TO TELL THE TRUTH:
WORKING FOR CHANGE:
DOCUMENTING HARD TIMES
(1929–1941)
directed by Calvin Skaggs, narrated by
Alex Baldwin. Icarus Films, Brooklyn, NY,
U.S.A., 2013. DVD, 56 min. Distributor’s

Reviewed by Amy Ione, Director,
The Diatrop Institute, Berkeley, CA,
U.S.A. Email: <ione@diatrope.com>.
doi:10.1162/LEON_t_01126

Working for Change: Documenting
Hard Times (1929–1941) is the second
installment in a 2012 series of Calvin
Skaggs videos titled To Tell the Truth.
This episode introduces the evolution
of the documentary genre through
the first social documentary films
of the Great Depression. Footage is
accompanied by interviews with a
number of left-leaning filmmakers
and people who study the field today.
The composite deftly allows us to see
how cinematographers in the United
States and Britain used interviews
and film to raise social conscious-
ness in the last century. Then, as now,
those who created the films were not
trying to provide an objective report.
Rather, much like Michael Moore’s
documentary productions today,
those involved wanted to present
their point of view. These pioneers
saw film as a means to educate people
about the pervasive human suffering
neglected by the entertainment films
and newsreels of their time. While
we can argue about the impetus to
use the camera to try to change the
world and whether a documentary
should include a bias, Working for
Change proved that films could help
others. In this case, the message
broadcast the plight of many in the
20th century who were suffering
unheard. Today, as labor is losing its
leverage in the United States, seeing
the historical struggles reminds us of
the importance of preserving worker
rights. Change is not a one-and-done
type of undertaking. Rather, as people
lose their pensions and other benefits
today, a documentary like Working
for Change reminds us that gaining
worker rights was not a passive activ-
ity but a hard-won battle against the
dominant paradigm.

The first three sections of the film
deal with American projects. The
Workers Film and Photo League
(WFPL), which operated 1931–1934,
is presented in the first sequence
through interviews with founders Leo
Hurwitz, Leo Seltzer and comment-
tators. They explain that the social
documentaries were seen as a means
to show poverty, picket lines, unem-
ployment, evictions, bread lines and
the overall Depression malaise to the
larger community. Their methodology
consisted of recording events and
improvising a “script” as the nature of
the event unfolded. Letting the people
at the event provide the material
allowed the filmmakers to capture the
moods and feelings of a mass dem-
onstration against unemployment
in New York City in 1930 (where the
police beat and dragged demonstra-
tors); the many Hoovers that
housed the unemployed; and the
hunger marches in cities across the
United States.

This section of the film stayed with
me longest, possibly because it set
the stage for the later developments.
In any case, the interviews here truly
convey the commitment of the film-
makers involved in this genre and
their struggles in getting the message
out. The WFPL had few resources.
Because their work received little play
in theaters, here, too, they impro-
vised. The films were shown in union
halls, fraternal organizations and any-
where else they could find a room. In
one case, when they wanted to show
their films to farmers in the Midwest,
they strung a sheet on the trees. Simi-
larly impressive were their efforts to
build channels for communication
with different populations across the
United States. Early in the Depres-
sion, many people failed to concep-
tualize how broadly the downturn
would impact the population. Those
in the cities assumed the farmers had
all the food they needed. The rural
population, by contrast, concluded
that those in the urban areas had all
the money. In actuality, neither rural
nor urban populations were able to
take care of their basic needs and the
documentaries were able to showcase
the broad fabric of suffering.

Bonus March, filmed in 1932 before
the New Deal found ways to extend
some relief, came about when World War I veterans, their families and affiliated groups went to Washington, D.C. to seek help. Although the US government had awarded them cash payment for their service in the form of certificates, they had structured the payment so that awardees were unable to redeem the certificates until 1945, more than a decade away! Disheartened and out of work due to the Great Depression, they demanded the right to redeem their service certificates earlier; they critically needed money to live on as they weathered their prolonged unemployment. As the film shows, rather than finding a compassionate response from the Hoover administration, the marchers were gassed and greeted with gunfire. Those elected to govern didn’t see them as struggling constituents but rather as dangerous radicals. They completely failed to conceptualize the veterans’ distress, with some even remarking that people shouldn’t expect to simply get things from Washington. While I would like to say that it is extraordinary to think that those elected to government positions responded so callously, as I write, I know that a similar sort of arrogance is alive and well even today.

With Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal, the compassion terrain changed. This period is covered in the second section of the film; here we meet Pare Lorentz, a progressive New Deal filmmaker who persuaded the Resettlement Administration to finance films about the work of FDR initiatives. Members of Congress who were opposed to “New Deal social welfare programs” were also against spending taxpayer money for the documentaries that showed what the government programs were doing to help people. For his first film, Lorentz turned to Paul Strand, Ralph Steiner and Leo Hurwitz. Despite the differing agendas of the filmmakers, The Plow That Broke the Plains was a hit at the box office. Praising American ingenuity, the film reassured people that the Roosevelt administration would solve the Dust Bowl situation. A second Lorentz film, The River, covered the causes of the floods in the Mississippi Valley.

British public agencies, by contrast, agreed to finance documentary films in order to educate the public about social issues during the Great Depression. Persuaded to do so initially by John Grierson, the man who coined the term “documentary,” these films captured the lives and dilemmas of working people. Grierson felt that creating sympathy for the plight of those suffering could avert a revolution. Indeed, many suffering workers found Communist interest in workers attractive, and thus this fear was real. Although Grierson’s only film was Drifters (1929), his impact was immense. He had a knack for funding film projects using public money and picking filmmakers (e.g. Pat Jackson and Harry Watt) who could craft compelling cinema such as Coal Face and Night Mail. The first introduced workers in the coal mining industry, a backbone industry in Britain at that time. Night Mail, directed by Harry Watt, documented the importance of Royal Mail and the railways in uniting the nation.

Other British projects included Housing Problems, a film about living conditions co-directed by John’s sister, Ruby Grierson, who often was the one who got the people to talk. We also meet Paul Rotha, who didn’t find Grierson’s films radical enough. Rotha’s Shipyard, which was commercially commissioned by a shipbuilder, nonetheless turns out to be rather muted politically. Despite Rotha’s left-wing stance, the film does not make an assertive statement. Rather he beautifully introduces the lives of the workers contemplatively, as they wonder if those who board the vessel to visit distant places will ever reflect on the lives of the people who made the ships. The cinematography reminded me of the work of Lewis Hine (1874–1940), an American sociologist and photographer, who used his camera as a tool for social reform. Hine’s photographs were instrumental in changing child labor laws in the United States.
Also discussed is Frontier Films, created in 1936 by Leo Hurwitz and his colleagues. This was the first independent, not-for-profit film company in the United States. Its mission was to deal with the truth of the American experience in film. While Grierson and his group in England had a great deal of government money, as noted, the documentarians of the New York School always operated on a shoestring. Their effort to make a radical, bold step forward at the end of the thirties led to films like *Native Land*, which focused on the way the labor struggle in the United States was attacked. It took them five years to finish because they had no money. Unlike their earlier improvisations, they worked with actors to dramatize real events. To raise funds, they showed the footage already produced to prospective investors to complete the project; perhaps an early version of the kind of crowdfunding we now find on sites like Kickstarter and GoFundMe. Just as they were set to finally release the film, Pearl Harbor was bombed. Thus, although it was well received by those who saw it as it developed, distribution became difficult. Once the war became a priority, interest in labor's struggles lagged.

Documentaries are among the hardest projects to review. On the one hand, they have a somewhat narrative story line and seem to convey a true story. Yet, simultaneously, despite presenting nonfictional material projects, there is also a clearly evident point of view. Deciphering the facts and examining what impelled the filmmaker(s) to present the powerful message is why films like these are perfect for classrooms and community events. In this case, the material of the film also offers a platform for thinking about the historical and contemporary social climate. Perhaps the most obvious classroom discussion topic would be a look at the labor trajectory from the first wave of films presented here through today. After struggling so hard to gain footing, the labor movement is once again losing leverage. For example, a number of states in the United States have passed laws weakening unions, reducing pensions and/or putting two-tiered wage systems in place for workers. With a two-tiered system, new workers are hired in at a lower wage while the old union workers receive a higher wage (due to their contracts).

Another topic might be whether or not governments should fund social documentaries. As noted above, the British government readily made funds available to filmmakers, whereas the United States Congress became upset about government funding of documentaries, and the practice died out for a time. This production on social documentaries—a social documentary in its own right—was funded by government agencies as well as private funds: the National Endowment for the Arts and the Nathan Cummings Foundation. It was also a PBS program. Personally, I found the message powerful and worthwhile, so I was glad the project was funded. (Had the film advocated something like a “Corporations Are People” perspective, I would probably have felt less enthusiastic that some of my tax dollars funded it!)

All in all, I highly recommend *Working for Change*. It not only belongs in academic and public library collections but could also provide an excellent resource in the classroom, particularly in relation to film history, social movements, government and mass communication. Anyone who is interested in this kind of film may also want to start with some of the film clips from this period that are available on YouTube and the expanded history of these films online [1]. While these supplemental resources offer a flavor for the material discussed in *Working for Change*, the value of the award-winning Icarus film is that it combines the history and footage into a story.

Reference

1. One excellent resource is the website Nicole Huffman put together for the American Studies Program at the University of Virginia. See: <http://www.udva.edu/~maor/huffman/frontier/films.html>.