

Video: “Plutocracy V: Subterranean Fire”. Capitalism and the Historical Trampling of the Working Class

The latest documentary from Metanoia Films

By [Kim Petersen](#)

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Region: [USA](#)
Theme: [History](#)

Plutocracy V: Subterranean Fire, written and directed by Scott Noble, continues the run of quality documentaries by [Metanoia Films](#). The film provides the historical context that allows the viewer to understand why inequality reigns while social justice and peace lag today. The, at first blink, curious title stems from a [quotation](#) by the American labor leader August Spies, who was one of four anarchists hanged in 1887 after being found guilty in the bomb explosion that wounded and killed several policemen and civilians in what became known as the Haymarket affair.

Said Spies to the court:

But, if you think that by hanging us you can stamp out the labor movement—the movement from which the downtrodden millions, the millions who toil and live in want and misery, the wage slaves, expect salvation—if this is your opinion, then hang us!

Here you will tread upon a spark, but here, and there, and behind you, and in front of you, and everywhere, flames will blaze up.

It is a subterranean fire.

Subterranean Fire documents historically how the capitalist class have nefariously accumulated wealth and power for selfish purposes by depriving working people of dignity and rights.

Subterranean Fire details at the outset how strike actions and popular revolts were put down by corporations through their cronies, including police, private detectives, vigilantes, and even the National Guard. In the Homestead strike of 1892, after workers had defeated the Pinkerton agency’s private army, the National Guard was brought out.

Watch the documentary or scroll down (end of article)

[Plutocracy V: Subterranean Fire](#) from [Scott N](#) on [Vimeo](#).

According to data cited in the film, in 1929, 60 percent of the population lived well below the poverty line. Despite large increases in productivity, there was no trickle down of profits. Neither was there a social safety net.

Labor historian Peter Rachleff tells how organizations like the Red Cross and Salvation Army were enmeshed in the capitalist pattern, categorizing the poor into deserving and undeserving of assistance based on what their “interrogations” uncovered about one’s life style. The unemployed were often blamed for being without employment.

Violence against workers was rampant, and the government was complicit in the violence. The über-rich industrialist Henry Ford hired armed guards to crush disenchanted workers. These armed guards shot and killed hunger marchers from the River Rouge plant.

Finally in 1935, unions were legalized. There was hope. A crafts union, the AFL was formed; also formed was an industrial workers union, the CIO. These two were to merge years later into the AFL-CIO.

Subterranean Fire informs how unions sought to end prejudice — an obvious *sine qua non* in the battle between the moneyed power of the capitalist class and working class.

A message that is compelling and clearly conveyed is that government (and hence “democracy”) is not a force for the masses of workers. Especially prominent in pushing for the dignity of labor were communist leaders.

Communism and Social Justice

Rachleff identified the communists’ goal as developing workers as human beings.

Of particular importance to communists was the inclusion of the Black masses. The KKK, who were supported by state power, warned against Blacks attending communist meetings.

Communists played a prominent role in the scathingly egregious example of racism meted out to the [Scottsboro boys](#). African-American Studies professor Carol Anderson lays out how nine Black teenagers were falsely accused of rape by two White prostitutes. This raised temperatures to boiling among racist Whites. In a one-day trial, eight youths were sentenced to the electric chair and the other youth to life imprisonment. Eventually one woman recanted her false testimony, but it was 17 years before the last prisoner was released for a crime never committed.

Immigrants were also targeted for exploitation.

Stoop labor, such as farm labor where the worker was often stooped over while working in the fields, was considered undesirable. This provided work opportunities for those more desperate; Mexican workers were attracted by the opportunity for work. As immigrant labor, they were without rights and often mistreated. To avoid a labor shortage during WWII, the US-Mexico had reached agreement on the Bracero program, a massive guest worker program that allowed over four million Mexican workers to migrate and work temporarily in the United States from 1942 to 1964. Scandalously, many Braceros still seek to collect unpaid wages from that time. As Justin Chacon, author of *No One Is Illegal* points out, this form of captive labor has continued into the present. The current backlash against immigrants supported by the Donald Trump government augurs back to the Bracero program.

Resistance in the Arts

Artists, writers, and actors were centers of unionization and resistance against exploitation

of people. Such artistic expression was opposed by the capitalist class.

Subterranean Fire features an excerpt from director Tim Robbins' movie *Cradle Will Rock*, where the capitalist Nelson Rockefeller is questioning the artist Diego Rivera who was commissioned by Rockefeller to produce a fresco for the Rockefeller Center in New York city. However, the pro-communist display was too much for Rockefeller to stomach; he subsequently had the fresco destroyed.

The Importance of Solidarity

In Flint, Michigan, autoworkers occupied factories and conducted sit-down strikes. Historian Sharon Smith points out the ingenuity of such a tactic: while factory owners were readily willing to use violence against workers, they were loathe to damage their own factories.

Women of the epoch played an important role in supporting the labor rights actions of the men. Women auxiliaries sneaked food into the men; they broke windows to prevent men from being overcome by gas attacks; and they served as a distraction to police.

The strikers reached out to fellow autoworkers across the country and fostered much unity. These tactics helped workers win demands from Big Auto.

Sit-down strikes spread across the country. The film tells that in 1937 almost 5 million workers took part in sit-down strikes. It was a heady time for workers.

However, in the end, the grassroots organizing power of workers was undermined by the union leadership which sought an alliance between labor and capital. The Communist Party of America also failed the working class.

In another blow to workers, the Supreme Court ruled sit-down strikes illegal in 1939.

The demonized state of workers was epitomized in the summer of 1937 when Chicago police shot at a parade of striking steelworkers and their families. Fifty were shot and 10 died. President Franklin Roosevelt sat on the fence and blamed both sides for the violence.

Later, however, FDR appeared to have a change of heart, and in 1944 he backed a second Bill of Rights for all, among the rights were such basics as "a right to a useful and remunerative job," "the right of every family to a decent home," and "the right to adequate medical care." According to the documentary, FDR was no true friend of labor, and his expressed views were in anticipation of the United States entering WWII. Nonetheless, FDR died a year later.

Demonizing Workers and the Left

Capitalists, with media in tow, demonized communists and anarchists. The Alien Registration Act of 1940 aimed to preserve the status quo. Japanese-Americans were interned. Communists were targeted.

The FBI was involved. Edgar Hoover had leftists monitored and surveilled by tactics including wiretaps and break-ins. The anti-leftism was so extreme that a section of corporate America supported fascism. The fascists supported Nazi Germany in WWII. [1]

Post-WWII the top income tax rate was 91% until 1964. One-third of workers belonged to a

union. From 1940 to 1967 real wages doubled. Living standards doubled.

However, the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 would attack workers, banning many types of strikes, closed union shops, union political contributions, communists and radicals in union leadership, and the compelled payment of union dues. The Supreme Court upheld Taft-Hartley, and it remains in force today.

The film also examines McCarthyism, a witch hunt against communists or communist-leaning types, as a psychological attack against Americans. No one was safe. Blacklisting was in vogue and among the first blacklisted were the so-called [Hollywood 10](#) for either communist sympathies or refusal to aid Congress' House Un-American Activities Committee investigations into the Communist party or having fought for the rights of Blacks and workers. The list expanded much past 10. One celebrity given in-depth prominence in *Subterranean Fire* was singer Paul Robeson who refused to back down before Congress, stated he was for Negro and worker rights, and accused Congress of neo-fascism.

McCarthyism hit hysterical heights as exemplified by Texas proposing the death penalty for communist membership and Indiana calling for the banning of Robin Hood.

McCarthyism was foiled when it bit off more than it could chew. When McCarthyism took on the establishment, in particular the military, its impetus ground to an inglorious halt. The Alien Registration Act was ruled unconstitutional, and the First Amendment right to political beliefs was upheld.

Subterranean Fire notes that the damage to the labor movement was already done. A permanent war economy was established: overtly through the military and covertly through the CIA. Come 2001, union membership had dropped to 13.5%. Radicals were disconnected from their communities; union democracy was subverted by a top-down leadership which avoided the tactic of striking for collective bargaining; the court system was heavily backlogged with labor-management issues, which usually were ruled in favor of management.

Some outcomes noted in the film,

In the early 21st century, Americans took on the dubious distinction of working more hours than any other country....

There is no single county in America where a minimum wage earner can support a family.

The Rise

Grotesque income and wealth disparity signifies the current state of neoliberalism. Yet *Subterranean Fire* finds glimmers of change for working men and women.

Despite relating the historical trampling of the working class, the film concludes on a sanguine note. Union strength appears to be on the rebound with solidarity being a linchpin. Labor strikes were on the upswing in the US, with teachers leading the way. Fast-food workers are fighting for a decent wage. Labor which has seen real wages stagnate in the age of neoliberalism is fighting back worldwide. Autoworkers in Matamoros, Mexico are striking and colleagues in Detroit, Michigan have expressed support for their sisters and

brothers. The *Gilet Jaunes* in France have been joined by labor. A huge general strike took place in India. The uptick of resistance was not just pro-labor but anti-global warming in Manchester, UK; Tokyo, Japan; Cape Town, South Africa; Helsinki, Finland; Genoa, Italy; and, Nelson, Aotearoa (New Zealand).

All this, however, must be considered through the lens of the current political context. A virulent anti-socialist president and his hawkish administration occupy the White House in Washington. Despite the nationwide strike actions, the right-wing BJP and prime minister Narendra Modi won a recent huge re-election in India. The purportedly centrist Liberal Party in Canada, rhetoric aside, has been, in large part, in virtual lockstep with the US administration. [2]

The Importance of Metanoia Films

Today, people with access to the internet have little excuse for continuing to depend on state-corporate media sources. Why would anyone willing subject himself to disinformation and propaganda? Not too mention paying for access to such unreliable information and the soul-sapping advertisements that accompany it.

It is important that we be cognizant of the search engine manipulations of Google, the biased opinions parlayed by moneyed corporate media, and the censorship of social media data-mining sites. The corporate-state media nexus wants to limit and shape what we know. The current war on WikiLeaks and [Julian Assange](#) is proof positive of this. Assange and WikiLeaks exposed horrific war crimes. It is a no-brainer that a person should be congratulated for bringing such evil perpetrated by the state to the public awareness. Instead the establishment seeks to destroy WikiLeaks, the publisher Assange, and Chelsea Manning who is accused of providing the information to WikiLeaks.

Given the corporate-state power structure's ideological opposition to WikiLeaks and freedom on information as well as the preponderance of disinformation that emanates from monopoly media, it seems eminently responsible that people seek out credible independent sources of information. Metanoia Films stands out as a credible source.

There are plenty of independent news and information sites that provide analysis that treat the reader/viewer with respect by substantiating information provided in reports and articles with evidence, logic, and even morality. The reader/viewer who seeks veracity has an obligation to consider the facts, sources, and reasoning offered and arrive at her own conclusions.

Metanoia documentaries lay out a historical context that helps us understand how we arrived at the state of affairs we find ourselves in today. It is an understanding that is crucial to come up with solutions for a world in which far too many languish in poverty, suffer in war zones, and are degraded by the cruelties of inequality. It is an understanding that is crucial for communicating, planning, and organizing the establishment of new societies in which all may flourish and of which all may be proud.

Independent media is meant for independent thinkers and those who aspire to a better world. Watch *Plutocracy V: Subterranean Fire* and the first four parts in the Plutocracy series and become informed.

Watch the documentary below.

[Plutocracy V: Subterranean Fire](#) from [Scott N](#) on [Vimeo](#).

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Notes

1. For an in-depth history, read Jacques R. Pauwels, *The Myth of the Good War* (Toronto: Lorimer, 2015), a book which exposes US motivations during WWII as serving corporate interests.

2. Note Canadian prime minister Trudeau's stand on Assad in Syria, Maduro in Venezuela, Huawei and the extradition hearings on Meng Wanzhou, antagonisms with China, and antagonism with Russia's Putin. Also consider Canada's poor record on effectively taking on climate change. These actions differ little from president Trump south of the border.

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