

Norma Rae showing at Kentucky Theatre Nov. 3

Film ties together labor, health reform, gender, and racial justice movements

By Betsy Taylor

On September 11, Crystal Lee Sutton died from brain cancer at age 68. She faced her death with the same fighting spirit that blazes out of *Norma Rae* (1979), the film based on her life. Denied possibly life saving treatments for two months after her diagnosis, Sutton had to battle illness and an insurance corporation simultaneously. In a June 2008 interview with the *Burlington Times-News*, reporter Handgraaf observed that Sutton saw this as “another example of abusing the working poor.” “It is almost,” she said, “like...committing murder”.

Central Kentucky gets a chance to honor Sutton's generous, valiant spirit at a public celebration at the Kentucky Theatre on November 3. At 6:30, the Reel World String Band will kick things off with a rousing set of labor and justice music, followed by the film *Norma Rae*. I think Crystal Lee Sutton would like this event. Organized by the Kentucky Division of the United Nations Association, it aims to gather together all sorts of people and justice struggles—labor, health reform, racial and gender justice.

I was nervous sitting down to watch *Norma Rae* last night. Could it possibly be as good as I remembered it? Well, yes, in the cold morning sunlight, I have to say it's a great film, with meanings that have deepened after 30 years—tragically, shamefully for all Americans. All I really remembered from my previous viewing many years ago was that culminating scene when Sally Field leaps onto a table, holding up a sign on which she has rapidly scrawled “UNION,” surrounded by the deafening racket of the textile mill, the police and company bosses massing to haul her (illegally) to jail, and the fierce gaze of hundreds of her co-workers on the knife's edge between their fear and their hunger to revolt, to join the union, to throw off several generations of subordination in a two-class company town. Field's whole body becomes a sort of exclamation point, as she brilliantly condenses the passion and exhaustion of months of struggle to unionize into an acting performance so stark, so elegant and so silent that it speaks through sheer gesture and stilled, hollowed visage.

Field, and director Martin Ritt, achieved a lot artistically with this scene, but they also did something for American culture that is really hard to do. What other scene can you think of in a blockbuster film that condenses these kinds of meanings? This scene is iconic, it has legs, because it expresses an ordinary worker (and a woman at that!) acting for work place rights, organizing collectively within a clearly articulated history of labor, class and police injustice. There are almost no other iconic scenes like this that are part of the general pop cultural repertoire.

Crystal Lee Sutton refused to endorse the film as a whole, but that scene so clearly expressed her own real-life action on the day in 1973 when she was first dragged off to jail, that she kept a photo of Sally Field, in that moment, on her living room wall.

Hollywood codes usually overwrite such tales of working life and class injustice. And, some parts of *Norma Rae* can be faulted. In the film, the unionization drive starts when the fictional Reuben Warshowsky (played by Ron Leibman) comes to the small North Carolina milltown as a labor organizer. He is portrayed as a **well educated**, young New Yorker from a Jewish family with strong labor roots, engaged to a Harvard lawyer. In Sutton's real life, this organizer was Eli Zivkovich, a 55 year old coal-miner from West Virginia. In the film, the erotic tension between Sally Fields and

Leibman fits usual Hollywood clichés in that it encodes a sort of Pygmalion upward mobility (he gets her reading high-falutin' poetry; a *Pretty Woman*-style marrying up the class ladder is flirted with). Feminist theorist and Berea College professor bell hooks has a great discussion in *From Margin to Center* about how pop culture disappears working-class communities, making heroic action seem merely individualistic. By replacing an Appalachian working class labor organizer with a cerebral, urban type, the film does suppress awareness of the creative bonds *within* working class communities by which people take control of their own destinies.

Perhaps director Martin Ritt was smuggling some of his own history into this film. A *New Yorker* himself, a political awakening came when he attended Elon College in North Carolina and experienced the racial and class inequalities of the depression-era South. Blacklisted in the early 1950s as a Communist sympathizer, he was periodically able to make films that directly engaged the struggles for worker and racial justice and political censorship that deeply mattered to him--e.g., *The Edge* (1957) and *The Molly McGuires* (1970). His more commercially successful films, like *Hud* (1963) and *Hombre* (1967), engaged these themes more indirectly.

But, to a startling extent, *Norma Rae* was both a critical and commercial success without diluting or disguising class or gender conflict, or weakening the political commitments he had crystallized as a young playwright working for the Federal Theater Project (a New Deal project under the Works Progress Administration).

The film carries traces of important history. Early in the film, the devastating physical effects of work in the textile mill are conveyed through Norma Rae's anguish watching of her parents' physical impairment (her mother's deafness, her father's death on the job). **The sensory qualities of factory labor are conveyed lushly and beautifully—cotton drifts as an omnipresent reminder of the smothering disease of brown lung, the intense sounds and feverish pace of physical labor in the mills overpower the viewer's senses.** Forced to integrate by the 1964 civil rights act, the employers cultivate racial tension among workers. Taunted as “communists,” “socialists” or “Jews,” labor or community organizers face hatred and racial stigmas that are depressingly relevant today.

Beneath this, are many suppressed histories. For instance, in the film, the unionization effort starts to gain traction after management tries to speed up work with what is called a “stretch-out.” A throw-away line in the film, the line references an important lost history of American labor. The “stretch-out” was practiced in the 1920s, in mills throughout the East Coast, culminating in the extraordinary Great Strike of 1934 when almost a half million textile workers went on largely spontaneous strikes for over three weeks across 21 states. Particularly in the South, this strike was so brutally suppressed that it largely disappeared from public awareness and left behind a repressive culture of anti-unionism. The seeming quiescence of the workers in *Norma Rae* is the residue of this lost, tragic history.

A terrific film to watch in conjunction with *Norma Rae* on November 3 would be the *The Uprising of '34* (1995) which excavates this lost history of the “stretch-out” and subsequent strikes, through a remarkable, community-based filmmaking process (led by directors George Stoney and Judith Helfand) which worked with North and South Carolina milltowns to unearth tales and photos of assassinations, strikes, violence and repression. Through the catharsis of filmmaking and community discussion, *Uprising* helped take down walls of shame and denial that had separated living but unspoken memories of grandparents from children and grandchildren.

In the summer of 2008, Crystal Lee Sutton reflected on the ravages of globalization, but pointed to the future with hope, saying “We need to show these companies that moved there [overseas] for slave

labor, that it is not going to work. We are coming back strong and there will be jobs to come.”

It's time for central Kentucky to come together on November 3 at the Kentucky Theatre to salute her remarkable life and all she has given our nation.