



## *Sorry to Bother You: A Spectacle That Teaches*

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If you haven't seen *Sorry to Bother You* yet, please stop reading this and find somewhere in your town that is still playing the film. SEE IT NOW. If you have seen *Sorry to Bother You*, I hope you will agree that this is the most pro-union film Hollywood has ever made.

*Sorry to Bother You* is set in a world so similar to our own that its dystopian futurism seem familiar. The economy is such that many ordinary people have signed lifetime contracts with a company called Worry Free Living, which guarantees them grueling work, crowded shelter, subpar food, and a modicum of free time. In other words: slavery.

Against this backdrop we meet Cassius "Cash" Green (Lakeith Stanfield), a desperate job seeker who is four months behind on his rent and living with his girl friend Detroit (Tessa Thompson) in his uncle's windowless garage. Eventually Cash finds work as a lowly telemarketer at Regal View. A charismatic union organizer (Steven Yeun) inspires Cash and his co-workers to organize, and they stage an uplifting job action on the telemarketing floor, chanting "phones down" and "Fuck Regal View."

Cash stands with the union at first. But then, his mentor Langston (Danny Glover)

encourages Cash to make his sales calls with a “white voice”—a voice so reassuring that Cash becomes a selling machine. Cash is promoted to “power caller” and moves up to the coveted top floor at Regal View. At the climax of the film Cash crosses the union’s picket line to get to work, betraying his friends. When our hero becomes a scab, *Sorry to Bother You* seems to be peddling Hollywood anti-union politics as usual.

But instead, the film sides with the union organizer Squeeze, Cash’s girlfriend Detroit, Cash’s best friend Salvador (Jermaine Fowler), and Cash’s mentor Langston—who is with the union even though he taught Cash the secret of the “white voice”—rather than Cash. As Detroit tells Cash, “I can’t ride with you anymore.” Rejected by his pals, Cash finds cold comfort in the palatial home of Regal View CEO Steve Lift (Armie Hammer), where Cash makes a horrific discovery about the sorts of futuristic workers that Regal View is producing in order to further lower its labor costs. Here’s a hint: they aren’t robots.

I won’t give away the extremely bizarre ending, but suffice it to say that Cash returns to his unionizing friends and re-joins their movement. The film’s fundamental argument is that solidarity at the point of production is the most effective way to change the world.

As a scholar specializing in labor films, I came away from *Sorry to Bother You* with two questions: 1) How did a film this radical ever get made? 2) What does it mean that such a pro-union film is being released now, given the state of the labor movement today?



Boots Riley

As Boots Riley, the film’s writer and director [explains it](#), it was very difficult to get *Sorry to Bother You* to the big screen. Riley, active in the Occupy Oakland movement and a long time rapper/writer/producer for the group Coup, finished the script in 2012. He put it in front of everyone he knew, and lots of people he didn’t know as well. He finally found a fan in Dave Eggers, who saw connections between the dystopian world in Riley’s screenplay and the world he was trying to capture in *The Circle*. Eggers published the script of *Sorry to Bother*

You on [\*McSweeney's\* in 2014](#).

According to [\*Wired\*](#), Egger's endorsement helped Riley get a grant from the San Francisco Film Society and then an invitation to Sundance's Screenwriters Lab. In 2016, the project caught the attention of Forest Whitaker's company, Significant Productions, where Whitaker's partner Nina Yang Bongiovi started promoting it with investors and agents. Selling Riley, a self-proclaimed communist, wasn't easy, but Bongiovi kept at it, bringing in financing from more than one investor. When *Sorry to Bother You* premiered at Sundance this year, Annapurna Pictures acquired it for seven figures.

Riley's story reflects the changing economics and politics in Hollywood. As entertainment journalist [Sharon Waxman](#) has argued, the Hollywood studio era is finally really and truly dead, replaced by digital media companies like Amazon, Netflix, and Facebook. Add to this the growing power of black-owned production companies and the allegations, firings, and resignations resulting from the #MeToo movement, and suddenly the entertainment landscape is becoming more open to films that feature minority lead characters as well as more politically edgy subjects.

Along with finding the right backers, Riley succeeded because he understood the connection between activism and art. All along, Riley knew that he was making art for the kind of people that he was organizing alongside—in migrant farm working communities, in Oakland where he grew up, and in the Occupy movement: "[I started out \[at the age of 14\] in radical movements](#) before I thought that I was an artist. . . . I think that if you have a passion to have your art be for something more, then what goes along with that is establishing a base, having a community that you answer to, having a community that you represent, having a community that you engage with in a way [other] than through your art."

In many ways, *Sorry to Bother You* is out of step with our current moment. Union membership is at an historic low, and the labor movement was recently dealt a terrible blow with the Supreme Court's Janus decision—a decision that will make it more difficult for unions to recruit members and collect dues. If Kavanaugh becomes our next Supreme Court judge, [some predict](#) that we'll see more catastrophic decisions for labor.

Yet *Sorry to Bother You* is also the perfect film for the renewed labor radicalism of right now. Earlier this month Missouri voters rejected the anti-labor "right to work laws" in a referendum, numerous red state teachers rose up last spring in multiple massive strikes, and workers across the globe put a small dent in Jeff Bezos's empire with strikes on [Amazon Prime Day](#). On the political front a newly energized left flank of Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) backed candidates have won elections in Pittsburgh, the Bronx, and

elsewhere.

This is the kind of activism that Boots Riley would like to see increase. He advocates strikes, rather than street demonstrations or boycotts, because “that is where the wealth is created.” Riley also likes the pedagogical function of strikes, the fact that they “teach the people involved and the onlookers how capitalism works . . . . It’s a spectacle that teaches.”

*A spectacle that teaches.* I love this notion. If you’ve ever walked a picket line you know how it changes your relationship with your co-workers, your job, and your street—how being out and loud and proud shows your community that you deserve a better deal, and that everyone else does too. At the end of this month, if it comes to it, I’ll be cheering on the on the [striking Chicago hotel workers](#), who just took an overwhelming strike vote, and any other group of workers ready to seize power at the point of production. Don’t be sorry. It’s no bother. It’s the only way we’re going to get our country back.

## Author



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