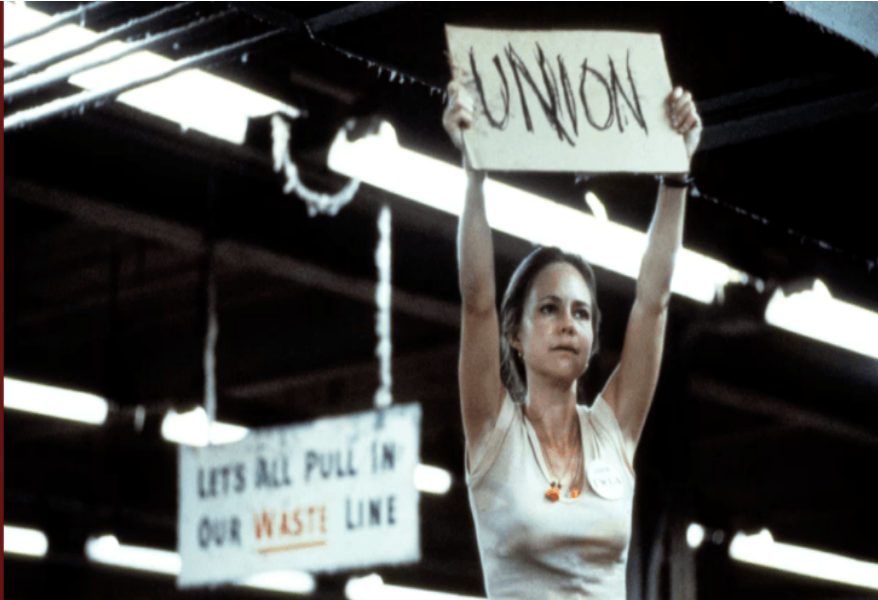




“There’s No ‘We’ Working Twelves”: Norma Rae Comes to Des Moines

Posted on September 12, 2026 by Nate Holdren

Hello online labor friends.

I wanted to write a quick report on an [Iowa Labor History Society](#) (ILHS) event here in Des Moines. I should add, the Society hosted another event the same day, in Iowa City, which I wasn’t able to attend. The Iowa City event was a screening of *Grapes of Wrath* with a Q+A and some discussion of the book as well. Having too many public-facing labor history events to attend in one day is a wonderful problem to have! The Iowa City event was held at the nonprofit arts cinema FilmScene, where The Society has been doing well attended film screenings for a long while. Here in Des Moines we hosted a screening of *Norma Rae*, at The Varsity, another nonprofit arts cinema. We regularly do screenings like this, in both Iowa City and Des Moines, for Labor Day and for May Day.

Our film series in Des Moines is newer than the one in Iowa City and previously has had lower turnout. This event was the best turnout we’ve had, which is really

gratifying and exciting. (I hope I'm not out of line in saying I've felt a little jealous about the Society's activities in Iowa City, which benefits from the presence of the University of Iowa as a research university, a public land grant institution, and a place with a commitment to labor history and labor education going way, way back. There's also a lively local counterculture – Iowa City punk and hardcore is famous if you're in the right circles – which can't hurt.) It was especially great to see such a big turnout when our weather was really atrocious – just before show time the rain looked positively torrential, but people still came out. I thought I'd mention some of what I thought about and what came up in the Q+A after the event, hosted by a some of us on the Society's board.



[The Iowa Labor History Society.](#)

Watching Norma Rae in a Room Full of People

I'd seen Norma Rae before but never in a movie theater. I'm an ignoramus about all things aesthetic so I'm sure this is obvious and clumsily worded but there is something really powerful about the experience of a film on a movie theater screen. There's also something powerful about people in a room together sharing a

collective experience. I think there's something important there about the labor movement and the public arts, the aspect of people associating together in real time and in each other's physical presence.

There's also something important about seeing our experiences reflected, validated, interpreted, and so on in art. Often the dominant culture sweeps that stuff aside or hastens its forgetting, encouraging us to feel isolated. I recently met someone who is a steward in a local public school employees union, at a gathering of likeminded comrades and fellow travelers, and they said that a lot of us often wonder if we're off base because of the ways we're out of step with the dominant culture when really we're people who perceive the reality of class society with greater clarity than is common, which is why it's important to gather together sometimes, to remind ourselves of that and to allay the self-doubt that can come up as a result of feeling isolated. I thought it was powerful at the time, and I thought of it again during the Norma Rae screening. I think this is part of why public labor history efforts and related labor arts efforts, like we work on in the ILHS and our fellow state labor history organizations around the country, matter so much.

There's something powerful about people in a room together sharing a collective experience.

Two Myths the Film Pushes Back On

After the film we briefly provided some contextualizing remarks. One point we wanted the audience to know is that union density in the US has fallen since the film came out, so that in important respects in the US in 2026 working people in general are peers of the southern textile workers the film focuses on. Another is that the film valuably speaks back to two myths, one that industrial work equals good union jobs (when the reality is that the association between industrial work and good union jobs was never that close in the first place and it only existed as the result of a lot of hard struggle by workers as the film presents), and the other that the association of industrial work and union jobs with white men is misleading. The film's emphasis on women workers and workers of color valuably pushes back against that.

That's Not the Past — That's the Present

I talked a bit about my own life experience in relation to the film as well, trying to stress that in important respects the film is not about the past but the present. I talked about when I briefly worked organizing hospital janitors twenty-something years ago one of the janitors had a heart attack at work and management were – to use a technical term – dicks about getting him care. Then when he came back to work after recovering, management kept riding him and intensified that when he started to have chest pains again at work. It was quite a bit like – SPOILER ALERT! – the scene when Norma Rae's father starts to have a heart attack at work and his boss tells him to keep working because his break is coming soon.

More recently, when my mom broke her toe at work at a warehouse in the early 2020s, management again were – sorry to keep using jargon – assholes and one result is she walked on it too much too soon, leading to long lasting problems with one of her hips.

More recently still, just last week my next door neighbor told me about how the metal shop where he works has no air conditioning despite the dangerously hot weather we're having, and management, who all work in air conditioned offices, said "we're working twelves this week." He added "they say 'we' but they all fucking go home at four, there's no 'we' working twelves, WE work a twelve without A/C and they leave their air conditioned office after eight hours."

The Q&A

We had a pretty lively Q+A after the film following our short remarks. Questions from the audience included how the current situation in the US compares to the original Gilded Age, what are we to make of workers who vote against their own interests, whether anti-union techniques today are the same or have evolved, and what should happen next in light of all this. Briefly, our answers went as follows.

In important respects, working people in the US in 2026 are peers of the southern textile workers the film focuses on.

On the Gilded Age Comparison

We argued that the current situation is similar to the late 19th and early 20th century US in terms of massive wealth inequality, different in terms of greater life expectancy for working people, and very much different in terms of changes in the associational life of the working class. We argued that the gains in labor law and similar legislation, while bringing important gains, also fostered a less combative labor movement, and that moving forward from here will require more of that combativeness. Another board member walked through some of the history of Iowa public sector labor law, itself a response to public employees' struggles (I don't know this history as well as I'd like to myself, but I can say that I've found Philip Rubio's wonderful book *Undelivered*, on postal workers, very illuminating). In the mid 2010s Iowa public sector law was made far worse, keeping the limitations on workers and walking back a lot of the beneficial elements. This has likely facilitated the rightward turn our state has experienced in its official politics, similar to events in Wisconsin after the attack on public sector unions there starting in 2011.

On Voting "Against Interest"

We responded to the issue of how some working class people vote by discussing voter turnout in the late 19th century, which was surprisingly high compared to the present, tied to the more collective or communal character of voting and civic life in general then. We also talked about how, as Martin Glaberman argued in *Punching Out* and his discussions of strikes in World War Two, that working class consciousness is not only a matter of what people say or how people vote, but is really a matter of a whole host of activities that have to be taken together. In that holistic picture, context matters a great deal as well. We largely read the news on screens alone and vote alone, conditions that promote a sense of fear and isolation.

That's different from being in a room together. *Norma Rae* dramatizes this repeatedly, showing how people are different – how people actively become different, often in lasting ways – when in rooms together, and especially when the activity in the room forces decisions, like in the scene when people start turning off their machines at work in response to management ganging up on Norma and calling the cops on her. Part of that scene does so well is to call attention to time and tension: people stand and watch at first, and slowly each person who acts has

to decide to do so, in what is clearly each person facing the dilemma of their moral principles and their fear of retaliation. This is part of why the associational life of the labor movement and of organizing matters so much. While the matter of some working class people voting badly matters, and without meaning to let people off the hook for bad choices, it also matters to not let that sort of instance of workers at their worst be treated as representative of the full scope of possibility for workers thoughts and actions, and not let it occlude the fact that workers in collective contexts have opportunities to be their best and to transform themselves in action.



Norma Rae (1979).

On Union-Busting, Then and Now

We responded to the question about union busting with a short history of those techniques and the development of an industry anti-union consultant. (People wanting a longer historical perspective should read Chad Pearson's two wonderful books *Reform or Repression* and *Capital's Terrorists*.) We also talked about capital mobility as part of economic globalization and as a matter internal to the United States. The ability of companies to close plants after they unionize and to move to where labor power is cheaper is a very difficult problem. We stressed how this makes internationalism and a commitment to anti-oppression not only principled but also pragmatic: when the floor for workers anywhere falls, that's wrong, full stop, which is what's most important, and also that threatens workers everywhere, at least in the long term. Thus it's very important to advocate for internationalism and solidarity in the labor movement, building on and extending existing commitments.

We largely read the news on screens alone and vote alone — conditions that promote fear and isolation. That's different from being in a room together.

What We're Asking For

The “what is to be done?” question was a gift as it let us segue into a pitch for supporting the society and, of course, we waxed expansive a bit about the need for the labor movement and the working class to have confidence in itself, and how that has an important cultural dimension. (I ranted a little about how one downside of the Wagner Act was transforming the basic existential question of ‘are we a union?’ from a strictly a matter of organization and struggle to something more heavily mediated by the state, something that is a bit of an axe to grind on my part.) In terms of the Iowa Labor History Society, we stressed that we’re an all volunteer organization and our events only succeed if people show up to them. More than that, though, we don’t just want an audience who supports our existing programming. We want active members who themselves practice an associational life: let’s talk! Let’s read, watch, discuss together, and so on, and please, propose an idea about something!

Personally I’d like to see our efforts in the Des Moines wing of the society catch up to those of our fellow travelers in Iowa City, which I mean in a spirit of very friendly and very low key rivalry, but above all I just want more shared life related to our shared conditions of working class life – understanding, criticizing, lamenting, opposing, and so on.

And very simply, it’s lovely to spend more time with fellow working class people talking about the kinds of themes that our field is focused on. I love to talk with fellow labor historians, and talking labor history and labor arts with people – specifically working class people – who aren’t academics is a real joy as well. (Someone came up at the end and asked for the titles of the books we’ve mentioned – Glaberman’s *Punching Out* and Lane Windham’s *Knocking on Labor’s Door*. What a treat to have someone care enough about labor history to stay after the screening to make sure they had the book titles right!)

Of course I’m hardly the only labor historian who is into this kind of thing and as I’ve alluded to, our efforts here in Des Moines are not at what I’d call a comfortable stopping point so I’m sure there’s a lot we could learn from other efforts in other places. I’d love to hear more about what other labor history and labor arts people are up to where you live, if anyone has anything to share.

Author



• Nate Holdren

Nate Holdren is the author of the book [Injury Impoverished: Workplace Accidents, Capitalism, and Law in the Progressive Era](#) (2020). He is employed as an associate professor at Drake University.