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## 7 WORKERS, DEMOCRACY AND SOCIAL WELFARE IN NFB FILMS BETWEEN 1942 AND 1945

Several NFB films from 1942 to 1945 tackled issues with direct impact on management-labour relations, social welfare, housing, and labour safety standards and regulations. As they contemplated the post-war future these films evoked past experiences. They argued that reorganizing society should account for and try to overcome mistakes that hindered progress and led to social and political tensions. The films concluded that there was a need to adopt new methods that specifically addressed economic and social concerns. One important proposal was creating and maintaining a structure for democratic partnership between labour, management and the government. This partnership was seen as beneficial to the entire society.

As I noted earlier, films dealing with labour issues emphasized the link between the general goals of social, political and economic welfare and the implementation of ideas such as collective planning, control and utilization of social and economic resources. In this regard, charting efficient and well-organized methods to address social and economic questions was considered crucial for encouraging stronger participation by workers in the political leadership of the country. This concurrently meant that better living and working conditions for the entire society represented a logical alternative to the old and chaotic methods of past pre-war practices.

This chapter focuses on how the notion of democracy in the workplace was applied through the creation of the Labour-Management Committees. The role of the cooperative movement and the use of film and media as instruments for democratic practice will also be addressed as two major elements in NFB films' propositions. Special attention will be given to a group of discussion films that were specifically produced to encourage workers' and communities' participation in pondering social and political problems. Finally, a separate section will appraise how NFB films tackled the issue of veterans returning to Canada after the end of World War II and how this impacted the notion of post-war economic and social reconstruction.

## WORKERS' ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL CONDITIONS

NFB films dealt with the immediate concerns of workers by way of contemplating plans for post-war reconstruction. Social and economic problems facing workers comprised an important topic in NFB films. The war in Europe necessitated taking urgent looks at inflation, job security, health, work safety and housing. In response, many films focused on the benefits of collective economic and social planning and the need to coordinate workers' energies in the post-war reconstruction process.

Films stressed that new approaches should replace old chaotic ways of dealing with problems, which only focused on solutions that could be brought about by relying on private corporate competition and interests.<sup>1</sup> As they dealt with the everyday problems and concerns of average workers and citizens, these films favoured taking a socially responsible attitude, not only as a basis for improving the overall economic performance of the country (i.e., in the context of identifying and allocating resources according to specific economic priorities), but also as a politico-ethical alternative aimed at strengthening the role and position of labour within the political process.

Fighting inflation represented an important topic for labour at the time. With the economy in full swing and with near-full-employment conditions, there was also relative shortage in consumer goods – stemming largely from the shift towards producing war-related goods and machinery – and inflation was becoming a potentially serious problem. To sustain some stability in the level of advances made in labour's living standards during the war, the trade union movement reluctantly accommodated the government's wartime price- and wage-control policy. For their part, NFB films reflected the anxiety about rampant and unchecked inflation. Several films by animator Philip Ragan dealt expressly with this topic.

*Prices in Wartime* (1942), for example, emphasized the role of government and the Prices and Trade Board in helping sustain the value of wage increases achieved during the war, which resulted in workers' improved living standards. Another short film titled *If* (1942) argued that if wartime controls were to be relaxed, the vicious spiral of inflation would threaten the entire economy. The film underlined the need to deal flexibly and differentially with the conditions created under wartime. It stressed that under a war situation, bidding, for example, raises the prices of goods that are in high demand. As a result, steps should be taken to raise the wages of workers to meet higher prices. This, the film argued, could result in higher cost of production and in inflation spiralling out of control. Several other films by Ragan, including 1942's *Story of Wartime Controls* and *Story of Wartime Shortage*, and the 1944 film *How Prices Could Rise*, offered similar arguments.

Another animated film that tackles the problem of inflation is Jim MacKay's *Bid It Up Sucker* (1944). The film tells the story of an auctioneer who manages to sell a basket of goods worth under \$10 for \$35. This film, however, pushes further the discussion on inflation by demonstrating how through bidding up of consumer prices, rampant capitalist market forces could trigger economic crises. Equally interesting is the film's depiction of a lone protester who constantly tries to interrupt and warn against the danger of the whole bidding process but is finally thrown out of the auction room! The same theme is relayed in another MacKay film, *Joe Dope Helps Cause Inflation* (1944). This two-minute film (among the first cel-animated films ever to be produced by the Board) once again warns against manipulating prices during wartime.

The issue of inflation, however, was not the only concern raised by NFB films. Job security, and the need to provide social and economic safeguards against future unemployment, comprised another important theme in a number of films. After years of labour protests that advocated creating a national program of economic relief for unemployed workers, the government finally legislated the Unemployment Insurance Act (UI) in 1943. NFB films showed exuberant support for the program, which had been on the list of demands of the Canadian labour movement and the Canadian left since the early twentieth century.

In *A Man and His Job* (1943), Alistair M. Taylor depicts the story of an unemployed Canadian worker. The story spans the man's years of unemployment in the Depression through 1943, the year when UI was implemented. It compares the inefficiency of dealing with the problem of unemployment without the intervention of the government and leaving it to the whims of market forces with the benefits of implementing public policies that socially and economically maximize the utilization of society's labour resources. The film concludes that the Unemployment Act represented a major step towards achieving the second alternative. As a result of the new Act, the film argues, Canadian workers would become the beneficiaries of a national program that for the first time in Canada's history made the problem of unemployment a collective social concern and responsibility.

Other films discuss ways of improving the conditions of workers both inside and outside the workplace. In Gudrun Parker's *Before They Were Six* (1943), we are introduced to a day care program for children of working women. The film demonstrates how for a very small sum of money this program allows a working mother to leave her child at a day nursery where trained staff offer meals and supervise the health and play of children. Parker presents the centre as an example of how communities and governments can and should cooperate to create and maintain programs that are of extreme benefit to society both during and after the war. Another set of films stresses

the urgent need to take concrete steps that would ensure workers' well-being at work and at home. Issues of physical and mental health as well the safety of workers in the workplace are considered here fundamental and therefore should become the collective responsibility of the entire society.

In *Thought for Food* (1943, Stanley Jackson), the emphasis is on providing soldiers, industrial workers and other employees with adequate nutrition to keep them in healthy physical condition. Another film, *When Do We Eat?* (1944, no credit), points out that in many cases workers are forced to eat their meals at varied hours and under difficult and stressful conditions. The film warns that numerous industrial accidents resulting from such situations can be prevented, and the illness rate can be substantially reduced, if workers ate "the proper types of food to maintain maximum strength and energy." It then urges the managers and personnel supervisors in factories and other workplace locations to build or improve their employees' eating facilities, and wherever possible provide them with well-run canteens. Stressing the health of workers as a critical element in maintaining a strong society and economy is also the topic of the Discussion Preface and trailers of two films; one American, entitled *When Work is Done*, and another from the Soviet Union, *Sports in the USSR*. Both films focus on the importance of worker's physical and mental fitness and advocate involving workers in recreational programs and activities and providing them with adequate sports facilities.

*After Work* (1945, producer Stanley Hawes) also illustrates the need to offer recreational facilities to help keep a healthy work force. It argues that a "working partnership between management, civic groups and workers" is essential to provide the support needed for building recreational centres for dancing, singing, handicrafts, swimming, and developing extensive sports facilities. In one episode of the 1943 series *Workers at War* we are introduced to a fitness class in a Vancouver factory designed to help workers keep fit and healthy. The film suggests that implementing such activities into the daily schedules of workers helps them maintain better and more alert job performances.

Another particularly important issue in NFB wartime films is the problem of working-class housing. The urgent need to alleviate shortages in working-class housing was also a critical demand among communist, Popular Front and labour supporters. In a speech in front of the House of Commons, Communist MP Fred Rose alerted his colleagues that the housing shortage in urban centres such as Montreal resulted in an alarmingly hazardous health situation. In the working-class Cartier district, Rose pointed out, "ninety-three out of a hundred thousand die of tuberculosis as compared with twenty in Notre Dame de Grace and forty in Westmount." He then reminded the

government that under the War Measures Act it did have the power to effectively deal with the situation:

We have power to build the five thousand homes which I would say are badly needed in the city of Montreal.... The government must have the power... to undertake a big building scheme, which is very greatly needed. Men are being laid off in factories; materials are available, and such a scheme could be undertaken to-day. In addition to anything done to provide people with houses which they may rent at the rates they are able to pay, we should also make it possible for people to build homes. We have a credit bank for business men, so why not extend credit to people for this purpose. Many aspire to build their homes; this is their dream, so let us help make that dream come true.<sup>2</sup>

Building new housing for working families was clearly deemed by communists and their supporters as a socially and economically feasible alternative to current shortages and degenerating housing conditions.

The NFB film *Wartime Housing* (1943, Graham McInnes) illustrates how rapid wartime industrial expansion pressed the need to build decent housing for workers. It explains that due to the major industrial growth during the war, many workers were moving to major urban centres. Some of these centres had no settlement prior to the new factory construction. To deal with the problem, the film contemplates building small pre-fabricated homes that can be constructed quickly and efficiently. Another film illustrates the possibilities that come with organizing labour resources to efficiently build houses for workers. In *Building a House* (1945, Beth Zinkan) the idea of collective work and using more labour power is considered to be a more efficient way of dealing with the housing crisis. The film poses its argument in the form of a school question: “if nine men can build a house in sixty-four days, how long will it take seventy-two men to build a house?” The question is answered by demonstrating that a prefabricated house can be erected in a single day by using the labour force of a higher number of workers. The workers are then shown laying the groundwork, and doing the carpentry, brick-laying, and painting, and later bringing in the furniture to the house. The film concludes that a collective effort and efficient utilization of the work force not only provide work for people but also supply the grounds for better living conditions for workers, their families and ultimately the entire society. It then reiterates that the efficiency of coordinated socialized work can also be a feasible alternative in other areas of social and economic development: “One man’s work depends on another’s man work, not only men working directly on a house but also those in factories, mines, etc.”

During the period between 1942 and 1945, many NFB films consistently stressed the value of work in producing material goods that are essential to fulfill the needs of people. These films saw economic efficacy in the idea of utilizing collective energy and resources for the benefit of the entire society. Efficient social and economic planning and the equitable and just distribution of wealth and resources were presented as rational alternatives to the inefficiency of the old methods of production and distribution that relied solely on values of individual and private economic profit. In particular, NFB films argued for the need to share and organize society's resources to meet the challenges resulting from the shortage of goods caused by the war.

*What Makes Us Grow* (1943, no credit) deals with the priority of providing essential nutritional diets for children. It demonstrates how vitamin deficiencies have long-term negative effects on youth. In *Children First* (1944), Evelyn Cherry discusses the value of milk and other dairy products in children's daily diets, particularly in the context of widespread war shortages in other consumer goods. The film focuses on the need to organize the use of milk in a manner that corresponds with the needs of society. It suggests that providing sufficient quantities of milk to children, teenage youngsters and expectant mothers should take precedence in consumption plans. The main message is that sharing is sensible and is a socially and economically more feasible option than selfish or chaotic individualism and over-consumption. The film repeatedly points out that by sharing we ensure that "there will be enough to go around." It also argues that it makes no sense for any society to "waste its selfish luxuries in a world filled with hungry people." *School Lunches* (1944, Evelyn Cherry) presents another appeal to support a publicly sponsored program that provides nutritional school lunches to children in the rural areas of the country.

A similar sentiment is expressed in the 1944 film *Six Slices a Day* (no credit). The film urges Canadians to consume more nutritious cereal products so that other types of foods that take more time and effort to produce will be available for use overseas where war has devastated the agricultural sectors of several countries. In *A Friend for Supper* (1944, producer Graham McInnes), an appeal is made so that children do not waste food. It points out that other children in Russia, China and in occupied Europe are going hungry, and that it is indeed our responsibility to ensure that these allies who have been sacrificing on an even more extensive level as a result of being at the forefront of fighting fascism are supported in their hour of need. Clearly here, social responsibility is considered not simply as a Canadian concern but as a matter of international significance. Expressing solidarity with the needy on a world level is itself regarded as contingent on our ability to more efficiently identify our own production and distribution priorities and our methods of consumption. The above-



mentioned films argue that workers and other sections of society would all benefit when a serious effort is made to coordinate the “cultivation” of Canada’s social and economic resources, and when society deals cooperatively with both its pressing and long-term problems.

## **DEMOCRACY AND THE ROLE OF THE LABOUR-MANAGEMENT COMMITTEES**

A major set of NFB films during the same period was dedicated to the topic of labour and the decision-making process within the workplace. Films proposed and supported the creation of social and political partnerships, which in addition to involving labour would also include management and government. This partnership, the films suggested, would help improve working and living conditions for workers and, in the process, would meet the urgent demands of wartime industrial production. Films also argued for strengthening democracy in the workplace by expanding consultation and decision-making practices by workers on the grassroots level.

An important aspect of the NFB’s discourse on the partnership between workers and business related to the role of the newly created Labour-Management Committees (LMC). As we saw earlier, support for these committees in NFB films has been the subject of criticism by some film critics. In a nutshell, some critics considered the creation of committees an ominous indicator of how business and government were able to force labour into submission to capitalist over-exploitation.<sup>3</sup> The main problem with those criticisms, however, is that they underestimate the specific conditions and the historical moment within which these committees were implemented. Another problem originates in these critics’ mystified and largely narrow view of the nature of working-class counter-hegemonic action as consensual revolutionary practice (a ‘war of position,’ as Gramsci would argue), rather than a “war of manoeuvre” aimed towards overthrowing the capitalist system. With consensual practice the main goal is to broaden the appeal of, and show in practice that implementing alternative approaches to present forms of organizing society and the means of production are indeed possible and feasible and could eventually work better for the subaltern. As such, support for the creation of the LMCs exceeded the working class’s own realm of influence and/or the Communist Party’s base of political support; in hindsight it incorporated the support of a socially and politically heterogeneous mass movement that included much broader sections of society, and hence allowed the idea of labour’s

participation in the managing of economic resources to become more plausible among greater number of people.

The creation of the LMCs helped offer a counter-hegemonic perspective vis-à-vis the role of workers in society. Within the framework of the new committees the role of the working class was acknowledged as a central, albeit not necessarily *the* central, element in generating successful economic performance. Hence, the implementation of the LMC structure was an acknowledgment of the need to effectively involve the working class in the management of the production process. The partnership between labour and business essentially became a tool that working people hoped would reverse business's unilateral control over the operational and the decision-making processes in the workplace.

Creating the Labour-Management Committees was partly a result of the efforts by an advocacy policy within the labour movement that stressed unity between various social and political forces in the fight against fascism. This policy echoed how left-wing supporters (particularly supporters of the Communist Party and its Popular Front strategy) identified the political tasks of the working class during the period of fighting fascism. In a speech in the House of Commons, Dorise Nielsen reminded her colleagues of the significance of labour-management partnerships in strengthening the fighting front against fascism:

To-day labour is asking for partnership with industry in production, not because labour is demanding merely on its own behalf a share of what the pickings might be, far from it, but because the men and women who form our labour forces realized long ago the danger of fascism. They started to fight it long before this government ever took up the case of democracy against fascism. These men and women who work are anxious to have partnership with industry in production.

On the effect of such partnership on improving the level of industrial production, Nielsen stated:

It is apparent that in their own factories [trade unions] are undertaking to devise ways and means whereby a greater output can be accomplished. If only the labour forces of this country could be granted a little more of the partnership idea with industry in production, I feel convinced that production would go up by leaps and bounds.<sup>4</sup>

Big business's consent to the creation of these committees, however, was not totally voluntary; it was achieved under pressure by an increasingly well-organized labour movement. It was also reached as a result of the government's own preoccupation with maintaining labour peace during the war.

Some NFB films were specifically made to promote the role of the Labour-Management Committees while others were simply part of Discussion Prefaces or trailers to other films. In both cases, films viewed labour-management partnership as an indication of the feasibility of consultative democratic practices within the workplace. The partnership between labour and management was also portrayed as an effective tool for initiating and successfully building projects that would benefit the entire society.

In *The New Pattern* (1944, Stanley Hawes and Fred Lasse), the role of the LMCs in Britain is given as an example of how cooperation results in launching and accomplishing major projects. The film argues that the role played by the committees was behind the successful building of an urgently needed airfield. It also shows the process of electing members of one LMC committee and gives a glimpse into the way in which discussions were conducted and decisions made. The film also demonstrates how suggestions and proposals were incorporated and dealt with, and how this was reflected positively on the level of production efficiency and quality. It also argues that the committees encouraged and maintained a high level of ongoing democratic grassroots participation by workers, which in itself improved the committee's performance and the success of the project.

In *Democracy At Work* (1944), Stanley Hawes discusses the production of weapons in Britain during the war. The film argues that Britain's ability to maintain a high level of industrial production was largely due to the implementation of partnership agreements between the labour movement and the employers' federations. *Partners in Production* (1944, producer Stanley Hawes) discusses how coordination between management and labour helped readjust the priorities of production during the war in a way that increased the volume of industrial output. Two other Discussion Prefaces deal with similar themes and include a presentation by a government official on the issue of labour-management cooperation followed by a related discussion by a group of industrial workers.

The 1945 film *Labour Looks Ahead* (producer Stanley Hawes) surveys workers' achievements during the war in connection with the creation of the Labour-Management Production Committees. It compares these committees to other organs that encouraged and served similar goals such as the Wartime Labour Relations Board, the International Labour Office, and the World Trade Union. The presence and equal

participation of workers within these structures is offered as a basis for developing a new kind of relationship between workers, employers and government, as well as among workers of various countries.

In *Work and Wages* (1945, producer Guy Glover) the success of the experiment of labour and management cooperation during the war is rendered as an example for the need to develop this relationship even after the end of the war. *Partners in Production* (1944, producer Stanley Hawes) discusses a similar topic while placing more emphasis on the successful integration of women workers into war factories. The film presents the goal of total democracy within the workplace as an essential ingredient in waging a successful war against fascism. It also refers to the LMCs success and effectiveness within the coal-mining industry. *Partners* points out that this success testifies to the importance of cooperation between all constituent elements of the production process.

The LMCs, however, had limited success in achieving their ambitious goals. As the war neared its end the Committees became a major liability and source of inconvenience to big business. The committees would become among the first casualties of the post-war era when business would regain its full pre-war level of control over the operation of industrial production processes. For workers, the creation of the committees reflected the fruition of their struggle to affirm a new role for themselves. Labour conceived these committees as instruments by which it could at least assume an acknowledged position in the management of the workplace, including the decision-making processes vis-à-vis production priorities, work conditions, personnel problems, etc. For the left, this new labour role was considered a step in the right direction that could eventually help demonstrate the feasibility of its strategic propositions to increase working-class involvement in managing the means of production and, by extension, in setting the agenda for operating the country's economy. As such, the committees offered a counter-hegemonic alternative value system to the commonsensical rationalization of the capitalist division of labour between, on the one hand, management and ownership, and on the other, waged labour. In other words, the committees brought the working class into a sphere, which – in the context of capitalist hegemony – solely belonged to the capitalist class.

## THE COOPERATIVE MOVEMENT

The issue of democracy was also discussed in connection with cooperative control and utilization of the country's economic resources. A number of NFB films particularly praised the role of the cooperative movement in advancing a spirit of solidarity among people during hardships, and pointed out its effectiveness in building social and economic prosperity for working people. As with films dealing with the Labour-Management Committees, those dealing with the cooperative movement basically affirmed the values of organizational efficiency, the sharing of resources, and common social goals, and presented them as politico-ethical alternatives for building society and enhancing the economy.

A good number of films focus particularly on the cooperative movement on the Canadian east coast. *Grand Manan* (1943, written by Margaret Perry) illustrates how people of this New Brunswick island earn their living from fishing in the Bay of Fundy. The emphasis is on the collective methods used by the island's fishermen, and the interdependency that involves the people of the community. This mutually supportive method of work and lifestyle is featured as a dynamic that has also helped sustain and enrich the community's cultural heritage.

In another film, *Trappers of the Sea* (1945, Margaret Perry) we learn about the lobster fishing industry in Nova Scotia. A major emphasis here is put on the role of the cooperative movement in improving the economic performance of communities, and in helping them sustain their interactive social and cultural heritage. A keen appreciation of community sharing and collective control over resources is shown in connection with its effect on other aspects of social life on the Canadian east coast. Margaret Perry's 1943 film *Prince Edward Island* offers a glimpse of the Island's history and includes an overview of its social and economic development. The early days of the island's history are described in the context of how wealthy English proprietors owned all the land while Scots, English and Irish immigrants came as tenants and worked without any claim to property. After Confederation, big landowners were forced to sell, and the farmers became owners of their own land. The film stresses that farmers and fishermen of the island later maintained a cooperative and credit union system to help them develop "better processing and marketing" of the island's resources.

The film uses a historical analysis of a specific community that draws a picture of the class dynamics of its economic development. In this regard it points out the historical specificity of the class-based form of economy, and contemplates the possibility of its overhaul. Given contemporary debates around class, capitalism and socialism, in the emphasis on dealing with the social dynamics of the island's history,

the film essentially offers a dialectical and thoroughly political approximation of history. Ironically, today's NFB website blurb totally deprives the film of its ideological significance by identifying it simply as one that "offers a look at Canada's smallest province, Prince Edward Island." The blurb continues, "known worldwide for its potatoes, the islanders are expert lobster fishermen as well as world leaders in raising foxes." It then describes how the film also offers a glimpse of the famous Green Gables house as well as the legislature building where Confederation was born.

A similar theme is alluded to in what is probably the only film of the period to deal with a mainly Quebec-related working-class setting and topic, which also involves a filmmaker from Quebec. Jean Palardy's *Gaspé Cod Fishermen* (1944) describes how a collective effort "brings together the people of Grande-Rivière on the Gaspé Peninsula to catch, prepare, and sell the cod upon which they depend for food and income." The work of members of the Grand Rivière Cooperatives is depicted as an example of the efficacy of a socialized organization of production. The film illustrates the joint work made by members of the community from when they set out to fish through to the point when they begin to organize the distribution and sale of their products. It demonstrates how this work constitutes the main element of success in keeping the community united and economically self-reliant. It also depicts further aspects that extend the community's collective practices and control to the town's co-op store, which provides it with most of its daily living needs. Palardy also describes facets of the grassroots political democracy as practised by the community, pointing out its utilization of collective discussion and decision-making practices. As such, the community articulates new forms of "building democracy into their own way of life," the film argues.

*Lessons in Living* (1944, Bill MacDonald) describes the life in the British Columbia town of Lantzville, where a community composed of people from different ethnic backgrounds works in various economic sectors such as farming, fishing, lumber and railroad building. The community pulls together to improve the town's public school. They transform an adjoining barn to serve simultaneously as a community hall for the parents, a school gymnasium and a workshop for the farm-mechanics class. With the improvements made on the building the whole school program is broadened and the community as a whole has expanded resources; "pulling together can achieve anything," the film commentary suggests.

Philip Ragan's animated film *He Plants for Victory* (1943) tells the story of a man named Plugger who organizes his neighbours to cultivate vegetables in an urban vacant lot. A few weeks later, when his wife looks sadly at the results of her isolated one-person farming, Plugger points out to her how the cooperative garden in the neighbourhood,

with its shared tools, seed and experience, produced enough vegetables for all members of the co-op. Collective work is once again presented as means for increasing productivity. Furthermore, organized collective forms of production are perceived as alternatives to individual, and, possibly by extension, capitalist mode of production. Another film, *The People's Bank* (1943, Gudrun Bjerring), delineates a history of the Credit Union movement and suggests ways of organizing these unions. The film praises credit unions as options that offer communities new financial opportunities that, on the one hand, are owned by them, and on the other are capable of addressing their own needs and concerns rather than those of bankers from outside these communities. Once again, what we have here is a potentially bold ideological statement that can only be interpreted as an argument which, at the very least, looks unfavourably at one of capitalism's most sacred institutions, the banking system.

## **WORKERS, MEDIA AND DEMOCRATIC ACTIVISM**

Various NFB films focused on the significance of using media as a tool to advocate grassroots political discussion and interaction. In particular, they perceived film and other new media outlets such as radio as apparatuses that could be employed to encourage workers and other citizens to discuss problems at work, as well as national and international politics and affairs. As such, these films saw the use of media as a tool for discussing labour and other issues as a practice that provides for a stronger basis for a grassroots participatory democracy.

Large numbers of NFB films used a relatively new film forum referred to as Discussion Films. These consisted of three-minute sketches where several people engage in an informal discussion about specific themes. Most of these films were prepared as trailers or prefaces to other film titles. Rather than promoting specific opinions, Discussion Films were intended to provoke grassroots deliberations on various topics including those relating to labour and work. Some of these films incorporated preliminary presentations or interventions by labour activists on other NFB productions or recent British or American movies. Others featured appearances by government officials. Occasionally they would also present shop-floor discussions among workers dealing with issues ranging from workplace problems to international politics.

Unfortunately, most of these discussion trailers have been lost and therefore it is hard to fully evaluate their actual significance. However, some accounts by contemporary filmmakers who took part in making these films allude to facets of their

ideological importance. In his book on Grierson, James Beveridge quotes Donald W. Buchanan's 1944 article "The Projection of Canada." The article designates some of the implications associated with producing and utilizing the discussion films:

A new movie technique, however, is proving effective in encouraging these and other audiences to come forth with their own opinions. This technique consists briefly in the presentation of a three-minute "discussion movie" in which four people appear on the screen in an informal argument centering on some topical theme. The National Film Board has now made "trailers" of this nature to follow the movies *Battle of the Harvests*, *Forward Commandos*, *Inside Fighting Russia*, and *Battle Is Their Birthright*. The last one has been particularly effective and has called forth much debate on the place of youth in modern society.

In such ways the motion picture with its visual impact become a rally to social discussion. It can relate one part of the nation to the other, as in *Coal Face, Canada*; it can make local problems fit into the scheme of work events, as in *Battle of the Harvests*; it can serve as a spur to group activity, as the *People's Bank*.<sup>5</sup>

Such an approach, Buchanan suggests, brings an ongoing living quality to the film as a tool that encourages social and political activism:

That is how the value of the Canadian documentary movie appears, not as an entity in itself, but as part of a larger entity. Those who direct, photograph, edit, and prepare a film for 16 mm distribution, are only the first participants in its creation as a living object. The men and women who finally bring it to life and useful activity are those who project that particular movie; in some small hall, some factory or club room, and so relate its values to local needs and aspirations.<sup>6</sup>

Discussion Films (the majority of the films in the other discussion series *Getting the Most out of a Film* were produced between 1944 and 1946) incorporated a wide range of topics that in addition to tackling the war-mobilization efforts also dealt with issues facing working-class communities. Issues concerning workers in the agricultural sectors were also introduced as part of discussions that were pertinent to the entire society. All in all the trailers depicted discussions on problems in the workplace, labour and management partnerships, relations between urban and rural workers, and labour union coordination on local, national and international levels.

The topic of economic injustice inherent in capitalist free market, for example, was presented in a trailer to the American short documentary *Story with Two Endings* (Lee



Strasberg, 1945). The film depicts the disastrous result of runaway prices following the First World War and warns Americans against repeating the crisis as the Second World War nears an end. In another trailer, *Tyneside Story* (1944), Stanley Hawes depicts members of a Toronto-based trade union local as they discuss potential problems in post-war employment. The trailer is based on a British film of the same title. Another trailer presents several union members as they discuss the British film *Second Freedom* (1945, Fred Lasse). In the trailer, workers express interest in creating a Canadian social- and health-security system that guarantees the minimum economic and social needs of Canadians. In another, a group of farmers and industrial workers jointly discuss the issues raised in the film *Valley of the Tennessee* (Alexander Hammid, 1945). Among the subjects considered is the co-dependent relationship between rural and industrial workers, rural land rehabilitation, and the improvement of rural living. In *Farm Plan* (1944) agricultural production figures for 1943 are recorded and compared to those of 1944. Farmers are encouraged to discuss and elaborate on plans to meet new essential requisites for wartime agricultural production. Other trailers dealing with labour issues include *Canadian Labour Meets in Annual Conventions* (1944), which features speeches by trade unionists discussing workers' rights and responsibilities.

Discussion films also dealt with the war situation and contemplated the role of workers in the post-war period. They discussed the need to allow workers and the labour movement to become politically more involved in domestic and world affairs. In a trailer for the NFB film *Now the Peace* (1945, producer Stanley Hawes), workers from various Vancouver-based trade unions express their hope that, through economic and political cooperation, the newly established United Nations will be able to reduce the threat of war in the future. They also suggest that international peace and cooperation are topics of vital concern for workers around the world. In a trailer titled *UNRRA – In the Wake of the Armies* (1944, producer Stanley Hawes), trade unionists discuss the work of the UN Relief and Rehabilitation Administration. Discussants stress the importance of joint international cooperation as the basis for the success of humanitarian relief efforts.

The use of media as an interactive discussion tool to deal with issues of social and economic development is also dealt with in a film about the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC). The film concentrates on the role of the CBC in building links between Canadians from different social backgrounds and from different parts of the country. *Voice of Action* (1942, James Beveridge) emphasizes the role of radio as a democratic mediator which allows people across the country to share their views and contemplate their future. It points out the network's role in offering medical advice and personal news broadcasts to remote northern outposts. Furthermore the

film describes how the CBC network provides extensive educational forums on labour and farming. The film's opening scene refers to the central role played by workers in providing the material base for victory against fascism. After depicting some of the forums and discussion circles that the CBC helped organize around the country on several occasions, the film stresses that the network has a responsibility to contribute to the country's fight "to help create a future where the earth and its wealth would become the common heritage of all." The role of media here is clearly seen in the context of its social relevance. It is viewed beyond its entertainment value and as such is mainly regarded as vehicle for building bridges between people. Equally important, the film proposes a new role for the CBC: an instigator of political debates. As such the film boldly advocates that this institution should not simply function as tool for government propaganda. Instead, the film proposes that the CBC contribute to discussions such as how to implement the concept which advocates "sharing the wealth of the earth by all," a finely tuned proposition for the network to facilitate more debate on an ideological concept which directly impacts the discussion on capitalism and socialism.

The significance of the discussion trailers' impact on the political culture of the day is most clearly manifest in their encouragement of debates involving contentions that themselves had major political and ideological connotations. Firstly, these trailers pointed out the prospect of opening media outlets to political debates. In essence, they proposed that public space should also become a space for political action. Secondly, they advocated that workers find their place at the centre of these debates and actions; given their major contributions to the war effort and to creating the country's wealth, workers were reciprocally encouraged to express their opinions about how the workplace *and* the country as whole are managed and run. Thirdly, these trailers addressed a clearly counter-hegemonic outlook on what constituted democratic practice. While the tendency within capitalist democracies is to emphasize elections as the main arena of political democratic practice (or at least the only ones that really count), the weight in the films was given to grassroots political engagement as an ongoing process that surpassed both the temporal and spatial specificity of official election campaigns. Lastly, by encouraging the idea of using government-owned media as an arena for political discussions that reflected more than the views of the government, these trailers projected the possibility of altering the role and nature of media as a political tool. In other words, these trailers contributed to affirming as common sense the idea that since people own these institutions it is therefore normal that they have a stake in how they are run, and what they deal with.

Looking at some of these propositions (particularly the ideas of institutional political 'neutrality' in public debates, and the need for government accountability in publicly owned and administered institutions) from today's vantage point, it is hard

to fully appreciate their full ideological significance. Perhaps part of the reason why they are not fully esteemed has to do with the extent to which such propositions have now become integrated and assimilated aspects of our Canadian commonsensical values. Indeed these ideas have now become the standard expectations from government-run public institutions. Today, debates are centred on *how* such ideas are practically implemented rather than on *if* they should be implemented. Looking at the context within which these ideas emerged and the political dynamics behind their materialization helps us understand the dialectics of counter-hegemony and how it affects political and ideological perceptions.

## RETURN TO JOBS

As the war neared its end, concern was raised about the future of war veterans who by then were already beginning to return to Canada. Coinciding with the veterans' return, major changes were also taking shape in the Canadian economy; they included shifting the production of war machinery and munitions to a substantially lower gear.<sup>7</sup> This affected the composition of the Canadian work force inherited from the war, and pushed for structural adjustments in the country's economic and industrial priorities. Securing jobs for returning war veterans, many of them victims of unemployment and poverty before the war and during the Depression, represented an urgent and critical task for the government. In contrast to the shortage in labour capacity during the war, the sudden overflow of returning workers was becoming one of the main problems facing the government in the early post-war period.<sup>8</sup>

For their part, left-wing labour unions and the Communist Party advocated maintaining the overall economic production levels achieved during the war. They suggested that Canadian living standards had risen, and that a sudden reversal of this trend would result in dangerously high unemployment and would eventually lead to economic recession. Based on this view, these groups proposed maintaining earlier levels of economic production and creating new government programs to modernize and refashion Canada's economy. They also suggested measures to build and improve infrastructural facilities throughout the country. These proposals were viewed as a means to avoid future social upheavals and to move the Canadian economy in a socially progressive direction. In a speech in the House of Commons, lone Communist MP Fred Rose presented his party's view on the issue:

We should draw up a huge public works plan to include such things as the development of the St. Lawrence waterway, the development of our natural resources, the modernization and reconstruction of our cities, the abolition of slums, the rebuilding of libraries and hospitals, and the development of modern highways to give our people work. Again I may be asked where the money is to be found. Well, during this war we have proved that we can find the money if we look for it and work hard enough to get it.<sup>9</sup>

Rose was referring to the emergency economic measures taken during the war, most of which encouraged the creation and expansion of specific industries such as the military. Rose was hoping for similar approaches to be implemented in relation to peacetime priorities and needs.

The communist left and its allies claimed that if the government adopted the task of modernizing and reconstructing Canada's economy according to social priorities, and if it initiated programs that efficiently reutilized the resources that were put into the war effort into abolishing slums and building homes, hospitals, schools, libraries and recreational facilities, the situation caused by the return of soldiers could be effectively dealt with in a manner that benefited all Canadians by creating full employment. Other funds could be allocated to rebuild and extend Canada's economic infrastructure and develop Canada's natural resources.<sup>10</sup>

A substantial number of NFB films dealt with the veteran's return to Canada and the potential danger of acute job shortages. These films advocated social and economic solutions that would guarantee a smooth shift into the post-war period. The approach put forward in these films reiterated the general framework proposed by the communist left and its labour and left-wing supporters.

In *Veterans in Industry* (1945, Fred Lasse) the emphasis is on coalescing the goal of reinstating veterans in their original jobs with providing these workers with adequate retraining. Developing workers' skills would eventually lead to satisfying the requirements of the post-war period, the film argues. Other films like *Looking for a Job* (1945, producer Nicholas Balla) and *Reinstatement in Former Job* (1945, producer Jeff Hurley) survey government programs to help reassign former members of the armed services to civilian jobs. Both films affirm the need and feasibility of securing the workers' old jobs. They also assert the principle that in the end it is the responsibility of the entire society to ensure that veterans are reintegrated back into the work force and that they become full participants in building post-war peace.

In *Welcome Soldier* (1944, producer Graham McInnes) a discussion featuring a labour leader and several returning servicemen and servicewomen focuses on problems

facing veterans as they enlist in former jobs or attempt to find new ones. Once again the accent is on reaffirming belief in public responsibility towards these workers, and on the need to ensure that their welfare and future work contribution to society are not jeopardized. Similar discussion is introduced in *Veterans in Industry*, where the leader and members of the Winnipeg Trades and Labour Council suggest expanding economic growth programs to deal with the problem of reintegrating veterans into the national work force. In *Canadian Screen Magazine* numbers 1 and 7 (1945), we are introduced to programs that train veterans in the areas of building trades, haircutting, mechanics and electronics. These programs are presented as tools that can help Canada face up to the economic and social challenges of the post-war period.

*Back to Jobs* (1945, producer Nicholas Balla) focuses specifically on the possibilities associated with retraining injured war veterans. The film emphasizes the importance of providing special courses to retrain these veterans and prepare them to resume active roles in Canada's labour force. As it describes the return of workers to farms, fisheries and natural resources industries, the film stresses the need and the feasibility of initiating new programs that could help injured war veterans learn and utilize new work skills. The responsibility to undertake such initiatives, the film highlights, lies in collective cooperation between veterans, communities, government and industry. The theme of direct government involvement in helping veterans adjust to post-war conditions is presented as part of initiating programs that provide low-cost loans to workers and farmers within the agriculture sector. *Home to the Land* (1945, Stanley Jackson) describes the new Veteran Land Act, which was created specifically for the purpose of helping returning soldiers buy town lots and farms as well as farm machinery, fishing boats, building material and livestock.

In general, all NFB films dealing with the war veterans' return echoed themes proposed by the communist left, particularly in the way they stressed the government's responsibility in dealing with the unemployment issue. Clearly, however, these films were short on specifics; to begin, most them were very short (mostly two to three minutes long) and as such were hardly able to do justice to this complex issue. As explained earlier, the communist left proposed creating new jobs on the basis of a programmatic emphasis on modernizing the country's infrastructural facilities, and on identifying new industrial and economic priorities. These films did not offer or deal with such proposals and instead relied on the general affirmation of the principle of government's responsibility in alleviating the potential problem of unemployment.

## LABOUR LOOKS AHEAD

With the end of the war looming on the horizon, NFB films looked towards the future and contemplated creating a new international order founded on the ideals of social, political and economic justice and cooperation. They looked at peace as an expression of stability that could only be enhanced by eliminating poverty, social inequality, and national and racial hatreds. Reflecting upon the possibilities of the post-war era was also at the heart of how John Grierson and his executive producer Stuart Legg saw their own mission as the NFB's top executives. For these two major NFB players the post-war phase was to become the highlight of their careers at the Board, and as trend-setting filmmakers. They saw making films about unity and about the war against fascism as a prelude to work in the "more exciting" era of peace. As Gary Evans suggests:

Unlike the Germans, who believed that war made splendid propaganda, Grierson had long been committed to the Bertrand Russell maxim that peace should be made as exciting as war. As Grierson put it bluntly but privately in 1943, "I confess I can't ever get very excited about the war effort per se and feel that any information regarding it must somehow try to get behind the shot and shell. The surface values – the guns and the campaigns and the braveries and the assembly lines and the sacrifices – are, I think, taken by themselves the greatest bore on earth." Grierson had turned his eyes to peacetime information. He hoped to get relevant government departments behind such concrete themes as conservation, nutrition and people as producers and consumers, so that all the information would be tied to common ends. He foresaw in this organization more a ministry of Education than anything else.<sup>11</sup>

For their part, NFB films constantly expressed their anticipation of the new phase when they would play a part in building the new society. They also looked forward to helping forge a new era in international politics that was based on cooperation, peace and building bridges between peoples and nations. They advocated wider public involvement in discussing, implementing and advocating economic and social projects that would benefit societies and help them curtail future wars and conflicts.

In relation to labour, these films praised the role of workers in the war and promoted increasing their role in constructing the fundamental ingredients for peace: social stability, justice and prosperity. In this regard, they also urged that workers directly benefit from the fruits of peace. The effective utilization of economic and social resources during the war was seen as a demonstrated example of what could be

achieved, if emulated, when working towards a better and more equitable prosperity for humanity in the post-war era.

## **LABOUR, PEACE, AND INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION**

On the international level, the Popular Front strategy as promoted by the Canadian Communist Party prioritized continued cooperation between western allies and the Soviet Union. They considered this cooperation as fundamental to the implementation of successful progressive domestic social and economic policies.<sup>12</sup> Continued cooperation between anti-fascist countries during the war was itself seen as a guarantee for world peace and for international prosperity. In this regard, NFB films also urged sustained collaboration among Allied nations and paid special attention to advocating the building of a better relationship with the Soviet Union.

This view concurred with the outlook agreed upon by the Allies (including the Soviet Union) in the late 1943 Tehran Summit. International collaboration at that point seemed possible, and consecutive Allied summits held in Yalta, and then in Potsdam in 1945, confirmed the feasibility of a peaceful coexistence between the west and the Soviet Union. Connection between international peace and national prosperity in the post-war era was itself a recurring theme in Fred Rose's speeches in the House of Commons. In one particular speech, Rose linked international cooperation and Canadian social and economic development:

[T]here can be no prosperity for Canada in the post-war years unless international cooperation is developed to the fullest possible extent in the world. The issues of peace and prosperity are inseparably linked together. The fight for markets, which in the past has been one of the chief causes of war, can now for the first time be resolved on the basis of a new concept-planned world economic cooperation.<sup>13</sup>

A key to the success of this proposal, Rose argued, would be the joint cooperation between "capitalist democracies and the socialist Soviet Union" and the "resolving of conflict among the capitalist nations."<sup>14</sup> The argument from the left was that international cooperation, particularly between the west and the Soviet Union, would also result in a better political and economic climate for improving working-class conditions in Canada.<sup>15</sup>

Wartime NFB films emphasized the priority of working towards a safe and peaceful future for humanity. In this regard specific focus was maintained on the creation and development of the United Nations with the full participation of all countries, including the Soviet Union. This was seen as fundamental to building better world relations. Mutual respect between different social and economic systems, these films argued, would help maintain peace and international cooperation.

Of particular significance to studying how NFB films conceived of international relations in connection with the Soviet Union is Tom Daly's 1944 *Our Northern Neighbour*. The film presents a historical survey of Soviet foreign policy from 1917 through World War II and argues that it is important to create solid bases for cooperation between the west and its "Northern Neighbour." The film provides an overview of the history of the Soviet Union and describes how Soviet citizens were interested in building an alternative to the state of hunger, despair and economic ruin that characterized their lives prior to the Revolution. It concludes with a message made on behalf of Soviet citizens: "we seek the cooperation of all nations, large and small, to eliminate tyranny and slavery, oppression and intolerance." The theme of post-war cooperation between Canada and the Soviet Union is also discussed in *Global Air Routes* (1944, Stuart Legg). The film tackles the subject of developing air transportation routes during wartime and suggests that considering the success of that experience nations should articulate new approaches to conducting international civil aviation. Critical to such development, the film argues, would be to ensure a higher level of coordination and unity between different nations. The main emphasis in regard to the "new approach to civil aviation" is to create and utilize new air routes connecting the Soviet Union with Canada and the U.S. across the North Pole. These routes, the film suggests, would provide "free access to all and for all" and would become part of a new system "dedicated to the common interest of mankind." In *Gateway to Asia* (1945, Tom Daly), the focus is on developing high-speed planes to create new links between Canada, Russia, China, and India. The film argues that the utilization of these planes could benefit all societies involved, and provide a solid base for economic and social development.

International cooperation was also seen as an essential ingredient for building a world free from poverty, need, and inequality. In this context, the structure of the United Nations was looked at not simply as a tool to keep the peace but also as a vehicle to enhance cooperation on various social and economic issues. In *According to Need* (1944, producer Dallas Jones), the stabilization of consumer prices in Canada is portrayed as an essential step in guaranteeing an effective sharing of Canadian-produced agricultural machinery by all the Allies. The film revolves around the theme that "the needs of one are a problem of all." In *The Peace Builders* (1945, producer Alan



Field) concrete steps are proposed to the Allies and the newly established United Nations to enhance the ideas of peace and international economic cooperation. These policies would be implemented in the context of guaranteeing the internal social stability of each country. A critical aspect of this task would be to avoid “repeating the mistakes of the past.” Economic and social development on the domestic level, the film argues, help prevent international tensions and hence provide a better atmosphere for maintaining peace between nations. Dorise Nielsen’s speeches in the House of Commons repeated arguments identical to those proposed by several NFB films. Economic and social prosperity in Canada, Nielsen argued, would secure Canada’s ability to help create an atmosphere of international cooperation:

We need cooperation of the Soviet Union. We know that the Soviet Union will be one of the greatest buying nations in the world after the war, and it is imperative for us that we have markets in order that our farmers can continue, and even increase the production of food; so that we can have increased employment on our farms, and better living conditions on them; so that industrial workers and returned men can have employment, and so that our national income can be kept at high levels, or even increase.<sup>16</sup>

The theme of international stability is also presented in the context of addressing the immediate problems stemming from the war.

*Suffer Little Children* (1945, Sydney Newman) presents the case of over “60 million children in Europe who became part of a major post-war refugee dilemma.” The film discusses how clothes and toys from Canadian and American villages and towns helped bring some comfort to these children. It also describes the role of the United Nations’ Relief and Rehabilitation Administration in providing food, clothing, shelter, medical care, education and attention to victims of war. But as it argues for finding ways to deal with the situation, the film’s main focus is on finding temporary and charitable answers rather than long-term solutions.

In *UNRRA – In the Wake of the Armies* (1944, Guy Glover), trade unionists discuss the work of the UN Relief and Rehabilitation Administration and propose that international cooperation in relieving social suffering is key to world peace. In *Food: Secret of The Peace* (1945) Stuart Legg points to the main problem facing post-war liberated Europe. The film opens with scenes of the food queues and hunger riots in famine-struck areas of Europe. Starvation is a political danger, and Legg reminds us that the ascendance of fascism before the war was directly linked to the west’s inability to

deal with its own economic and social problems. The film then describes the measures taken by the Allies to deal with the problem of food shortages in Europe.

Communists and their Popular Front policies saw the participation of labour in the process of rebuilding the peace as another crucial element in post-war social and political reorganization. One aspect of labour's contribution to peace was linked to the ability to advance and affirm its own views on international politics. In a speech before the House of Commons, Fred Rose stressed the importance of bringing labour to participate directly in the San Francisco discussions on establishing the United Nations. Rose called for the inclusion of official workers' representatives from the ranks of organized labour as part of the official Canadian delegation. He argued that such a step would reflect Canada's "new spirit and give a lead to other nations to follow." Citing the role it played during the war, Rose reminded his colleagues that labour was

one of the biggest and most homogeneous groups of the Canadian population.

Labour has played a fine role in this war; labour is concerned about the future of Canada's peace and prosperity, and the organized labour movement should therefore have representation at the San Francisco conference.<sup>17</sup>

For their part, and by way of dealing with issues of international cooperation, NFB films showed a similar interest in involving workers in the process of building a new international order. In this regard, they stressed the need to carefully listen to the opinions expressed by workers in connection with international affairs.

In the film trailer *Now the Peace* (1945, producer Stuart Legg) members of various Vancouver unions discuss future world stability and ideas about building peace. Several argue that sustaining a peaceful world largely relies on guaranteeing social and economic prosperity within each society. They also suggest that mutual respect in international relations is another key to stability. The trailer depicts workers as they express hope that through economic cooperation, the newly established United Nations "would be able to reduce the threat of war and in the process increase the security and prosperity of workers everywhere." In one *Canadian Screen Magazine* program (1945) the emphasis is on how workers can directly contribute to international peace and cooperation. As an example, the film delineates how Canadian workers were building railway cars and shipping them to the Soviet Union to help rebuild the Russian transportation system.

## WORKERS IN THE POST-WAR ERA

Films also posed an acute vision of the post-war period in relation to social, economic and political development within the country. They asserted that workers needed to feel that their share of social and national wealth had indeed improved in the aftermath of the war. They also urged that working people in the new era be directly involved in a leading capacity in the process of building peace. Communists and their labour and Popular Front supporters presented a similar vision. They advocated raising workers' living standards and saw this as a step towards securing better economic and social conditions for all Canadians, including Canadian businesses. Fred Rose argued this case in the House of Commons:

... raising popular purchasing power... would provide Canadian business with an annual market for a half a billion dollars worth of goods. This is practically half of our total pre-war exports. That means that we must have post-war policies which will raise substandard wages, increase farm income and provide a national minimum of social security.<sup>18</sup>

NFB films gave prominence to the theme of providing workers with new means to improve their economic and social lot. They also pointed out the interrelationship between improving working-class living conditions and bettering those of all Canadians.

In *Labour Front* (1943) the argument is that the workers who had been toiling on the assembly lines during the war, and who were able to meet the needs of fighting fascism, have the right to expect new opportunities to share in the benefits of peace. The ability of Canadians to jointly meet the challenges of war is seen as a proof of their aptitude for addressing the challenges of peace. *New Horizons* (1943, Evelyn Cherry) presents a similar view of the positive effects of the industrial development that accompanied the mobilization for war. Such development, the film affirms, has to be rearticulated in conjunction with the longer-term social and economic needs of the entire society.

NFB films also stressed that cooperation between labour, management and government had been instrumental in the success of war efforts. Such cooperation was seen as equally important in peacetime periods. In *Labour Looks Ahead* (1945), Stanley Hawes suggests that achievements made during the war are testaments to the successful impact of equal labour participation in the decision-making process. The film refers to “the successful work of the Labour-Management Production Committees” during the

war as an example of how Canadian workers can, in the future, help design, plan and execute the tasks of building peace.

Presenting the story of a young miner who has just been discharged from the armed forces, *Coal Face, Canada* (1943, Robert Edmonds) conveys the hope that with the war nearing its end there are new opportunities for workers to contribute to the political and economic decision-making process. The film emphasizes the role played by the trade union movement in building social and political awareness among workers. As an older worker converses with a young dischargée about the advances in building solidarity among workers, we catch a glimpse of a book in the union hall's library: *The Right to Work*. The miner assures the young worker that "miners today are more aware of their rights and their place in the world." The film concludes that building unity among workers on the local, national and international levels helped open their eyes to the value of their power and to their ability to conduct a mutual struggle to build "a better place for themselves," and "to win and build a better world for all." The tribute to the trade union movement here is clear. But what is more striking is how the film celebrates the political role of this movement. In hindsight, *The Right to Work* not only acknowledges and supports the role of trade unions in advocating workers' rights and addressing their problems in their separate workplaces, but more importantly supports their role as apparatuses within which the working class becomes more politically involved in influencing issues of relevance to it as well as to all Canadians. As such, the film subscribes ideologically to the idea of moving the working class in the direction of, to paraphrase Marx, becoming a class *for* itself instead of being a class *in* itself. Furthermore, it points out ways through which this class can play a leading role within society, the result of which would be to become a gravitating centre for a new Gramscian historical bloc that would lay the ground for a historic transformation away from the capitalist mode of production. The general features of this fundamental transformation can be detected in how NFB films argued the case of utilizing collective energies and sharing the benefits of society's development.

NFB films reiterated the notions of effective economic and social planning, sharing the benefits of economic growth, and the full utilization of labour resources as fundamental features of rebuilding the world in the post-war era. These films also expressed hope that after the war people would learn to avoid tribulations similar to those in the years following World War I, and that they do this by learning how to employ their common and collective resources effectively. They argued that work that was capable of utilizing the energies of people represented an efficient alternative to uncoordinated work and production methods. The ability to plan and maintain a balance between the work of individuals and the larger needs and capacities of society

was deemed crucial to maintaining peace and creating future social prosperity. In this regard, social interdependency was presented as a source of strength to the collective as well as to individuals. The value of economic production itself was mainly measured by its ability to satisfy the needs of society, rather than by generating profit. In other words, instead of stressing the value of products as commodities, NFB films tended to emphasize product value in terms of how it satisfied actual social needs and priorities.

Organizing the country's labour resources to meet war needs is the main topic in *Curtailment of Civilian Industries* (1943, Philip Ragan). The success of the nation in shifting its economic priorities towards producing war machinery is conversely seen as an indicator of its ability to shift its post-war future priorities to a new gear which addresses the goal of social prosperity for all Canadians. *A Man and His Job* (1943, Alistair M. Taylor) discusses the economic chaos, waste and overproduction that characterized the years of the pre-Depression. Avoiding the repetition of that situation, the film suggests, would require articulating new programs that streamline social-economic needs with available labour work force. In *Prices in Wartime* (1942, Philip Ragan), we are warned against repeating earlier mistakes that allowed for the wasting of valuable labour and production resources. The film reminds us that during the Depression this waste came at a time when labour was capable of increasing national income by 60 per cent. The film argues for better social and economic coordination and planning to ensure the maximum utilization of the nation's economic resources. Another film, *Subcontracting for Victory* (1942) demonstrates the advantages of reorganizing industrial production operations to take full advantage of the productive capacity of large and small industries. It argues that this redeployment would allow industries to satisfy the needs of war machinery production.

A similar theme is discussed in Raymond Spottiswoode's *Tomorrow's World* (1943). Once again, the film begins with a warning against repeating post-WWI mistakes, "when countries went into overproduction, and when chaotic and reckless production failed to meet the needs of people." The world has to learn the benefits of using its energies and resources in an efficient manner, the film argues. Since society has now acquired the skills needed to utilize its collective resources, to conserve its needs and identify its priorities, and since the production capacity of the nation during the war has reached new heights, Canadians and people around the world can now look for new opportunities. With the devastating experience of the war behind them, people realize that the human energies and resources that were summoned for war can also be "released for the service of common men." They would now have more conscious appreciation of the feasibility of the idea of building a "better tomorrow" which would be more prosperous and better planned than ever before, one in which the earth would

be rid of “fear and want.” In *Workers at War* (1943), the building of the Saguenay River Dam in Quebec in less than one year using the labour of ten thousand workers is offered as an example of the effective utilization of resources for peacetime goals. *Training Industry’s Army* (1945, Vincent Paquette and Ronald Dick) delineates that during the war, Canadian industry adopted more efficient methods to develop labour skills. Similar application of vocational training, the film suggests, can be used to develop, adapt and expand war-based skills and industries to meet peacetime priorities.

Other NFB films discussed the possibilities and benefits of utilizing the available work force on a nationwide level to address the issue of labour shortages in specific regions or certain economic sectors. *Land for Pioneers* (1944, Margaret Perry and James Beveridge), for example, visits Canada’s north and reminds us that this is a major area of untapped resources that are still waiting to be explored and developed. The film encourages Canadians to invest some of their energies and labour to help develop this area of the country.

While films like *When the Work’s All Done this Fall* (1944) appealed to farmers and farm workers to give temporary help to wartime industries after they finished their yearly harvest, most other films addressed problems within the agricultural sector by way of emphasizing the need to relieve shortages in farm labour. Similar arguments in support of utilizing planned farming resources as means of meeting the needs of the Allies were raised in the House of Commons. Dorise Nielsen argued the case:

We need the planned production of food.... I would say to [Minister of Agriculture] that the time has come when we should have a gathering of all the farm bodies in Canada. Let them plan. Let them know what the requirements of Britain are going to be. Let us correlate our plans for food production with the plans of the United States. Let us see that in this western hemisphere we build up huge stocks of food which will be a weapon for victory in our hands and help us to bring the peace we so much desire.<sup>19</sup>

A similar theme is reiterated in several NFB films. *The Farmer’s Forum* (1943) stresses the importance of discussing and implementing strategies that ensure adequate agricultural production quality and quantity. The goal is to provide enough food for every human need, and the message is that too much is at stake and the world is counting on the success of farmers.

In *Hands for the Harvests* (1944), Stanley Jackson illustrates that coordination between various levels of government combined with the full utilization of Canada’s work force resources can help meet the challenge facing the agriculture sector during

and after the war. The film suggests encouraging high-school students and workers from other parts of the country to help alleviate shortages in agricultural labour during the peak farming seasons. It also argues that the traditional underestimation of women's capacity to contribute in this area of economic activity hampers the efforts to better utilize Canada's labour force. The film also suggests adopting cooperative methods to share the use of machinery and other resources by the farmers.

Among earlier NFB films dealing with the issue of agricultural planning is Stuart Legg's *Food, Weapon of Conquest* (1941). The film's main topic is the Nazi attack against the Soviet Union and its destruction of the Ukraine's agricultural sector, resulting in disastrous effects on the Soviet Union's entire food supplies. The film urges Canadians to learn from the Soviet experience in building "well-organized collective farms." It argues that before the Nazis destroyed these farms, they were "the bread-basket which helped feed the entire Soviet population." It then draws attention to the success of the Soviet Union in parting ways with older forms of "production anarchy," and recommends that as we Canadians adopt similar alternate farming methods. These methods include helping farmers finally free themselves from the "glutted markets and surpluses of former days" and allowing them to devote the use of their land to meet the "real food needs of fellow men."

Clearly, all these films were conceived as tools of instruction; they talked about a specific social problem, delineated its sources, and suggested curative solutions. It is within these parameters that the counter-hegemonic relevance of these films is found. While each film presented ideas about specific problems in the context of different locations and circumstances they all, on the other hand, shared common views on the possibilities for their solution. An important element in this regard is how these films pondered the role of workers in the process of reshaping history.

NFB films explored how workers were instrumental in developing and expanding social wealth, and promoted values of equitable social and political control and distribution of resources. By challenging the commonsensical view of history as fate, or as a vehicle within a predetermined evolutionary process, NFB films inscribed working people as agents in reshaping the historical moment of which they were part. They advocated a leading role for workers where they, as part of a class, would deliberately contribute to remoulding and reshaping the course of history to satisfy both their own class objectives and the needs of society in general.

But these films also envisioned a society that would be reorganized on the basis of its shared goals. In this society people's involvement in the work force is informed by their genuine interest in producing and sharing what is needed to overcome the devastation of war and in laying down a strong basis for future social prosperity.

When it comes to the notion of democracy, NFB films stressed the importance of applying grassroots democratic practices both inside and outside of the workplace. In this regard these films promoted ideas about the direct participation of workers in discussing and making decisions in all areas of political and economic endeavours, both within the workplace and on the national and the international levels. As such they envisaged grassroots democratic practice as fundamental to ensuring the participation of all classes and sections of society in the process of building the country's future.