FADE TO RED:
The CSU Strikes
and
Hollywood
Anti-Communist Hysteria

By Craig Loftin

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Introduction

"With such a vast influence over the lives of American citizens as the motion-picture industry exerts, it is not unnatural—in fact, it is very logical—that subversive and undemocratic forces should attempt to use this medium for un-American purposes."[1] These are the words of House Committee on un-American Activities chairman John Parnell Thomas on October 20, 1947. Ever since the Republican landslide in the 1946 elections, HUAC had expressed an interest in investigating Hollywood based on accusations that the industry was falling under the influence of communist forces. By infiltrating Hollywood's labor unions, it was alleged, communists were on their way to controlling the content of the films that America so adored. The communists could then cleverly exploit the motion-picture industry for their own purposes and place doubt in the minds of Americans concerning their democratic and capitalistic form of government. Ultimately, disillusionment with the American way of life would pave the way for an all-out communist takeover. With WWII still fresh in the public mind, such a communist takeover seemed similar to Hitler's attempt at world domination. The purge trials of the 1930's had reinforced to the world the horrors of a Stalinist, totalitarian-style government. And even though the United States was an ocean away, some believed they were feeling a Soviet influence on our own shores.

Hollywood had long been a beacon for communists, and evidence suggested that communists had attempted to organize labor under their control during the 1930's. One man repeatedly accused of such subversive activity was a scenery painter and ex-prize fighter named Herb Sorrell. In 1941, Sorrell led a strike against Disney studios demanding higher wages and the formation of a Screen Cartoonist's Guild. Disney, who refused to recognize the guild, became convinced that Sorrell's true motives for the strike were political, and viewed Sorrell as an outside agitator attempting to control Disney employees against their will for suspicious and subversive reasons. After Sorrell won the strike, Disney publicly accused him of being a communist, attempting to subvert the Disney stu-

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[1] Communist Infiltration of the Motion Picture Industry, Hearings Before the House Committee on un-American Activities, 80th Congress, 1st Session, 1947, p. 1.

dio [2] An investigation by the California legislature followed, but was of little consequence [3]

With the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor, America had more urgent concerns than investigating Hollywood communist subversion. Ironically, the Soviet Union and the U S found themselves with mutual enemies and formed an alliance as a result. Shortly before the end of the war, Sorrell, now the head of his own labor coalition, the Conference of Studio Unions, called an industry-wide strike on the issues of wages, hours, and various jurisdictional conflicts. As the strike dragged on, a rash of violence erupted, the worst the film industry had seen. Two years later, the Hollywood labor situation remained unsettled.

During the war, America was more concerned with fighting fascism than communism. But many Americans nonetheless held onto their anti-communist beliefs. Union representative Roy Brewer, Sorrell's chief rival, was one such individual. Early in the first of two major strikes, while WWII still raged, Brewer embarked on a campaign to expose what he believed to be the subversive political leanings of Sorrell and to prove the strike had a political basis. Few took his efforts seriously. But with the end of the war, America began again to see itself as the enemy of the Soviet Union. As the international situation turned ever more tense, the fear of communism for the average American grew. Many believed the communist threat lay in the infiltration of trade-unions in order to dominate industries. Sorrell, being in a position to control the craft unions of Hollywood, became the focal point of such attacks that Hollywood labor was being run by communists. Meanwhile, it was no secret that the Screen Writer's Guild had a vocal communist presence during much of its existence. It seemed no coincidence that many members of the Screen Writer's Guild were loud supporters of the strike. Such circumstances allowed Roy Brewer to fade a communist-oriented explanation of the strikes into the picture until it completely dominated.

The thought that communists had established a foothold in Hollywood labor created an atmosphere of paranoia. Such paranoia was typical for the Red Scare as a whole. Analysis of the Conference of Studio Unions strikes provide an excellent window for viewing the Scare in its early days. Because of the strikes and the efforts of Roy Brewer, a fervent anti-communist mentality was established in Hollywood, resulting in the October HUAC investigation and later the Hollywood blacklist. As one of the earliest industries to be purged of communists, the Hollywood situation set a precedent for future anti-

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[2]Richard Schnickel, *The Disney Version*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968, pp. 254-61.

[3]Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund, *The Inquisition in Hollywood*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983, pp. 157-58.

communist crusades The story of the strikes is not one of mere opportunism, but rather, an honest fear resulting in short-sightedness and overzealousness Brewer's passionate concern to root out the subversive forces in the nation created a tunnel-vision that placed a Red under every bed Roy Brewer's attacks on Sorrell were sincere, but almost certainly unmerited While there is evidence suggesting Sorrell had links to the Communist Party, there is stronger evidence, which Brewer ignored, suggesting that those ties were of little consequence to the situation.

The fear produced by these strikes climaxed with the HUAC investigation of October 1947, during which ten individuals, known as the "Hollywood Ten," were denied their rights as citizens. This essay will examine the role of the Hollywood strikes of 1945-47 in creating an atmosphere that could result in something "as un-American as a blacklist."[4] The fervor to save the country from communist subversion ultimately placed into question whether America was as free a nation as it claimed to be.

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[4]Eric Johnston, president of the Motion Picture Association of America, said this on the eve of the Hearings. See Nancy Lynn Schwartz, *The Hollywood Writers' Wars*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982, pp. 266-267.

Clashing Forces

Historical Background

In 1917, the Russian Revolution resulted in the first Communist-led government. Two years later, the United States was knee-deep in its first Red scare. Since communist ideology clashed with traditional American notions of free enterprise and private property, a dichotomy was established of being either one of "them" or one of "us." The press had a large hand in creating the hysteria by using apocalyptic adjectives to describe the evils of Bolshevism. Red Scare expert Robert Murray writes

> Scare words such as "Bolshevist," "Soviet," "radical," "chaos," and "terror," were used indiscriminately and served as a framework around which exaggerated stories were built . . . . "Bolshevism in the United States is no longer a spector," warned *The Philadelphia Public-Ledger*. "Boston in chaos reveals its sinister substance." "Lenin and Trotsky are right on their way," screamed *The Wall Street Journal*.[1]

Meanwhile, strikes were occurring in unprecedented numbers. Between March and August of 1919, 1463 strikes broke out across the nation. These strikes were repeatedly blamed on the Bolsheviks and cited as proof that they were succeeding in shutting down the country.[2] Strikes began to be viewed as revolutionary attempts to seize the government for communistic purposes, and organized labor as a whole was put on the defensive. A series of package bombings, aimed at high U.S. officials, was also blamed on the Bolsheviks despite little evidence linking the two.[3]

The Red scare peaked with the Palmer raids in the fall of 1919. The brainchild of Attorney General Mitchell Palmer, and implemented largely by J. Edgar Hoover, the purpose of the raids was to expose and deport alien radicals thought to be at root of the alleged communist takeover. Teachers, government officials, and union leaders were the main targets. Thousands were rounded up and imprisoned in appalling conditions while hundreds of others were deported. Those imprisoned were later released, but only after suffering beatings and humiliation. Their arrests were due to suspicion only; many did not

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[1]Murray Levin, *Political Hysteria in America,* New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1971, p. 38.

[2]Levin, p. 31.

[3]Levin, pp. 32-34.

hold radical views. In Newark, for example, a man was imprisoned because he "looked like a radical".[4]

Eventually, violations of civil rights became so blatant that opposition formed against the raids, and the whole scare in general. The evidence of a communist conspiracy did not merit the hysteria, and it seemed the scare was simply being exploited to sell newspapers and advance political careers. It was dead by 1921. But damage had been done, with labor taking the worst blow. Union memberships decreased, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) was in chaos, and labor leaders adopted more cautious approaches to advancing their cause.[5]

The stock market crash in 1929 plunged the U.S. into the worst economic depression of its history. The most sweeping effort to curb the miseries of the depression was the New Deal, implemented by the Roosevelt administration shortly after 1933. It featured numerous programs to get people back to work and help regulate the economy. Never before had the government taken such an active role in the lives of so many Americans. The depression created a climate of political experimentation that resulted in the increase of left-wing political activity. In California, for example, socialist writer Upton Sinclair was nearly elected governor.

Such political trends were not solely due to the depression, however. The rise of fascist dictatorships in Germany and Italy, and later the civil war in Spain provoked many socially conscious individuals to join left-wing organizations opposing such fascist movements. The U.S. Communist Party itself was a vehicle for many to fight the fascists, and the Party provided a key organizational force in other groups intended to rally against Hitler, Mussolini, and Franco. Although Stalin eventually signed a nonaggression pact with Hitler in 1939, in the eyes of many, supporting communism and fighting fascism were synonymous. This link would haunt many later on.

As World War II got underway, the U.S. and the USSR found themselves fighting on the same side as allies. But it was a marriage of convenience; the main thing the two nations shared were the same enemies. When the U.S. completed construction of the atom bomb in August 1945, the Soviets were kept in the dark. Truman made a casual remark about it to Stalin at Potsdam shortly before the end of the war, but more as a deterrent for post-war Soviet aggression than for friendly purposes. This information was no surprise to Stalin, whose spies had kept him informed about the progress of the bomb. This is one ex-

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[4]Levin, p. 58.

[5]Levin, p. 73.

ample of how the U.S. and USSR still viewed one another with a suspicious eye, despite hopes an alliance could be maintained after the war.

Such hopes were quickly shattered at the war's conclusion. One diplomatic crisis after another led to a state of cold war between the two nations, both considered superpowers at this point. Although the U.S. was the only nation with atomic weapons in 1945, it would only be a matter of time until the USSR had its own. The Soviet Union was the enemy once again, and to be a communist in America was to be one of "them." Many politicians took advantage of the anti-communist consensus of the day, latching onto the issue for their own aggrandizement. But not all anti-communism was based on opportunism; people adopted anti-communistic stances for a variety of reasons. Author Daniel Biederman writes "both [Richard] Nixon and [Ronald] Reagan began their political climbs by riding out on crusades against communism. . . . Nixon's brand of anti-communism was rooted in opportunism; Reagan is a true believer in the Red Menace."[6] Many intellectuals, such as Arthur Schlesinger Jr., were opposed to the totalitarian nature of communism. Most liberals held similar anti-communist views, which tended to legitimize the more reactionary anti-communist crusade that eventually swept through the country. As before, the crusade targeted those who were in any position of influence. Teachers, government employees, union leaders, and now atomic scientists all came under close scrutiny, and were often forced to take loyalty oaths proclaiming they had never been members of the Communist Party. Such a trend was still developing when the House Committee on un-American Activities investigated Hollywood in 1947.

Unions in Hollywood: The Talent Guilds

Throughout the early twentieth century, an entertainment empire of immense size was being carved in Hollywood. A handful of major studios dominated the business: Warner Brothers, MGM, RKO, Columbia, and Paramount among the largest. Each began with the vision of their respective founders, who were mostly young, ambitious, Jewish immigrants taking advantage of America's fascination with the new motion picture technology. In the 1920's, motion picture production increased exponentially, and the movie-making process became increasingly factory-like and standardized. As money poured in, the studios grew in size and prestige. These ambitious founders, whether Jack and Harry Cohn at Columbia, or Sam Goldwyn and Louis Mayer at MGM (through a series of mergers),

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[6]Daniel Biederman, "The Making of a Zealot," *The Nation*, June 22, 1974, p. 784.

maintained considerable control concerning the affairs of their studios. They were seen as father figures, assuming a paternalistic role even though they were often younger than those who worked for them.

Such a paternalistic role fueled an open hostility to any sort of labor organization in the industry, although by the mid-1920's there was a great need for it. Social clubs of actors, directors, and writers came into being, and although not explicitly unions, they often served as vehicles to express labor discontent to producers and studio heads. In an effort to control labor and prevent future independent unionization, studio heads created the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in 1927. Although it succeeded in preventing any sort of labor organization for five years, it was clearly a company union designed to serve the interests of producers (the financial backers of a film).[7] After a ridiculously unfair proposal for a 50% wage cut, fed up Academy members formed their own independent organizations. The three talent guilds were the result, formed in 1933: the Screen Actors Guild, the Screen Writers Guild, and the Screen Directors Guild.

The Directors and Actors Guilds were tame unions, generally loyal to the wishes of producers. However, the Screen Writers Guild proved a thorn in the side of the producers, largely over the issues of creative control and of being treated as "office boys."[8] After much legal hassle, the Writers Guild established a contract with producers, meaning only a script written by a Guild member could be used for a film. At its inception, the Guild had no definite political leanings. But as time went on, it became increasingly politicized, largely due to its first president, John Howard Lawson. As the Guild's stances on political issues went further to the left, more and more writers in the Guild felt ostracized. Producers took advantage of these internal squabbles by forming the Screen Playwrights, made up of Guild members frustrated with its left-wing politics. But, like the Academy, the Screen Playwrights was created by and for the interests of the producers rather than the writers themselves.[9] Producers began hiring only Screen Playwrights, and the Writers Guild was driven underground. The Guild was resurrected in 1938 after a ruling from the National Labor Relations Board forced producers to work out their differences with the writers. The Screen Playwrights soon withered away.

After that conflict, the Screen Writers Guild continued to represent the interests of the screenwriters in Hollywood. The existence of such an organization is important, since

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[7]Ian Hamilton, *Writers in Hollywood 1915-1951*, New York: Harper and Row, 1990, p. 93.

[8]Ceplair and Englund, p. 18.

[9]Schwartz, pp. 71-74.

writers were the most exploited group of workers in Hollywood at that time. Whereas writers of national stature, such as William Faulkner and F. Scott Fitzgerald, received enormous salaries from the studios, most writers lived an uncertain existence devoid of a contract, minimum wage, or notice of termination of employment. Writers were often "unemployed, but on contract," meaning they received no pay, but could not legally work for another studio. The biggest area of abuse was in credits. To a screenwriter, a screen credit is far more important than salary, because it leads to name recognition. Producers would often give the credit "to their friends or relatives or—under pseudonyms—to themselves."[10] Before the Guild, there was no organization to regulate such exploitation.

The Craft Unions

While the talent guilds protected the interests of the actors, directors, and writers in Hollywood, the local craft guilds (painters, electricians, carpenters, set builders, etc.) were organized and represented by the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees, affiliated with the American Federation of Labor. The International Alliance was established in 1893 to represent stagehands, and got an early jump in the booming motion picture industry in the 1900's. After a set-back due to jurisdictional problems and an unsuccessful strike in the early 1930's, the Alliance was resurrected by George Browne, a new president who arranged a successful projectionist strike in 1935 and shut down the industry in the process. Membership skyrocketed. But Browne appointed Willie Bioff, a reputed Chicago gangster as his personal representative in Hollywood. Bioff (pronounced "buy-off")[11] "simply transferred the locale but not the character of his racketeering operations to the West Coast," picking up several $100,000 bribes from studio heads to keep labor as producer-friendly as possible.[12] Convictions of conspiracy and extortion were handed down to both Browne and Bioff in 1941. Bioff did not go quietly, however. He claimed he had been framed by the Communists who were out to get him.[13]

With Hollywood labor suffering from the corruption of the Browne-Bioff years, Herb Sorrell, who had been campaigning against the International Alliance since the late

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[10]Ceplair and Englund, pp. 21-22.

[11]Victor Navasky, *Naming Names*, New York: Penguin, 1980, p. 176.

[12]John Cogley, *Report on Blacklisting*, vol 1, The Fund for the Republic, 1956, pp. 49-50.

[13]Cogley, p. 52.

1930's, formed and headed the Conference of Studio Unions. It had two stated purposes: "to unite the motion picture unions for the protection and autonomy of each and to advance through joint consultation and action the economic welfare of the motion picture unions and their members."[14] The Conference was comprised of five unions: locals of cartoonists, office employees, film technicians, machinists, and painters. By 1945, membership was around 10,000 members.[15] Authors who have written about the CSU, such as Larry Ceplair, John Cogley and Nancy Schwartz, describe it as an honest attempt to represent those unions holding little power by themselves and in need of a coalition with similar groups. Politically, the Conference adopted many left-wing stances. To many Hollywood conservatives, it went beyond left-wing and was simply communist.

Sorrell himself is described in a variety of ways. On the one hand, he was "ambitious, aggressive, cocksure, . . . folk-hero,"[16] "a man of earthy warm integrity,"[17] even "holy."[18] But to others he was a reckless communist determined to dominate Hollywood labor. His actual communist ties are debatable; rivals claim irrefutable proof, while supporters contend he was apolitical, merely looking out for the good of the average worker. To a large extent, the issue of communist infiltration into Hollywood unions rests on the actual intentions of Sorrell, which will be the focus of a later chapter. One certainty is that the Conference of Studio Unions, from 1941 to the strikes in 1945, never strayed from the official Communist Party line. It supported the same causes that the Party supported, and endorsed many of the groups that were actually "Communist Front" organizations, such as the National Lawyers Guild, the People's Educational Center, and the Hollywood Democratic Committee.[19] The Communist Party also had a favorable view of Sorrell and actively supported the Conference of Studio Unions. But none of this proves Sorrell was a Communist following doctrine from the Kremlin. In fact, Sorrell despised the "ideological straitjacket" that being a Party member often meant. John Cogley writes "Sorrell was clearly not amenable to discipline, but did not hesitate to accept Communist support when it was offered."[20]

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[14]Cogley, p. 55.

[15]Ceplair and Englund, p. 217.

[16]Cogley, p.54.

[17]Schwartz, p. 115.

[18]George Dunne, "Peace in Jail," Commonweal, June 20, 1947, p. 232.

[19]Cogley, p. 55.

[20]Cogley, p. 54.

The Communist Party in Hollywood

From 1936-1946, the Hollywood branch of the Communist Party abounded with contradictions and peculiarities. Here was a group of nationally known writers, actors, and directors, many of whom received huge salaries and owned enormous homes with swimming pools in Beverly Hills, subscribing to a philosophy that renounced personal wealth and property. In order to make a living, a communist screen writer had to write stories that glorified free enterprise and rugged individualism.[21] For such a social aristocracy as the Hollywood elite, the notion of joining a party to break down class barriers seems nonsensical.

The majority of communists in Hollywood were unconcerned with Marxist doctrine and its revolutionary implications. Rather, they joined the Party because they saw it as a positive outlet for immediate social change. Screenwriter Paul Jarrico recalls "In effect. . . we were a reformist party; the ground for a revolutionary effort on our parts did not exist."[22] Many saw the Communist Party as the most effective way to battle the threatening rise of fascism, and joined solely on that basis. The left-wing stances of the Party, such as pro-unionism and equality among the races, attracted many socially conscious individuals in Hollywood. The Spanish Civil War proved a rallying cry, as the Communists spoke out loudly against General Franco's revolt against the Spanish Government. Through the Communist Party, wealthy left-wingers in Hollywood could support and contribute money to such causes.

The Party in Hollywood acted informally and in relative secrecy. Meetings were usually held at members' homes, and had the atmosphere of cocktail parties. It was often a social outlet first, and a means for political activity second. In order to protect the identities of the better known members, memberships were often taken under assumed names. Perhaps the most important function of the Party was that it alleviated the guilt of high salaries and a pampered existence that many socially conscious yet successful Hollywood personalities felt. By contributing money to various causes, they were elevating their own egos as much as trying to help those who needed it. And while they did indeed raise money for many significant causes, the social aspect of the Party dominated. "The Com-

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[21]Ceplair and Englund, pp. 47-49.

[22]Ceplair and England, p. 48.

munist Party suffused everything with meaning. If you got drunk, you did it for Spain, at a meeting to raise ambulance money."[23]

The Communists in Hollywood had powerful enemies. In February of 1944, an advertisement in *Variety* announced the formation of the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals. Prominent director Sam Wood served as its first president, and Walt Disney as its first vice-president. The ad stated a vague series of beliefs and principles, such as the "American way of life," and proclaimed the organization's sole purpose was to fight communism and its "kindred beliefs". Claiming to represent an unorganized majority in the film industry, the ad expressed resentment towards "the growing impression that this industry is made up of Communists, radicals, and crack-pots."[24] The group revealed no plan to speak of other than to fight the tide of totalitarianism and prevent the movie screen from turning into a vehicle of communist propaganda. While the mainstream press mocked the organization at its inception, the Hearst press was more than enthusiastic, and provided large amounts of money and publicity. A month later, the Alliance, through its loud proclamations of communist infiltration in the industry, hosted the Dies Committee to investigate the charges, which later opened the way for the House Committee on un-American Activities (HUAC). The Alliance even offered the arch-conservative Representative Dies $50,000 a year if he would be their director.[25]

As Hollywood grew into a large-scale industry throughout the early 20th century, two distinct groups were constantly clashing. On the left was the Screen Writers Guild, the Conference of Studio Unions, and the Hollywood branch of the Communist Party. On the right was the Screen Playwrights, the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees, and the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals. The latter conservative side worked in coordination with studio heads and producers, whose responsibilities and goals in Hollywood were primarily financial. The liberal side tended to work against producers, claiming that Hollywood ought to use its vast resources for socially responsible enterprises, that employees deserved a fair deal, and that the screen could be used for more than merely a money-making device. But producers held the upper hand since they were the employers. As time went on, the line in the sand grew deeper and deeper as conflicts grew more heated. A showdown was inevitable.

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[23]Schwartz, p. 85.

[24]Schwartz, p. 206.

[25]Schwartz, pp. 210-211.

The First Strike

Early Developments and Gridlock

Author John Cogley writes "The 1945 and 1946 strikes called by the Conference of Studio Unions were among the most involved and complex in the history of American labor. What appeared on the surface to be a continuation of inter-union jurisdictional disputes was, in fact, a major conflict of warring social forces."[1] The trouble began in October, 1943,[2] when the Society of Motion Picture Interior Decorators voted to affiliate with the Screen Set Designers, Illustrators, and Decorators, local 1421. The Interior Decorators had been an independent union, holding their own contracts with producers. But this vote of affiliation made the Interior Decorators part of the Conference of Studio Unions (CSU from here on), since local 1421 belonged to the Conference.[3] Dick Walsh, president of the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE), however, claimed jurisdiction over the Interior Decorators, and refused to recognize its move to the CSU. Producers also refused to recognize the guild, mostly because of Walsh's influence. After months of arguments and threats from each side, the National Labor Relations Board investigated the situation and ruled the move was legitimate, affiliating local 1421 with the Decorators. This officially made the CSU the new bargaining agent for the Decorators. Refusing to change their positions, the producers and IATSE immediately protested to the Board. Having no contract, the Decorators found themselves with no work. Sorrell called a strike on March 12, 1945, throwing pickets around major studios, claiming jurisdiction over the Decorators, and demanding work for his union.[4]

A rivalry had always existed between the CSU and the IATSE, but never had such a heated dispute arisen over such a small issue. The above description of the strike genesis is a thumbnail sketch; to go into greater detail serves no purpose for this analysis. To confuse things further, each side involved claimed the strike resulted from different issues. Producers claimed the conflict was solely jurisdictionally-based and blasted all those on

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[1]Cogley, p. 60.

[2]Ronald Reagan with Richard Hubler, *Where's the Rest of Me?*, New York: Deull, Sloan and Pearce, 1965, p. 134, Schwartz, 222.

[3]*Variety*, March 21, 1945, p. 19.

[4]*Variety*, March 21, 1945, pp. 2, 19, Cogley, pp. 60-61.

strike. At the same time, they repeatedly told the press that the strike was ineffective, and even boasted of increased production since its start.[5] The IATSE argued along a similar line, accusing the CSU of stepping on their toes and attempting to control unions that rightfully belonged under the IATSE's jurisdiction. Sorrell and the CSU viewed the conflict as a lock-out, since the producers were refusing to bargain a contract with the Decorators. But it was also a matter of wages and working hours. Because of a surge in the labor force due to returning soldiers, the work week had been reduced from forty-eight to thirty-six hours, and Sorrell demanded a wage increase to make up the difference. " . . . [A]nd why not?" he asked. "The producers were making plenty of profit. They said so in the trade papers."[6] Thus, to pinpoint responsibility for the strike to one side or the other purely depends on which one you happen to be talking to.

Out of the 30,000 workers in the industry, around 15,000 went on strike, consisting of all CSU members along with other sympathetic unions.[7] The studios quickly brought in strikebreakers to replace the striking workers and tried to continue business as usual.[8] Critical to the success of the strike was earning the support of the talent guilds, since actors, directors, and writers could not be adequately replaced as easily as craft workers could. Most important was the support of the Screen Actors Guild, since without movie stars, there could be no movie industry. But they refused to support the strike, and overwhelmingly voted to cross picket lines.[9] Within the Screen Writers Guild, strong conservative and left-wing factions butted heads over the issue. As the strike continued, the debate within the Guild grew louder and more polarized. But at its outset, the Writers officially adopted a neutral stance, giving no support in either direction. The Writers were also in the unique position of being able to work at home, allowing them to continue writing without crossing a picket line.[10] A wartime anti-strike pledge taken by all AFL and CIO unions played a role in the talent guilds' decisions. Unionists such as Sorrell, however, claimed the pledge gave employers an easy opportunity to exploit their employees, making it sometimes necessary to break it.

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[5]*Variety*, March 14, 1945, p. 1, March 21, 1945, p. 2,.March 28, 1945, pp. 4, 17.

[6]Herb Sorrell, from *Jurisdictional Disputes in the Motion Picture Industry, Hearings before a Special Subcommittee of the House Committee on Education and Labor*, 80th Congress, 2nd session, 1948, p. 772.

[7]*Variety*, March 14, 1945, p. 1.

[8]*Variety*, March 14, 1945, p. 18, March 28, 1945, p. 17.

[9]*Variety*, March 21, 1945, p. 19.

[10]Schwartz, pp. 225-27.

On March 28, barely two weeks into the strike, *Variety* ran the optimistic headline "Studio Strike May End This Week; Producers, Labor Reps Talk In NY." But for six months, no progress was made despite repeated attempts to get together and settle. Strikebreakers crossed picket lines by the fourth week, keeping production alive and hurting the effectiveness of the strike.[11] By the fifth week, Sorrell and IATSE president Dick Walsh were verbally attacking one another like political rivals. At a mass meeting, Sorrell said

> I want to give you people, particularly those of the IATSE, an idea of the kind of errand boy Walsh really is . . . . You remember there was a 2% grab in the IA a few years ago. I know you boys who paid will remember. Well, Mr. Walsh, who has always been an errand boy, was errand boy for Willie [Bioff, the gangster who helped run the IATSE in the thirties] then. When they cut up the first $125,000 [from the 2% "fee" Bioff essentially stole from IATSE members], Mr. Walsh got $4,080. I don't know what he did with it. Maybe he shoved it down a sewer or gave it to the poor, but anyway, he paid income tax on it, and that wasn't on salary. That was a cut of 2%.[12]

Walsh responded by saying

> The charge which Sorrell makes just goes to show how far he will go in trying to justify his actions by tying up the studios. What possible bearing this matter could have on his actions, even if it were true, he does not explain. So far as my personal record is concerned, I can assure Mr. Sorrell, if it is any of his business, that every cent I have received from the International Alliance, with the exception of my own salary, has been spent in the interests of the Alliance. I defy anyone to present any proof to the contrary.[13]

Such personal attacks were typical and plagued attempts to resolve the conflict. In May, Roy Brewer, international representative for the IATSE, "stymied a peace move" by insisting Sorrell leave the picture and dissolve the CSU.[14] In July, a massive arbitration attempt held in Chicago fell apart when neither side would budge their positions. Four months into the strike, it stood exactly where it had on March 12.[15] During this time, some formerly sympathetic unions grew tired of the strike and crossed picket lines. Others that had crossed lines in the beginning changed their stance, and respected the lines, thus balancing the picture. It was a complete stalemate. The winning side appeared to be

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[11] *Variety*, April 4, 1945, pp. 7, 20.

[12] *Variety*, April 11, 1945, p. 5.

[13] *Variety*, April 11, 1945, p. 18.

[14] *Variety*, May 23, 1945, p. 7.

[15] *Variety*, July 11, 1945, p. 5.

whichever could outlast the other. The long awaited showdown between Hollywood's "warring social forces" was underway, and proving to be a grueling battle.

Enter the "Commies"

As the strike dragged on, a new issue gradually crept into the picture to confuse things further: communism. Accusations had been floating around from the IATSE leadership since the beginning of the strike,[16] although they were not publicized until August. On the 15th of that month, a barrage of anonymous sources claimed the strike's purpose went beyond mere jurisdictional issues. It was also asserted that Sorrell could not be trusted due to his left-wing political biases. Sorrell did not help matters by allegedly saying "there are too many decrepit old men running the AFL, and the CSU should line up with the CIO."[17] The Congress of Industrial Organization, the AFL's rival, was under communist domination in the eyes of many anti-communists.

Anonymous sources, the only such sources at any time during the course of the strike, told *Variety* that if the CSU prevailed in the strike, and "if the [I]ATSE was destroyed in Hollywood, the Commies will take over the studios." Another quote said

> Commies have called the [I]ATSE a scab union—but the CIO on the coast is all Commy—and Sorrell is one of the main fellow travelers. This is more than a jurisdictional dispute. It is a threat by Communists to take over Hollywood, with Sorrell merely acting as window dressing for their activities. No union in Hollywood gets along with Sorrell unless they follow the party line. This CSU is being used for nothing else but to agitate and to vilify and condemn the AFL.[18]

Sorrell responded to the charges by recalling gangster Willie Bioff, who made the same anti-communist charge when he fell from grace in the early 1940's. Sorrell attributed the quotes to Walsh, who Sorrell claimed was merely looking for a scapegoat since there was no excuse for hiring strikebreakers to replace fellow AFL workers. Sorrell blasted Walsh: "[He] doesn't even have the support of a majority of the IATSE members working in the studios. None of these men wanted to replace strikers, but were forced to do so by Walsh and his associates."[19] Despite brushing off the communist accusations, they nonetheless

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[16]Cogley, p. 63.

[17]*Variety*, August 15, 1945, p. 18.

[18]*Variety*, August 15, 1945, p. 18.

[19]*Variety*, August 15, 1945, p. 6.

raised eyebrows in the AFL. The Southern California Teamster, an AFL publication, quickly called for investigations regarding the communist accusations. The Teamsters opposed the strike, and had been crossing picket lines from its beginning.[20]

Pushing the communist question most fervently since the beginning of the strike was Roy Brewer, the IATSE's international representative who had previously asked for Sorrell's removal from the entire affair. A true believer in the Red conspiracy,[21] as early as March 28, Brewer published IATSE daily bulletins condemning the politics of the CSU and hinting at a connection with the Communist Party. Leaflets for IATSE members labelled the strike as politically motivated. One such leaflet claimed the strike was "a result of a long range program instituted many years ago *by a certain political party* for one reason: To Take Over and Control Organized Labor in the Motion Picture Industry."[22] Later, Brewer sent letters to prominent Hollywood personalities, asking if they "support the campaign of slander, vilification, lies and scurrility now being carried on against our officers and those loyal American workers who believe in and support the IATSE, and who, by doing so, have incurred the enmity and hatred of the entire Communist 'apparat'?"[23]

Such accusations of communism had little impact on the 1945 strike. Communism was not quite the dirty word that it would soon become. In fact, the Communist Party did not even support the strike at its outset, condemning the CSU for breaking the wartime no-strike pledge. *People's World*, the official Communist Party publication on the West Coast ran a headline in April begging "FOR NATIONAL UNITY—END THE FILM STRIKE." A May editorial blasted the CSU for "wasting forces needed for making that new world for which the President [Roosevelt] gave his life." But in September, amidst a changing international political climate, their position changed, and editorials in *People's World* began supporting the strikers and the CSU.[24] For most of the strike, the CSU had Communist Party sympathy. But the early hostility is important, since it refutes many of Brewer's claims in his early propaganda campaign.

As the Cold War set in, cries of communism increasingly gained attention. As Brewer's role in the strike increased, he advanced his theory that the CSU intended to dis-

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[20]*Variety*, August 22, 1945, p. 21.

[21]David Prindle, *The Politics of Glamour*, Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988, p. 41.

[22]Cogley, pp. 63-64, my italics.

[23]Ceplair and Englund, p. 219.

[24]Ceplair and Englund, pp. 218-19.

rupt labor in order to form one large communist controlled union. While this sounded fantastic in 1945, two years later Brewer would be telling the story before HUAC, complete with documentation, and to some, proof of the conspiracy. After the initial injection of anti-communism into strike was made, the issue never went away.

The Riots

Despite occasional hopes of settlement, the situation remained deadlocked for months. But picket lines had been peaceful from the beginning. Gates Ward, an MGM employee and striker, wrote in *The Nation* that "For seven months, the 7500 men and women involved have peacefully picketed the nine major studios by day and the local theatres by night, generally in groups of ten to a hundred. Save for a few clashes between individuals there has been no violence; the picket lines have been gay and good humored, pretty girls in white collar unions marching with the young men from the crafts."[25]

In October, Sorrell announced a change in strike tactic. Rather than spread out picketers among all the major studios, picketing was to be concentrated on one studio.[26] Warner Brothers was arbitrarily picked, and on October 5, a thousand picketers gathered before sunrise to shut down the studio. When workers arrived at six A.M., they were intent on getting past the line of picketers and entering the studio. Three automobiles were turned over in the initial confrontation. As the strikers held their line, police from neighboring towns arrived to assist the Burbank police. *Variety* reported "When more nonstrikers attempted to crash the gate, there was a general melee in which various implements of war were used, including tear gas bombs, fire hoses, knuckles, clubs, brickbats, and beer bottles." Two hours later, 300 law officers dispersed the pickets. Forty injuries were counted.[27]

Ward gives a more vivid account. "Strike-breakers vainly tried to run down the pickets in automobiles, and company cops, aided by the Los Angeles and suburban police, sought to break up the line with fire hoses and with tear-gas bombs thrown from the studio roofs." The mass picketing repeated itself the following day, but no rioting occurred.

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[25]Gates Ward, "Rhapsody in Black and Blue," *The Nation*, October 20, 1945, p. 395. For accounts of the minor "clashes," see *Variety*, March 28, 1945, p. 17; April 4, 1945, p. 20; and July 11, 1945, p. 7.

[26]Schwartz, p. 227.

[27]*Variety*, October 10, 1945, pp. 3, 18.

Monday, October 8, saw the worst violence. After again forming a line of a thousand pickets or so, Ward writes

> At once two hundred goons engaged by IATSE . . . came behind them, swinging chains, clubs, and other weapons. Behind the goons came about four hundred non-strikers, mainly scabs from rump chartered IATSE unions. The unarmed pickets fell bleeding in the street, but the line held until two hundred suburban police and deputy sheriffs rushed out from the studio and used their clubs recklessly. . . . From the safety of the sound-stage roof, studio executives watched the bloody battle and by loud speakers invited reluctant workers to come in.[28]

Lester Pine, an unemployed screenwriter on the picket line, recalls the scene: "Across the street there was a big assortment of guys. . . . They were tough sons of bitches, had wire cable and other things like that in their hands. They charged at us and hit the line broadside from across the street. They beat the shit out of people."[29] Sorrell himself was bashed by a chain in his face.[30]

The above accounts tell a story of peaceful picketers assaulted by aggressive IATSE thugs, company goons, and corrupt police. Warner Brothers allegedly rented out the entire Culver City Police force to break up the massive picket line.[31] Clearly, it would seem the violence was caused by the IATSE and the studios. But Roy Brewer claimed the other side was responsible for the riots. He believed CIO organizer Harry Bridges sent goons from San Francisco for the sole purpose of inciting the riots.[32] Ronald Reagan reiterated Brewer's opinion: "It was pretty well established that the objective of the strike was to force the studios to accept an industry-wide union by Harry Bridges."[33] Others believed the strikers instigated the violence purely out of desperation.[34] However, there is little evidence supporting Brewer's or Reagan's claims, and nearly all eyewitness accounts are unanimous in the aggressiveness with which the picket line was broken.

After this burst of rioting, things settled down a bit. But October 16 saw more violence, when police had to "crack a few heads" to disperse a picket line of 300.[35] A

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[28]Ward, *Nation*, October 20, 1945, p. 395.

[29]Schwartz, p. 228.

[30]*Variety*, October 10, 1945, p. 18.

[31]Biederman, *Nation*, June 22, 1974, p. 781.

[32]Schwartz, p. 227.

[33]Anne Edwards, *Early Reagan*, New York: William Morrow and Co., 1987, p. 311.

[34]Schwartz, pp. 227-28.

[35]*Variety*, October 17, 1945, p. 3.

week later, mass picketing spread to other studios. Several arrests were made at Paramount after fights broke out, and a riot was narrowly averted at Republic when the studio agreed to shut down for the day.[36] As a result of the repeated violence, labor leaders made emergency efforts to end the strike. Eric Johnson, president of the Motion Picture Association of America, was brought in to help settle the issue.

The violence was interpreted differently by different groups. To the strikers, it showed how intent the producers and IATSE were on destroying the CSU. To the producers, it meant financial disaster. To conservatives like Brewer and Reagan, the violence was proof of the subversive, revolutionary nature of the strikes, and showed how intently the communists were trying to control the film industry. No matter whom you spoke to, one thing was clear: the strike had to end.

Resolution (?)

On Halloween, 1945, *Variety* announced the end of film strike. The agreement removed all strikebreakers, and gave the striking employees their jobs back along with ten weeks worth of severance pay.[37] The resolution succeeded in restoring order, but many of the jurisdictional issues remained unsolved, and each side's accusations (be it communism or corruption) went unaddressed. The original issue of the Interior Decorators, long forgotten by many, was settled once and for all by the National Labor Relations Board. The Decorators were granted representation by the Set Designers local 1421, giving jurisdiction to the CSU rather than the IATSE.[38] It could be argued then, as *The Nation* did at the time, that the CSU "won" the strike.[39] This statement is an oversimplification, since the IATSE did win a few of its points. If the CSU won, the victory would prove pointless.

The hasty agreement only served the purpose of ending the strike. A period of 30 days was established to work out the rest of the issues while employees got back to work. Three high officials in the AFL, later sardonically dubbed the "Three Wise Men," were appointed to settle these remaining differences. Thirty days turned out to be overly optimistic, but the strike was over, and all was quiet.

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[36]*Variety*, October 24, 1945, p. 3.

[37]*Variety*, October 31, 1945, p. 3.

[38]Cogley, p. 65.

[39]In an early November editorial, the *Nation* wrote that the settlement "represents a complete victory for, and vindication of, the position taken by the Conference of Studio Unions," p. 446.

The Second Strike

Here we go again . . .

The hasty conclusion of the 1945 strike was designed solely to return workers to their jobs. Many of the nitty-gritty labor issues that had caused the strike were swept under the rug, left to be dealt with by the three wise men. But their efforts only confused the situation further. From the first strike stemmed the second, and although the issues were similar, the overall tone of the second strike was quite different. The communist accusations, which caused little alarm before, took center stage and eventually killed the strike.

In May of 1946, a local of Machinists, represented by the CSU but not affiliated with the AFL, was laid off after Roy Brewer convinced producers not to employ the unaffiliated union. Outraged, Sorrell called a strike. But the National Labor Relations Board immediately intervened and resolved the strike in order to prevent a repeat of the previous mayhem.[1] In July, Sorrell called another strike demanding a 25% wage increase for his unions. The studios conceded after three days, raising CSU and IATSE members' salaries in accordance with the demands.[2] These brief strikes demonstrate the continued fragility of the Hollywood labor situation.

A new issue arose in August of 1946 when the powerful Carpenters union, led by William "Big Bill" Hutcheson, raised a question of jurisdiction concerning its Hollywood local. Represented by the CSU, the Carpenters claimed an IATSE union of "Set Erectionists" was intruding on their work, performing duties belonging to them. To settle the confusion, Hutcheson requested a formal clarification of the issue to the three wise men.[3] Disaster followed. The "clarification" was cryptically written and open to broad interpretation, basically saying the Carpenters were entitled the jurisdiction they sought, but had to "strictly adhere" to a previous decision that had raised the question in the first place. Ronald Reagan said in retrospect, "It was a puzzler. It meant everything to everyone. The CSU took it as a victory; the IATSE, at first, as confirmation."[4]

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[1]Cogley, p. 67.

[2]Ceplair and Englund, p. 222.

[3]Cogley, p. 70.

[4]Reagan, p. 146.

No one knew what to make of the clarification, much less how to apply it. Hutcheson, referring to the three wise men as "stupid blockheads" who "don't know anything about construction,"[5] demanded producers only let his Carpenters work on sets. In protest, the CSU-led Carpenters refused to touch any movie set that had been worked on by an IATSE-led Erectionist. Producers held meetings, and largely due to the persuasion of Brewer, fired CSU workers who refused to touch the "hot sets," as they were now dubbed. The CSU workers were then replaced by IATSE workers. Crying lockout, the CSU not only demanded their Carpenters back to work, but also wage increases.[6]

The producers refused, and IATSE workers continued replacing CSU workers. Labor officials held emergency meetings to avoid a strike, but as before, neither side would budge.[7] As long as IATSE Erectionists built sets, they would be considered "hot," and as long as CSU workers refused to touch these hot sets, they would be laid off. Thus, it boiled down to the difference between "construction" and "erection."[8] In mid-September, producers laid off 1,000 CSU Carpenters and Painters for refusing to work on a hot set.[9] The second strike followed.

The gridlock of the first strike repeated itself. As before, each side blamed the other not only for causing the strike, but for purposefully prolonging it as well. Sorrell lashed out at Pat Casey, representative for the producers:

> Your interest is not in reaching an early settlement but rather in prolonging the current dispute. Our contention that this is a lockout has been established by your stalling, evasion and delay. . . . Your delaying tactics will not weaken our fight but on the other hand will only cause us to intensify our activity for negotiations to achieve contracts and decent wages and hours for all workers in the industry.[10]

Roy Brewer threw in his own barb: "The strike was a trick to rob us of our jurisdiction. It also proves the irresponsibility of the men who call strikes without knowing what they are

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[5]Reagan, p. 151.

[6]Cogley, p. 70-71.

[7]Cogley, p. 70.

[8]*Variety*, September 18, 1946, p. 8.

[9]*Variety*, September 25, 1946, p. 7, 20.

[10]*Variety*, November 13, 1946, p. 16.

doing."[11] Even the Screen Actors Guild had apparently "been forced to the conclusion that certain CSU leaders do not want the strike settled."[12]

The violence of the previous strike resumed. On October 1, the first major incident occurred when 15 strikers were hospitalized due to "heavy clubbings."[13] By the end of the month, police cracked down and made the first of many mass arrests. An October 29 demonstration of 3000 strikers paraded from studio to studio, brandishing loudspeakers, banners and placards. Citing a court order forbidding large groups of picketers, police randomly yanked people from the procession, resulting in 130 arrests.[14] Such arrests became a daily occurrence, brought forth by any large gathering of strikers. Mass trials followed, the largest the town had ever seen. By December, 1300 strikers were scheduled to be tried in groups of 50 or 60 at a time.[15]

Due to the complexity of the strike, it was impossible to view the strikes in terms of a "good guy" and a "bad guy." The silly battle over semantics only made matters worse. The Hollywood Talent Guilds, faced with the potential ruin of the movie industry, found themselves forced to come to grips with all of these issues in deciding which side to support.

The Talent Guilds Pick a Side

The Screen Writers Guild had taken a neutral position in the previous strike, despite a vocal left-wing urging support and refusing to cross picket lines. Many writers simply worked at home without crossing any picket lines. But as the 1946 strike got underway, it became apparent a stronger stance in one direction or the other would be required. The debate nearly tore the Guild apart.

At the outset, the Writers Guild again adopted a neutral stance, urging members to work at home.[16] However, the vocal minority of radicals protested the lukewarm stance, and demanded the Guild support the strike. This forced the leadership, a mix of conserva-

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[11] *Variety*, October 30, 1946, p. 9.

[12] *Variety*, November 20, 1946, p. 32.

[13] *Variety*, October 2, 1946, p. 26.

[14] *Variety*, October 30, 1946, p. 9.

[15] *Variety*, December 18, 1946, p. 15.

[16] *Variety*, October 9, 1946, p. 31.

tive, liberal and radical forces, to come down more firmly on one side or the other.[17] After heated discussion, the Guild chose to cross picket lines. Pressure from producers, urging them to return to work or face dire consequences, was the main factor in tipping the scales. Screenwriter Frances Goodrich recalled "Our producer at Paramount wanted us to come through the picket line, and our agent said, 'You cannot subject Mrs. Hackett [fellow screenwriter] to this, someone might spit in her face,' and the producer said, 'She should wear it like a badge of honor.'"[18]

Frustrated, many left-wing members continued to support the strike despite the Guild stance. Lester Cole, best known for co-writing *Objective Burma,* is good example. During the course of both strikes, he drafted resolutions accusing studios (in particular Warner Brothers) of denying workers their civil liberties, and proposed Guild members abstain from work until the strikes were settled. Another proposal from Cole offered legal support to writers arrested on the picket line.[19] John Howard Lawson continued to support the strike, despite being fired from his studio for his picket line activities.[20] Dalton Trumbo was perhaps the best known of Hollywood screenwriters to actively support to the CSU cause. Around the time of the Warner Brothers riots, Trumbo spoke at a mass meeting in support of the CSU[21] and penned a rousing speech for Sorrell. Screenwriter Karen Morley recalled that "Herb Sorrell completely captured that meeting with a warm, witty speech in which he condemned people who 'covered the fact that they'd lost their pants by wrapping themselves in the American flag' . . . . I later found out that Herb Sorrell's warm witty words had come from Dalton Trumbo's pen."[22]

During the first strike, the Guild's neutral position had allowed radicals like Cole, Lawson, and Trumbo to participate in the strike as well as remain active members of the Guild. But when Guild members voted to oppose the second strike, these and other radicals were ostracized from their fellow writers. Outcasted, they could not rely on any kind of support or protection from their Guild. Thus, by refusing to cross picket lines, they became vulnerable for all sorts of personal and political attacks.

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[17]Schwartz, pp. 245-48.

[18]Schwartz, p. 248.

[19]All the resolutions were defeated by the Guild Board members. See Ceplair and Englund, pp. 220-221.

[20]Ceplair and Englund, pp. 221-222.

[21]Ceplair and Englund, p. 221.

[22]Schwartz, p. 228.

The Screen Actors Guild, like the Writers, found themselves pushed into taking a stronger stance than before. Although members voted overwhelmingly to cross picket lines,[23] the leadership decided to remain as neutral as possible and take a role in the arbitration process. Thus, with greater stakes than any other organization in the industry, the Actors Guild's leadership made a concerted effort to make sense of the situation and objectively settle the strike as quickly as possible.

Their first arbitration attempt occurred in September of 1946. Members of the Guild's Executive Board, including Gene Kelly, Robert Taylor, George Murphy, and Ronald Reagan, met with "Big Bill" Hutcheson to discuss the mysterious clarification from the three wise men that had been issued in the previous month. After five hours of talks, the Actors gave up, convinced that Hutcheson was a power monger unconcerned with the plight of his workers.[24] At the end of the meeting, Hutcheson told the Actors to "Tell Walsh [IATSE president] that if he'll give in on the August directive, I'll run Sorrell out of Hollywood and break up the CSU in five minutes. I'll do the same to the Commies." As the group of actors exited the hotel, they found Sorrell in the otherwise empty lobby. After briefing him on their conversation with Hutcheson, Sorrell responded "It doesn't matter a damn what Hutcheson says. This thing [strike] is going on, no matter what he does! When it ends up, there'll be only one man running labor in Hollywood and that man will be me!"[25] This dramatic exchange of dialogue, no matter what was really meant by Sorrell and Hutcheson (after all, it occurred at three in the morning), had a big impact on the Actors, particularly Reagan. Not only did it raise the Communist question, but it made them realize they might be in over their heads.

In October, the Actors held their largest attempt at arbitration by refereeing a massive conference call between key union leaders. With violence raging on the picket lines, twelve phones were hooked up, and after a twenty-eight minute conversation, the Actors were convinced of what they believed to be the true nature of the strike. A lack of cooperation on Sorrell's part led certain members of the board to conclude that the true source behind the strikes, the riots, and Sorrell's behavior were the communists. Reagan explains "They were the cause of the labor strife, they used minor jurisdictional disputes as excuses for their scheme. Their aim was to gain economic control of the motion picture industry in order to subvert the screen for their propaganda."[26] Thus, in attempting to

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[23]*Variety*, October 9, 1946, p. 31.

[24]Reagan, pp. 148-152.

[25]Reagan, p. 152.

[26]Reagan, p. 159.

arbitrate a settlement to the strike, the Screen Actors Guild Board ended up adopting Brewer's notion of a communist plot. Once they decided this, their arbitration attempts ceased, and they adopted a hostile view towards the strike.

Ronald Reagan played a critical role in the adoption of the communist explanation, and devoted himself to alerting others of what he believed to be the true nature of the strikes. Indeed, they had a significant impact on his political and personal life. He spends a fourth of his 1965 autobiography *Where's the Rest of Me?* discussing the strikes, especially focusing on the arbitration attempts made by the Actors. Declaring himself a former "wide-eyed liberal" and even "Communist dupe,"[27] the strikes first alerted him to the communist issue, and pointed him in a more conservative political direction overall. His fervent attention to the strikes had many consequences: his film career declined, his attention to political activities increased, it ruined his marriage to Jane Wyman, and perhaps is the root of an anti-communist mentality retained for the rest of his life. In an article entitled "The Making of a Zealot," Daniel Biedermen describes the transforming effect of the second strike on Reagan and his being influenced by the "conservative clique of suave actors who dominated the decision making process of the SAG."[28] The strike became an obsession for the formerly easygoing, self-assured leading man. He lost weight, his health failed, and paranoia forced him to carry a gun at all times. Gene Kelly gives a vivid description of Reagan's state of mind at the time:

> Reagan was very emotionally upset. All the time. He would go into tirades about communism and at one time he was carrying a gun . . . and imagining that a lot of things would happen. Now he might have been threatened. I don't know. But [things were] so highly exaggerated that it was hard to make logic. I do know that they weren't as intelligent as they were emotional. . . . You couldn't talk to [George] Murphy or Reagan about anything without them saying "the Communists are going to take over." Everything was so completely clouded by the Russians are coming, the Russians are coming.[29]

Thus, Reagan had a large role in spreading a communist-oriented explanation for the strikes. While his devotion was exceptional, he represents a broader trend, just starting to gain a widespread following: the genuine fear of communism. Reagan's personal and professional sacrifices show his sincerity in the belief that the nation faced major peril from Red infiltration, which he believed the strikes were a manifestation of. Using his oratorical brilliance, Reagan alarmed others to what he honestly believed to be a serious threat. At the time, Reagan was merely one of a growing chorus preaching anti-communism. But in

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[27]"I was their boy!" he exclaimed. Cogley, p. 69.

[28]Biederman, *Nation*, July 22, 1974, p. 782.

[29]Biederman, *Nation*, July 22, 1974, p. 783.

light of his subsequent political career, it is interesting to consider the circumstances from which he arrived at his convictions.

The Communist Question Gains Legitimacy

Many of Reagan's ideas about the strikes came from Roy Brewer, whose activity in the strikes increased as they went along. Brewer had been given a large degree of control over the Hollywood situation due to his lack of association with the past corruption of Willie Bioff and George Browne. In fact, his first day on the job coincided with the first day of the 1945 strike.[30]

Earning the trust of the producers was key in Brewer's rising importance. By attending producer meetings, he was able to influence their perceptions of the strike.[31] Although he did not convince all studio executives of a vast conspiracy, his hard-line anti-communist stance did at least give the strike a political tinge. Pat Casey, representative for the producers, disagreed with Brewer on many points. At a congressional hearing, he described the nature of Brewer's efforts: "My God. I have heard Communist, Communist. It gets down to where if you do not agree with somebody you are a Communist."[32] But while not everyone agreed with Brewer, the Red-Baiting succeeded in swaying producer support towards the IATSE and in raising eyebrows about the CSU.

Also, by blaming the communists, Brewer provided a simple way of understanding complex events. His explanation reduced the strike to good vs. evil. For those not familiar with the internal politics and intricacies of the AFL, or organized labor in general, such as the Screen Actors Guild Board, blaming the communists proved a convenient way to understand the strikes. Brewer capitalized on this one-dimensional idea in his propaganda campaign directed at studio executives, producers, and especially the Screen Actors Guild leadership. The CSU had its own propaganda campaign, but it was disjointed, and failed to focus on single theme. Sometimes the corrupt history of the IATSE was emphasized, other times the political biases of producers, yet other times the injustice of the arrests and violence on the picket lines. In other words, their attempts to gain sympathy were as

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[30]Prindle, p. 41.

[31]Ceplair and Englund, pp. 222-23.

[32]Ceplair and Englund, p. 223.

complex as the strikes themselves.[33] It is easy to see why many preferred Brewer's simpler version.

It was during the second strike that others began seeing red in Hollywood as well. In October of 1947, an AFL vice-president wrote a blistering editorial about Hollywood, calling it the third largest communist center in the United States. He also urged a boycott of any film worked on by or featuring a communist in any way.[34] Eric Johnston, president of the Motion Picture Association of America, urged congress to force all communists out of union posts.[35] Dick Walsh also accused the communists of starting a rumor that he wanted a "dictatorship" of Hollywood labor.[36]

The Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals (see page 12) saw Brewer as a strong ally. He was embraced by the organization, which risked his reputation as a labor leader due to the well-known anti-labor stance the organization held.[37] The Motion Picture Alliance had previously sent a letter to Congress claiming "Aliens of un-American ideology have infiltrated into the United States, here to take jobs in American industries and to spread European and Asiatic propaganda detrimental to American principles, institutions, and safety." The letter begged for a congressional investigation to expose how Hollywood industrialists were "coddling Communists."[38] With funding from William Randolph Hearst, and praise from his press, the organization contributed to the anti-communist frenzy that was gaining momentum.

Meanwhile, the House Committee on un-American Activities was taking a newfound interest in Hollywood. A Republican landslide in the 1946 elections and a new committee chairman, J. Parnell Thomas, had increased the scope and ambitions of HUAC.[39] At his inauguration, Thomas announced "The committee plans to give a good airing to Communist influences in Hollywood. I intend to make it the most active year in the committee's history."[40] A small scale, one-man investigation was soon planned to look

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[33]Prindle, p. 43.

[34]*Variety*, October 2, 1946, p. 4.

[35]*Variety*, March 5, 1947, pp. 3, 54.

[36]*Variety*, March 12, 1947, p. 12.

[37]Cogley, p. 66.

[38]Prindle, p. 51.

[39]*Variety*, December 30, 1946, pp. 1, 20

[40]*Variety*, January 29, 1947, p. 5.

into the alleged union infiltration and subversive film content.[41] But the man who was to do the investigation, freshman congressman Richard Nixon, soon became too preoccupied with the Alger Hiss case to hold the investigation. A preliminary HUAC fact-finding investigation, led by California state legislator Jack Tenney of Los Angeles, was held in March. At its conclusion, Tenney made a formal report to the California legislature calling Herb Sorrell a "secret member of the Communist party."[42] Slowly but surely, Brewer was gaining adherents to his anti-communist crusade in Hollywood, regardless of its justification.

Two months later, HUAC's J.P. Thomas turned his attention to Hollywood for the first time. A subpoena was issued to a prominent Party member named Gerhart Eisler, but Eisler refused to testify and fled the country. Thomas then learned of Eisler's estranged brother, Hans, a successful Hollywood composer.[43] When called to testify in Washington, Hans proved an evasive witness, answering few of Thomas' questions. Although the investigation turned out to be pointless, Brewer played a key role by providing Thomas with information, and alarming him of how the Communists "stuck their noses into the Hollywood strikes." Brewer also asserted that the National Labor Relations Board, which had made many decisions favoring the CSU during the strikes, was merely "an accessory to the Communist Party."[44] While the Eisler investigation was of little consequence, it did gain a surprising amount of press. It also linked Brewer with Thomas, the number one Communist-hunter in the country.

By mid-1947, the CSU strike was essentially lost. Picket lines dwindled. CSU locals were dissolving with greater frequency. Workers joined IATSE unions just get food on the table. But a chaotic atmosphere had been created. Brewer's allegations of a communist plot to take over Hollywood, and their spread by people like Reagan combined with a revamped HUAC, made Hollywood ripe for a full-scale Communist investigation.

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[41] *Variety*, March 5, 1947, p. 3.

[42] *Variety*, March 26, 1947, p. 13.

[43] Schwartz, p. 251.

[44] *Variety*, May 14, 1947, p. 20.

The HUAC Investigation

In October, 1947, J. Parnell Thomas made good on his promise to conduct a full-scale investigation concerning Hollywood communist infiltration. By focussing on Hollywood, HUAC was guaranteed ample press since nothing could create headlines better than big name Hollywood personalities like Gary Cooper, Robert Montgomery, and Walt Disney. An investigation into government offices might have been more vital to the nation's security, but Thomas could capture the attention of the nation with a Hollywood investigation, and maximize his political visibility in the process.

The atmosphere of the hearings was that of a circus. Screenwriter Gordon Khan, later blacklisted himself, describes the scene:

> The newsreel cameras, their motors murmuring, caught J. Parnell Thomas as he entered. The flashlight bulbs of thirty news cameramen volleyed silently in his face until he waved his small white hand for a halt. . . . About one third of the right side of the room . . . were rows of control panels and other broadcasting equipment manned by technicians and announcers. Loudspeakers for the public address system which amplified every whisper in the hearing room were strategically clustered around the walls. . . . [And not once] did J. Parnell or any of the hundred newspapers covering the hearings ever mention the fact that nowhere in that room was an American flag.[1]

In Thomas' words, the intentions of the hearings were to "determine the extent of Communist infiltration in the Hollywood motion-picture industry," and figure out "what strategic positions in the industry have been captured by these elements."[2] Although the hearings were not designed to institute a blacklist, it was no secret they would be used for that purpose. The committee's ultimate concern was communist propaganda creeping onto the screen, designed to brainwash the nation to the will of the Kremlin. Labor unions were the supposed vehicles of this infiltration, and testimony would attempt to portray the strikes as revolutionary-oriented manifestations of the planned communist takeover. Throughout the ten days of testimony, witness after witness referred to the "communistic nature" of the strikes, and portrayed Herb Sorrell as the Hollywood communist kingpin.

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[1]Gordon Khan, *Hollywood on Trial*, New York: Boni & Gaer, 1948, p. 7.

[2]Communist Infiltration of the Motion Picture Industry, Hearings before the House Committee on un-American Activities, 80th Congress, 1st Session, 1947, p. 3. Hereafter cited as "Hearing".

The hearings consisted of testimony from two groups of witnesses. The first group was the "friendly" witnesses, anti-communist figures in Hollywood who seized the opportunity to expose communism in their industry. The other group was the "unfriendlies." These nineteen witnesses (only ten testified due to time constraints) were those believed to be communists, or at least connected to the Party. The unfriendlies collectively agreed not to cooperate with Thomas by claiming constitutional immunity from the $64 question, "Are you now or have you ever been a member of the Communist party?" This analysis will focus entirely on the friendly witnesses, since they provided strike-related, one-sided though it was. Most blacklist literature focuses on the plight of the unfriendly witnesses, and the impossible situation they were placed. For the most comprehensive telling of the story of the unfriendly witnesses, see Ceplair and Englund's *Inquisition in Hollywood.*

Damaging Testimony

The first witness to deal explicitly with unions in his testimony was director Sam Wood, who had served as the first president of the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals. According to his testimony, the formation of the Alliance was "self-defense," since if communists were to gain control the unions and guilds, they "would have the plum in their lap and they would move on to use it [the screen] for Communist propaganda."[3] Wood discussed opposition the Alliance had faced at its formation, and named Sorrell as one of the key opponents. Such opposition, Wood claimed, "referred to us as anti-semitic, anti-labor, anti-Negro. Of course, always anti-labor when they couldn't think of anything else." "Isn't that the usual tactics of the Communist?" asked Prosecutor Stripling, to which Wood responded "To smear, yes. Smear and hide."[4] Later, Wood described methods by which communists exerted power in guilds and unions. After obtaining key positions in unions, communists would never suggest the names of those who opposed them for jobs. After a period of unemployment, the anti-communist workers would be released from their contracts, forced to find other jobs.[5] Another method was filibustering at union meetings late into the night until normal members go home bored out

[3]Hearing, p. 56.

[4]Hearing, p. 56.

[5]Hearing, p. 59.

of their minds. Being the only ones left, communists could then pass any resolutions they wanted.[6]

Suave actor Adolphe Menjou attacked Sorrell more ruthlessly than Wood. A self-declared expert on the evils of communism,[7] Menjou made his prejudices clear: "I am a witch-hunter if the witches are Communists. I am a Red-baiter. I make no bones about it. I would like to see them all back in Russia."[8] He used the strikes as evidence of communist activity in Hollywood, and presented the single most damaging piece of evidence regarding Sorrell's communist connections: his alleged party card. He revealed a Communist Party card under the name "Herbert K. Stewart", Stewart being Sorrell's mother's maiden name,[9] along with a sworn statement from "admittedly the world's greatest handwriting expert" claiming the signature on the card was Sorrell's.[10] In describing the strike, and particularly the Warner Brothers riots, Menjou placed 100% of the blame on Sorrell's shoulders:

> He is responsible for the most incredible brutality—beatings, the overturning of cars on private property in front of the Warner Brothers studio, shocking parades, where one man almost lost an eye in front of the MGM studio—a most outrageous performance and violation of the picketing laws in California. I think he did everything possible to embarrass the producers. I don't believe the Communist Party has any intention of ever having any peace of any kind, and I would regret the day that a man of Mr. Sorrell's characteristics should ever be in charge of labor unions in California. God help us if he ever does.[11]

Menjou's accusations convinced many that Sorrell was a communist, and the Party card seemed indisputable evidence. As the hearings progressed, witness after witness reinforced the same themes.

MGM script supervisor James McGuinness portrayed Sorrell as a power baron, forcing his unions to strike against their wills. Similar to Wood's testimony, McGuinness emphasized the unpopularity of Sorrell by pointing out that many of his unions turned against him and opposed the strikes. McGuinness also told of the "utmost" support given to the strike by the Screen Writers Guild. In fact, the Guild was central to the testimony of

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[6]Hearing, p. 62.

[7]According to Khan, Menjou had read over 450 books on the subject. See Khan, p. 47.

[8]Hearing, p. 100.

[9]More high profile members often took such pseudonyms, even in the 1930's when joining the Party was not as frowned upon.

[10]Hearing, p. 97.

[11]Hearing, p. 98.

many witnesses. Writer Fred Niblo testified that "the Screen Writers Guild has been the spark plug and the spear head of the Communist influence and infiltration in Hollywood."[12] It was believed that Sorrell was responsible for organizing the craft unions, and John Howard Lawson, former president of the Writer's Guild, was the main force in organizing the talent Guilds. Numerous witnesses called Lawson a communist, and condemned him as a supporter of the strikes, which linked him with the now-presumed communist Sorrell. It is not surprising that Lawson was the first unfriendly witness called to the stand, the first cited for contempt, and the first banished from his profession.

The testimony of George Murphy and Ronald Reagan further damaged Sorrell and the CSU. Murphy and Reagan had each participated in the Screen Actors Guild arbitration attempt during the second strike. On the witness stand, each told the same story of the failed arbitration attempts, and pointed to Sorrell's stubbornness as the sole cause of the stalemate. Reagan boasted of their expertise in the issue: "I believe the Screen Actors Guild committee which put three people in one room and tried to settle the strike perhaps is better informed on the situation and on the jurisdictional strike than any other group in the motion picture industry."[13] When asked about communist infiltration into the Actor's Guild, Murphy estimated there were very few communists in the Guild, perhaps around one percent. His estimate was based on the Guild vote determining whether to support the strike or not, which came out 97.3% in favor of crossing picket lines. This implies an automatic, unquestioned connection between supporting the strikes and being a communist.

Author Oliver Carlson took the stand soon after. His 1941 history of California, entitled *A Mirror for Californians*, included a chapter describing Hollywood as a three-ring circus with the third ring dominated by the Hollywood "Newly-Reds."[14] While the chapter demonstrates that most Hollywood personalities joined the Communist Party in the 1930's for innocent intentions, such as fighting fascism, he nonetheless writes "To any outsider visiting Hollywood in 1937 or 1938, it would appear that the whole motion-picture colony was merely an adjunct to Soviet Russia."[15] On the witness stand, he expressed alarm about the People's Educational Center, a Marxist-oriented school based in Los Angeles. After presenting a catalogue of courses, Carlson linked the school to John

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[12]Hearing, p. 190.

[13]Hearing, p. 216.

[14]Oliver Carlson, *A Mirror for Californians*, Indianapolis: The Bobbs Merill Company, 1941, pp 154-60.

[15]Carlson, p. 158.

Howard Lawson and Sorrell, who served on the board of directors.[16] Implicating Sorrell further was a course entitled "Labor's Key Problems," taught by a CSU lawyer.[17] Later in his testimony, Carlson pointed out the importance of trade unions in the overall conspiracy, since they could become an "organ for revolutionary purposes" once they were all under communist domination.[18]

Walt Disney provided more testimony about Sorrell than any other witness aside from Roy Brewer. Prior to the existence of the CSU, Sorrell had organized a successful strike against Disney in order to form the Screen Cartoonists Guild.[19] Disney's image of Sorrell was once again a reckless power-monger organizing workers against their will and using bodies like the National Labor Relations Board "as it suited his own purposes."[20] Disney also emphasized Sorrell's smear tactics: "Well, they distorted everything, they lied; there was no way you could counteract anything they did . . . they called my plant a sweat shop, and that is not true, and anybody in Hollywood would prove it otherwise."[21] Thus, Disney claimed his harmonious workers had been invaded by the outside force of Sorrell, and when Disney would not "knuckle under," he was smeared by Sorrell.[22]

Before concluding his testimony, Disney was asked if he had ever discussed communism with Sorrell. His answer, while it proves little, nonetheless linked Sorrell further with the Communist cause:

> He evidently heard that I had called them all a bunch of Communists—and I believe they are. At the meeting he leaned over and he said, "You think I am a Communist, don't you," and I told him that all I knew was what I heard and what I had seen, and he laughed and said, "Well, I used their money to finance my strike of 1937," and he said that he had gotten the money through the personal check of some actor, but he didn't name the actor. I didn't go into it any further. I just listened.[23]

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[16]Hearing, p. 242.

[17]Hearing, p. 243.

[18]Hearing, p. 248.

[19]Not successful according to Disney, but he is a small minority in that opinion. See Schnickel, pp. 249-262.

[20]Hearing, p. 283.

[21]Hearing, p. 283.

[22]It is worth remembering that Disney was the first vice-president of the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals. This gives insight into his political stances and biases.

[23]Hearing, p. 284.

After a solid week of testimony, numerous witnesses had portrayed Sorrell in the worst light possible. For anyone sitting in the audience, reporting for the press, or listening to the hearings on the radio, it would have been difficult to imagine Sorrell as anything other than a communist conspiring to take over Hollywood labor. But the worst had not been heard yet. Roy Brewer took the stand the next week, and provided the most concrete evidence of subversive activity of the hearings. Although significant damage had already been done, Brewer's testimony would seal the coffin.

Brewer's Testimony

As one of the final friendly witnesses, Brewer's purpose for testifying was to provide evidence for the allegations of the previous witnesses. The first piece of evidence he presented was Sorrell's Party card, which Adolphe Menjou had previously submitted. Like Menjou, he accompanied it with statements of handwriting experts. But unlike previous witnesses, Brewer claimed the plot to take over Hollywood had not originated with Sorrell.

When Brewer arrived in Hollywood in March, 1945, according to his testimony, he quickly noticed that the brand-new strike was "not an ordinary trade union argument,"[24] and began looking into the history of Hollywood labor. His investigations led him to a series of documents revolving around the activities of a studio employee named Jeff Kibre. These documents provide evidence that Kibre was a functionary of the Communist party whose mission was to organize Hollywood labor into a single communist-dominated industrial union. The documents, mostly letters and reports to his superiors in the CIO and other fellow "Comrades," detailed the progress of his activities. Furthermore, Brewer claimed a definite connection existed between Kibre and the Soviet Union, based on a 1934 meeting in Carmel during which a Russian purchasing agency representative allegedly contacted Kibre and laid out the grand scheme.[25]

Due to time constraints,[26] Brewer could only read bits and pieces from the documents in his testimony. In a letter to CIO headquarters in California, Kibre describes his successful building of a "studio unemployment conference," a preliminary step in establish-

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[24]Hearing, p. 347.

[25]Hearing, p. 348.

[26]The hearings were taking longer than expected, and were being thrashed in much of the non-Hearst press. See Ceplair and Englund, pp. 288-89.

ing an industrial union. The unemployment conference was built by infiltrating the already existing guilds and unions, most of which belonged to the IATSE at the time. The document reads "Influential groups have been established in every major union and guild. These groups are coordinated by a regular underground apparatus. It is through these groups, based in the present organizations, committed to the object of an industrial union for the 35,000 workers in the industry, that the present field representative [Kibre] is working."[27] Another document was a letter Kibre wrote to a fellow Party functionary, which opens "My Dear Bob: Well, one thing about Reds. They seldom write except on business. A number of things are on my mind, but it first appears that the long-awaited showdown in the industry between the IA[TSE] and real unity is fast on its way and that's the main business of this note."[28] Although the documents are general and unspecific, they definitely show communist activity in Hollywood in the 1930's.

Brewer then linked the efforts of Kibre to the Conference of Studio Unions. "The significance of the technique which is outlined in Mr. Kibre's early reports, as I see it, Mr. Chairman, is that that technique has been followed since that time in the organization and the activities of the Conference of Studio Unions."[29] Furthermore, many of the unions involved in Kibre's unemployment conference later made up the CSU. Thus, according to Brewer, the central purpose of the CSU was the continuation of Kibre's attempt at a large-scale, industry-wide union, making Sorrell Kibre's successor. The centerpiece of Sorrell's plot was the Painters union that he was a business agent for. Brewer describes how union after union became "sucked in" to the Painters union, even though it often made little sense. For example, there is nothing unusual in a Cartoonists Guild hooking up with a Painters Guild, since both involve similar crafts. But a Story Analysts Guild? Or a Publicists Guild? Office Employees? Clearly there is little connection between painting and these other professions. Due to this "peculiar" fact, according to Brewer, "it became evident to us that the painters union was being used by the Communist core as an instrument of setting up within this trade union structure a second industrial union. . . . The first thing that they were trying to do was to bring into the CSU all those unions that they could bring around to the Communist Party philosophy."[30]

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[27]Hearing, p. 349.

[28]Hearing, p. 349.

[29]Hearing, p. 351.

[30]Hearing, pp. 352-53.

Brewer then discussed the strikes, but provided little insight about their role in the above conspiracy, other than to "disrupt and destroy the American Federation of Labor" and establish an industrial union.[31] However, Brewer was adamant that the strikes and the violence they created were the direct result of communists. The riots broke out due to desperation on the part of the CSU, since "for all practical purposes, by the first of October that strike had been lost."[32] A report made on the riots by the California legislature soon after indicated a communist influence existed in the picket lines. But Brewer had previously arrived at the same conclusion, since "there were a number of prominent people who had been identified with Communist activities. Among them was Mr. John Howard Lawson. . . . "[33] Brewer listed several more prominent members of the film industry involved with the picket lines, among them Dalton Trumbo. Ultimately, Sorrell was the main cause of the violence since he had organized and directed the picket line activities.

After a brief pause in the hearing, Brewer read a prepared statement that summarized the role of Kibre, and his connection with the CSU. But the statement revealed a slightly different picture of the strikes: "The real purpose of these strikes was the weakening and the ultimate destruction of the IATSE, which was the recognized bulwark against Communist seizure of the studio unions."[34] Thus, Brewer saw the strikes as an attempt to eliminate opposition to a communist presence in Hollywood in order to form the much-discussed industrial union. The last piece of the puzzle in place, Brewer was excused from the stand. But he was recalled later in the afternoon to substantiate some earlier remarks regarding the National Labor Relations Board. Since the Board had favored the CSU several times during the course of the strikes, Brewer investigated the Board and discovered that, in his opinion, it was also under communist domination. Most of his accusations involved Board members' affiliations with Communist "front" organizations or the CSU. The presence of these individuals "had let us to believe, and I think rightly, that in many cases our interests were prejudiced."[35] Thus, the conspiracy had spread to a legitimate government agency, which, according to Brewer, was doing its share in promoting Sorrell's efforts.

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[31]Hearing, p. 352.

[32]Hearing, p. 354.

[33]Hearing, p. 354.

[34]Hearing, p. 357.

[35]Hearing, p. 395.

At the conclusion of the ten days of testimony, ten respected personalities had each been forcibly removed from the witness stand for failing to answer their communist allegations. Underlying the drama was a subtext of subversion in labor, instigated in the 1930's by Jeff Kibre, and continued by Sorrell. The strikes were supposedly the most deliberate effort to put Brewer's master scheme into action. Sorrell, with no opportunity to defend himself, and with no one to stick up for him, was repeatedly portrayed as a communist kingpin determined to destroy the IATSE, and ultimately aid in the subversion of the screen for communist propaganda. Although documentation of Sorrell's activities were sparse, his party card seems difficult to take issue with. His indirect connections with Kibre also do suggest some sort of overall plan to reorganize Hollywood labor, perhaps for communistic purposes. One thing is certain: all the testimony regarding the strike was presented by well-known anti-communists. The hearings never allowed any other viewpoint to be heard. Although evidence exists of communist activity, there is stronger evidence indicating that Brewer's story is merely a conspiracy theory gone out of control.

The Priest and the "Patriot"

The fall-out of the October, 1947 HUAC Hollywood investigation was quickly felt. In November, the ten unfriendly witnesses were formally charged with contempt of congress. Shortly afterwards, slightly over 50 producers and studio executives secretly met at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York to discuss the situation. The result of their meeting was the "Waldorf Statement," which fired each of the Hollywood Ten and vowed the same treatment to anyone who refused to cooperate with future HUAC investigations. The statement is seen as the official start of the blacklist, which continued until the mid-1960's for most of its victims, although some would remain unemployable well into the 1970's.[1] There is little doubt the blacklist resulted directly from the October HUAC investigation, during which the CSU strikes were repeatedly pointed to as the most concrete evidence of communist activity in Hollywood. But as was shown, the testimony regarding the strikes was one-sided and seldom substantiated with any hard evidence. Had Father George Dunne been given the chance to testify, a different and more honest picture of the strikes might have emerged.

Father Dunne

A Jesuit priest and associate professor at Loyola College,[2] Father Dunne was asked to write an article about the CSU/IATSE situation in early 1946 by the Catholic publication *Commonweal.* While conducting his research, Dunne became fascinated by the situation and became actively involved in trying to settle it. During the second strike, he became a major figure in the arbitration process.[3] But unlike the Screen Actors Guild leadership, Dunne's sympathies fell with the CSU and Sorrell. Through his mediation efforts, Dunne got to know Sorrell well and gained substantial insight into Sorrell's charac-

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[1]John Belton, *American Cinema/American Culture*, New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1994, pp. 241-242.

[2]Jurisdictional Disputes in the Motion Picture Industry, Hearings before a Special Subcommittee of the House Committee on Education and Labor, 80th Congress, 1st session, 1947, p. 431. Hereafter cited as "Jurisdiction."

[3]Schwartz, p. 250.

ter and beliefs. Dunne strongly believed Sorrell was not a communist and the accusations were only complicating further the already complex labor situation.

Dunne harbored left-wing sympathies, and was occasionally accused himself of being a communist. But his concerns were more cosmic than political. He explained in a later congressional hearing "I am not a Communist. I am not a Communist fellow-traveler. I sympathize with them. . . . I sympathize with anyone that is intellectually confused. I subscribe to the doctrine that we cannot hate anybody. I don't hate Communists. We must love, not only our neighbor but our enemy, assuming the Communist is our enemy."[4] While Dunne entered the situation with definite biases about organized labor, it is unlikely he would have supported Sorrell so strongly had he felt Sorrell was a communist. Considering Dunne's effort to get to know Sorrell at a personal level, his opinions seem trustworthy and dependable. By comparison, most of the HUAC witnesses who blasted Sorrell had never met or had any direct contact with him. Those who did, such as Disney, had reasons to despise him aside from his alleged political convictions.

Dunne never wrote his intended article, mainly due to nightly rehearsals for a play he had scripted.[5] But as his involvement with the situation increased, he was able to write a different article for *Commonweal* in June of 1947. Entitled "Peace in Jail," it began by deploring the mass arrests and mass trials that were then underway. The focus then shifted to Sorrell, observing that any average citizen reading the *Los Angeles Times* or any Hearst paper would get the impression that Sorrell was "a double-dyed villain who periodically plunges Hollywood into the turmoil of labor strife and sets his rough, tough followers to beating up innocent policemen."[6] Dunne attacked such accusations, claiming they were merely reckless attempts to smear Sorrell's character. Dunne illustrated this point by describing an incident involving Jack Tenney, the state legislator who had proclaimed that Sorrell was a "secret member of the Communist Party."[7] Prior to his political career, Tenney had been the president of a musicians local. After writing a new constitution for the union, he showed it to Sorrell, who bluntly told him that it was awful and would probably get him kicked out of the union. Tenney ignored the advice and was promptly voted out of office as Sorrell had predicted. Dunne thus illustrated that Tenney's communist accusations were mere a chance to even the score with Sorrell by smearing him.

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[4]Jurisdiction, p. 429.

[5]Jurisdiction, p. 406.

[6]George Dunne, "Peace in Jail," *Commonweal*, June 20, 1947, p. 232.

[7]*Variety*, March 26, 1947, p. 13.

Dunne then gave his overall impression of Sorrell:

> I also know Sorrell. During the past year I have come to know him quite intimately. My considered opinion of him is that he is one of the most genuine and honest persons I know and a man of complete integrity. Not everybody likes Sorrell. The communists have more than once been very angry with him and, though not for publication, have said harsh things about him. Roy Brewer, Hollywood representative of the IATSE, gives the impression of turning green at the mention of his name. Brewer, of course, says that Sorrell is a communist. But Brewer has a very simple norm for determining who is a communist. Whoever crosses Brewer is a communist.
>
> On the other hand, some of those who have fought Sorrell most bitterly and unscrupulously, the producers, will admit, off the record, that they have nothing but admiration for his complete honesty and integrity. People sometimes admire what they cannot imitate.[8]

Dunne went on to call Sorrell "a diamond in the rough," possessing many qualities "which to me are a reflection of genuine holiness." He described his many visits with Sorrell as humbling experiences, citing the sincerity in his voice and words, his half-shy smile, and the warm affection of his eyes contrasting with his rough and battered face. The article closed by praising Sorrell's attitude about being in jail, as Sorrell explained it to a carpenter friend of his: "Nobody can hurt you if you have a clear conscience. Jail can't hurt you. But if you haven't, you can't live with yourself. It'll kill you. Remember that and stop worrying about me going to jail."[9]

It was largely due to Father Dunne's efforts that the House Committee on Education and Labor's investigation of the strikes generally ignored the communist question. Although Dunne supported the CSU, his strongest conviction was that the communist accusations had no place in the labor negotiations. The Labor Committee agreed, and conducted its thorough investigation of the situation with scant mention of communism. The investigation began shortly before HUAC's, and continued off and on for several months. Of the 77 witnesses that testified, aside from Brewer and Reagan, few mentioned or took seriously the communist issue. This is significant; if the communists were responsible for the strike, then why was the issue barely mentioned in nearly 2000 pages of testimony? The hearing focussed on what was really at issue: jurisdiction, wages, construction vs. erection, hours, policies, contracts, and other issues too boring to merit press coverage. Indeed, the press paid little attention to the hearing. Its focus on the sensationalistic HUAC hearings only helped contribute to the growing paranoid perception that communists were beginning to chip away at the American way of life. A simple glance at this

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[8]Dunne, p. 232.

[9]Dunne, pp. 232-33.

other hearing invalidates a great deal of the HUAC testimony and allows us to view the strike for what it really was.

Sorrell and the Communist Party

Brewer's testimony before the House Committee on Education and Labor resembled his testimony before HUAC, claiming communism as the root of the strikes. For proof, he again referred to the photostatic copy of Sorrell's alleged Party card, Sorrell's suspicious connections to communist front organizations, and his links to the activities of Jeff Kibre. But what actually was Sorrell's relationship to communism? The Party card presented may in fact have been Sorrell's. It is difficult to dispute the testimony of "the foremost handwriting expert in America."[10] Perhaps Sorrell even went to a few Party meetings at some point in his life. But if the affiliation did exist, it made little dent on his overall character. He was surely not a communist in spirit. He seemed a hard-boiled, often uncompromising labor leader, whose views often matched those of the official Communist Party line. Given the Party's pro-labor stance, the fact that their views overlap should not be a major revelation. Although not all accounts of Sorrell are as glowing as Dunne's, he is consistently described as honest. Under oath, he denied he was or ever had been a communist. He also denied it in his unpublished memoirs, although he admitted that Party members sometimes influenced him.[11] So if evidence implicates him as a communist, *he* did not consider himself one, and that seems most important. It likewise seems doubtful that Sorrell considered himself part of a communist plan to unite the Hollywood craft unions.

Many of his actions also indicate he did not have a communist affiliation. If he was uniting Hollywood labor under the Red banner, why would he call a strike during wartime, breaking policy and enraging the Party in the process? Perhaps he was a self-motivated communist acting on his own conviction rather than Party doctrine. But the plot Brewer describes is so elaborate and involved that it would require central organization, and would have to revolve around the Communist Party, or perhaps the CIO. Brewer and other witnesses claimed Sorrell was responsible for uniting the craft unions, while John Howard Lawson was to unite the talent guilds. Ultimately, their efforts were to be united

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[10]Hearing, p. 346.

[11]Prindle, p. 40.

into one large labor unit. Hence, for the story to make sense, Sorrell could not simply be a self-directed communist organizing for his own purposes. It only seems logical that, despite the Party card, Sorrell had little connection with the Party. His comments and behavior verify that he was a devoted labor leader, accepting support when it was offered, but working independent of any large political scheme. His comment to Disney about using communist money, which to Disney reinforced Sorrell's communist identity, actually implies a disrespect for the Party. Sorrell's connection to the Communist Party can be summed up as follows: if the Communists were willing to give him money, he was willing to take it.

A final note on Sorrell is worth mentioning. En route to a weekly union meeting in early March, 1947, three men, one of them dressed as a Los Angeles police officer, pulled Sorrell over, handcuffed him, beat him unconscious, and threw him in their car. During the ride, Sorrell was repeatedly beaten at any sign of stirring. The kidnappers drove him to a remote spot in the Mojave desert, and upon dumping him from the car, fired two shots in his direction and left him for dead. Fortunately for Sorrell, both shots missed, and his past boxing career dulled the effect of the beating. He rolled to the nearest highway, and was picked up by a passer-by who took him to the nearest hospital. Later in the week, a *Variety* article compared the methods of the kidnappers to those of Chicago mobsters, with which the IATSE had a well-known past affiliation. The article cited that during the St. Valentine's Day massacre of the 1920's, thugs had similarly dressed as policemen. Also mentioned was the "handcuffing of Sorrell, method Harvey Church used in Chicago for killing of two automobile salesmen in one of Windy City's most brutal crimes." Sorrell, during one of his brief conscious spells, also overheard his abductors discussing heading to Reno after the job for a payoff.[12]

While there is no direct evidence linking the IATSE to the kidnapping, Sorrell had repeatedly charged that gangster Willie Bioff still had ties with the organization. This must be taken into consideration. Sorrell had many enemies but none as bitter or powerful as the IATSE. Since the IATSE had such a history of affiliation with the Chicago underworld, a connection could exist. Dick Walsh, president of the IATSE, claimed his organization had nothing to do with the incident. He also "pooh-poohed the publicity given the incident," as *Variety* so elegantly put it. Walsh went on to say if "anyone can prove that Willie Bioff or George Browne has anything to do with any IA local I'll resign as interna-

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[12]*Variety*, March 5, 1947, pp. 9, 18.

tional president."[13] Obviously, the IATSE is not guilty by suspicion. But links to the Chicago underworld could have still existed that Walsh was unaware of.

Brewer's Over-excitedness

Brewer never relented in his accusations of Sorrell. Since Sorrell flatly denied the charge, Brewer concluded that Sorrell must have struck a deal with the Party to keep his identity secret while carrying out their subversive program. It is worth remembering that Brewer arrived in Hollywood with strong anti-communist sentiments. Events early in the first strike convinced him of its political nature, and once his mind was made up, he devoted his energy to alerting others of the conspiracy rather than looking at facts objectively. As Red hue faded into the picture, it clouded his subsequent perceptions and judgments of the strikes. Brewer placed this clouded narrative over the real events of the strike and saw a perfect fit. Furthermore, the misconstrued narrative turned out to be advantageous in gaining support from others who understood little about the complexities and intricacies of organized labor. Ronald Reagan is the best example of someone influential who, unable to fathom the realities of the strike, adopted the fiction.

Reagan's sincerity in his beliefs about the strike is shown by the emotional toll it had on his personal and professional life. But was Brewer also sincere? After all, being a labor man, he should have been perfectly capable of understanding the jurisdictional issues. It could be argued he was merely using the communist explanation to scare people into supporting the IATSE, the "recognized bulwark against fighting communism in Hollywood."[14] Indeed, many historians have made the charge. Father Dunne also blasted Brewer for the same reasons. It is easy to view Brewer as a earlier version of McCarthy, manipulating the situation for his own aggrandizement by capitalizing on an exaggerated fear of a communist takeover.

It is true that Brewer juxtaposed his incorrect narrative, gained support, and ultimately defeated the strike and bolstered his own career and influence in Hollywood as a result. But evidence suggests that he *genuinely believed* in the conspiracy himself. He saw the strikes as an early step of a communist takeover of the United States, and by alerting others of his convictions, Brewer was simply following his conscience as an American. In

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[13]*Variety*, March 12, 1947, p. 29.

[14]Brewer used this phrase in his prepared statement during his HUAC testimony. See Hearing, p. 357.

an interview with author David Prindle decades after the strikes, Brewer complained that historians don't "really understand the capacity of the Communists to destroy. . . . Things will not grow naturally with the Communists in the picture. . . . I don't mind opposition—I like opposition—because sometimes I'm wrong, but I don't want a guy telling me something that he isn't, especially when he's attached to an organization that's trying to destroy the world."[15] Prindle describes Brewer as a "short, round man with a soft voice and a polite, almost shy demeanor, but his words carry the certitude of the righteous." Unfortunately, such "righteous" determination to save Hollywood from the communists resulted in a short-sightedness that blinded him to the real nature of the situation. His conviction about Sorrell is the most significant example of this short-sightedness, since once his mind was made up about Sorrell, there was no chance of changing it. Additionally, in Brewer's paranoid eyes, any person defending Sorrell, such as Father Dunne, or even the National Labor Relations Committee, must also be part of the conspiracy.

Another example of Brewer's over-excitedness concerns his HUAC testimony about Jeff Kibre. To many, Kibre cemented the fact that Hollywood labor was being dominated by Reds.[16] As we recall, Brewer had presented evidence of Kibre's attempts to organize a communist-led industry-wide union during the 1930's. Brewer then linked Kibre to Sorrell, claiming the unions involved with Kibre later made up the core of the Conference of Studio Unions. But a closer look at Jeff Kibre demonstrates he was hardly the threat Brewer made him out to be.

Kibre was indeed a communist, but atypical. His parents had established a decorating and prop-making shop upon their arrival to Hollywood in 1908, which supported the family until the depression hit and ruined the business. The lower standard of living awakened Kibre's political conscience in college, although he joined few political organizations. Friends describe him as more "anarchist and bohemian than radical. . . . He was not much of a joiner, not one for taking orders." After college, Kibre was rejected as a writer by the major studios, settled on prop-making, and joined IATSE Studio Technicians local 37. But this was during the height of the IATSE's corruption, and Kibre was appalled at the blatant manipulation of the local by the IATSE. This set him off on a quest to transform the Hollywood trade-union movement.[17]

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[15]Prindle, 41. Also see Schwartz, p. 255, for an impassioned self-defense of his actions.

[16]See David Saposs, *Communism in American Unions,* New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959, pp. 19-81, for a blatant example of this.

[17]Larry Ceplair, "A Communist Labor Organizer in Hollywood: Jeff Kibre Challenges the IATSE, 1937–1939," *The Velvet Light Trap,* Number 23, Spring 1989, pp. 64-66.

At roughly the same time, Kibre joined the Communist Party. His reasons are typical for the time and expressed in a resolution he drafted for the Cheremoya Young Democratic Club, which mentions the "alarming growth of fascist tendencies in California," and calls for a "united front" of anti-fascist organizations to elect progressive candidates. In his struggle against the corruption of the IATSE, he naturally sought Party support. But the Communist Party had little interest in organizing the Hollywood craft unions, and Kibre received virtually no support for his efforts. According to author Larry Ceplair, "The most the party did was make Kibre a 'protected member,' freeing him from the tasks that might identify him as a Communist and subject his campaign to Red baiting."[18] Unfazed, Kibre sought support from the Congress of Industrial Organization. But the CIO also expressed little interest in organizing Hollywood, due to the IATSE's firm entrenchment and loyalty to the producers. They did not turn their back entirely on Kibre, however, providing him with "advice, moral support, and a sprinkling of funds."[19] As a result of this minimal support, Kibre maintained an occasional correspondence with certain CIO members. These are the documents that Brewer used as the crutch for his theory.

To make a long story short, Kibre's efforts were easily squashed by the IATSE. Not until the formation of the CSU a few years later would there be any force to challenge the IATSE effectively. Kibre was eventually banished from Hollywood and later became a Washington representative for the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union.[20] Ceplair lists many reasons for his failure in challenging the IATSE. His lack of Communist Party and CIO support, his inexperience, and the sheer power of the IATSE doomed him from the start. Also, he overestimated the importance of the craft workers in the overall entertainment industry, underestimated the time it would take to win their support, and put too much faith in the National Labor Relations Board.[21] While his struggle against the corruption of the IATSE is admirable, it was ineffective. Ultimately, Kibre barely made a dent in the overall structure of Hollywood labor.

Brewer painted a much different picture during his HUAC testimony by implying that Kibre was part of a much larger effort by the Communist Party and the CIO to establish a communist-oriented industrial union in Hollywood. Never mind the rampant corruption of the IATSE at the time, which Brewer failed to mention. Here we see Brewer's

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[18]Ceplair, p. 66.

[19]Ceplair, p. 64.

[20]Ceplair, p. 72.

[21]Ceplair, p. 73.

thought process at work. After obtaining shreds of evidence of communist activity from a decade earlier, the implications alarmed him so much that he embarked on a crusade to publicize his rash conclusions rather than probe the issue more deeply. Had he conducted a more thorough and *unbiased* investigation into the activities of Jeff Kibre, he would have seen that Kibre was hardly the threat to national security that Brewer portrayed him to be. Weakening Brewer's story further is the alleged link of Kibre to the CSU and the strikes. Since Kibre worked with many of the same unions that later made up the CSU, Brewer claims there must be a link. Brewer again was making jumps in logic that demanded closer scrutiny and some concrete evidence (none exists) rather than simply proclaiming Sorrell guilty by a very indirect association. Chairman Thomas repeatedly said during the course of the HUAC hearing, "All we are after are the facts." Brewer, having few facts to work with, was forced to offer fantasy.

The story is now told. A complex strike, pitting "warring social forces" against one another erupted in Hollywood, resulting in violence and riots. To Roy Brewer, the anti-communist Hollywood newcomer, the strikes had peculiarities implying it was not a normal jurisdictional affair. Upon investigation, Brewer discovered left-wing connections among his rival Herb Sorrell, and a history of attempted union infiltration by communists in Hollywood. Hence, in Brewer's mind, the strike was an attempt to take over Hollywood by communists. Unfolding events seemed to justify the conclusion. His mind made up, Brewer made it his mission to save Hollywood from the Reds. Right-wing organizations such as the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals reinforced his beliefs and promoted his efforts. His campaign succeeded in winning over the influential Screen Actors Guild leadership. As his support increased, the validity of his claims became unimportant. Meanwhile, post-war America was turning increasingly anti-communist. To many Brewer's story seemed frighteningly believable. In a high-publicity congressional hearing, Brewer told the world of the plot. Other witnesses reinforced his story. None had the chance to deny it. By repeatedly referring to the strikes as the most concrete evidence of widespread communist subversion, an atmosphere was created that manifested itself with the blacklist. Of course, a closer look at the evidence dismisses Brewer's story. But the accusations ultimately were more important than the facts themselves. Such was often the case during the Red Scare.

Conclusion

Roy Brewer's story of a communist plot to dominate Hollywood, despite its inaccuracies and leaps of logic, helped contribute to the growing fervency of anti-communist sentiment. The Hollywood HUAC investigation was one of the earliest high publicity communist purges of the atomic age. Soon afterwards, such witch-hunting would extend far beyond Hollywood. Government employees, teachers and professors, atomic scientists, union leaders, and others would have experiences similar to those in Hollywood. The CSU-related testimony of the Hollywood investigation demonstrates how fear tended to dominate fact in such investigations. Brewer was not the only Red-baiter in Hollywood, but his efforts during the strikes, his close alliance with the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals, and his ties to HUAC Chairman Thomas were direct causes for the investigation to be held. The efforts of Brewer and his misguided accusations against Sorrell help explain what forces were at work as the Red Scare gained prominence, and America adopted an anti-communism of such aggressive zeal that thousands of innocent people would be ruined by it. It is no mystery why many Americans opposed communism at a philosophical level since it was usually equated with Stalinist totalitarianism. But as shown by the situation in Hollywood, some took that opposition further than could be justified.

The strikes provide insight as to how something "as un-American as a blacklist" could occur, since the blacklist had very little to do with subversive film content. As nearly all blacklist literature has demonstrated, communists working in Hollywood had no way of placing communist dogma into films as was feared due to the conservative nature of the Hollywood studio system, and the elaborate script editing process. Nonetheless, throughout the HUAC hearings, chairman Thomas sought examples of communist propaganda that had been injected into the films of the Hollywood Ten and other suspected communists. Examples offered by friendly witnesses border on the ludicrous. Typical is the testimony of Lela Rogers, the mother of Ginger Rogers: "I know Dalton Trumbo is a Communist because in a picture he wrote my daughter was forced to say, 'Share and share alike, that's democracy.'"[1] Ayn Rand similarly gave questionable "proof." In the film *Song of Russia*, penned during the war-time alliance, she noted that Russian characters were smiling. "In Russia, nobody smiles."[2] Clearly, the question of communist propaganda on

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[1]Lester Cole, *Hollywood Red*, Palo Alto, California: Ramparts Press, 1981, p. 275.

[2]Cole, p. 275.

the screen was not the true purpose for the hearing. For the most thorough treatment of the issue, see volume one of John Cogley's *Report on Blacklisting*.

Thus, with no subversive content in films to be found, the friendly witnesses used the strikes as proof of dangerous communist activity. Indeed there were communists working in Hollywood. But the only way to justify an industry-wide purge would have been to demonstrate that communists were somehow threatening the American public, or at least the industry. Since no evidence of subversive film content existed, the strikes and their violence were pointed to as proof of not only the infiltration of communists but the danger and threat to freedom that infiltration brought with it. A closer look at the strikes demonstrates they were not politically motivated, even though it is understandable that a vociferous Red-baiter like Brewer could have seen a Red tinge to them. But once the thought entered his head, he shut himself off to other alternatives due to the fear that those implications brought. It can be concluded that without the strikes, it is doubtful that there ever would have been a HUAC investigation, and with no investigation, there would have been no blacklist. The same can be said if Brewer had seen the strikes for what they were rather than as an elaborate conspiracy. Thus, Brewer's Red-frenzied interpretation of the strike and his ability to fade it into perceptions of other people are fundamental in understanding the establishment of the Hollywood blacklist.

As one of the earliest industry-wide purges of communism, the HUAC investigation, subsequent investigations, and the resulting blacklist helped contribute to a growing national trend of anti-Red hysteria. Soon, much of the nation would be seeing the world through Brewer's Red-tinted glasses, and letting fear rule over sound judgment. With stars such as Gary Cooper and Robert Taylor topping the bill, HUAC's one-sided investigation had little difficulty capturing the interest of the American public. With all the talk of Hollywood Reds, people cast a suspicious eye at those around them with politically active pasts. Furthermore, those patriotic individuals who fought fascism in the 1930's by joining left-wing organizations would all potentially face an inquisition similar to those of the Hollywood Ten, and lose their jobs at the refusal to name every person they remember affiliated with such groups. It was the Hollywood investigation that set the precedent for such a mindset.

Thus, the strikes were critical to the Hollywood investigation, and the Hollywood investigation was critical in the growing Red scare. Although Brewer most likely had honest intentions, he saw only what he chose to see and ignored evidence that did not verify his suspicions. His own words from the 1950's effectively sum up his contribution to a shameful part of America's past:

The trend of the time has aided our cause. Important persons in the industry, who a few years ago greeted our story as too fantastic to believe are looking at it with recognition and concern. But we know from experience that the Communists will not give up—the prize is too great. We hope, therefore, that with the help of the committee [HUAC], the Communist menace in the motion-picture industry may be successfully destroyed, to the end that Hollywood labor may be spared in the future the strife and turmoil of the immediate past.[3]

[3]Saposs, p. 78.

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