THROUGH THE CAMERA'S EYE

This issue of *ILWCH* inaugurates a new column of film reviews, "Through the Camera's Eye," which should become a regular feature in the future. Films not only have the capacity to diffuse labor and working-class history more widely than books and articles, and to provide powerful audiovisual resources for classroom use, but also to present original accounts and analyses before they become available in print. The films reviewed below offer examples of both cinematic purposes.

The film reviewer for this issue of *ILWCH*, with its focus on the Latin American workplace, is Senior Editor Peter Winn, who has extensive experience in documentary film. (Readers interested in reviewing films in future issues should email their proposals and CVs to ILWCH@newschool.edu)

Recent Documentary Films on Latin American Workers

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Maquilapolis: City of Factories (2006) 60 minutes. Co-Directors: Vicky Funari and Sergio de la Torre in collaboration with Grupo Factor X, Tijuana, Mexico. Independent Television Service (US) Production. Email: itvs@itvs.org US premiere at Tribeca Film Festival, New York City (2006).

Maquiladoras are in-bond assembly plants in special export platform zones that import parts duty free that were manufactured at the lowest price somewhere else in the developing world and which assemble them at low cost for duty-free export to the United States.

Maquiladoras first emerged as a major factor along Mexico's northern border during the economic crisis of the 1980s, when they offered an alternative source of employment and economic dynamism to the country's stagnant protected import substitution industries. Their rapid expansion during the last two decades of the twentieth century transformed Tijuana, San Diego's "twin city," from a sleepy border town with a population of maybe 1500 in 1946 into an industrial city of over 1.3 million people, most of whom came to Tijuana from rural Mexico to find work in its *maquiladoras*, where a thirty percent annual turnover rate is not unusual. During the 1990s, the *maquiladora* model spread to Central America and the Caribbean, countries with weak, dependent

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economies that feared being excluded from the US market because of NAFTA's privileging of Mexican exports. Although there are signs that the *maquiladora* model has peaked in the face of rising costs and cheaper Asian competition—Mexican *maquiladoras* lost over 200,000 jobs during the first years of this century—they still provide more than one million jobs in Mexico and represent nearly half of its exports. Yet, they have also been criticized for their low wages and poor working conditions, for abuse of both workers and the environment and for contributing little but the low wages they pay to the development of Mexico. Because Mexican *maquiladoras* employ mostly women, who are considered by management to be more dextrous, more tolerant of repetitive work and more docile than men, sexual harassment and the double day are also prominent in the debate.

Maquilapolis: City of Factories investigates these issues in Tijuana, where the largest concentration of *maquiladoras* exists and young women arrive at the bus station every day seeking to find the factory job that will transform their lives and their families.

Maquilapolis is filmmaking from below. It is the fruit of an innovative collaboration between veteran filmmaker Vicky Funari (*Live Nude Girls Unite*, a documentary on efforts to organize strippers in San Francisco), artist Sergio de la Torre, and Grupo Factor X, an organization of women activists who are *maquiladora* workers in Tijuana striving to educate other women workers and to lobby for improved working and living conditions. The filmmakers held a six week workshop for the women *promotoras*, training them how to film a documentary and how to use digital video cameras which they then lent to the women. The result is a film that is both about and by these women workers, one that reflects their priorities and concerns, as well as their lives and experiences.

Two of them—Carmen Durán and Lourdes Luján—stand out. Carmen is a single mother of three who lives in a self-built shack made of abandoned US garage doors in a shantytown without paved streets, sewers, or electricity. She lost her job in a Sanyo plant when it moved to Indonesia to take advantage of even cheaper labor costs. Now Carmen works six nights a week in a Panasonic plant assembling television components for a wage of five dollars a day, which she acknowledges is more than she can earn elsewhere in Mexico.

The costs to her health, however, from taking care of three kids during the day, working nights in a toxic environment, and sleeping only a couple of hours inbetween, is anemia and kidney failure at twenty-nine years old. Carmen's activism, however, dates from Sanyo's failure to pay the severance pay required by Mexican law, a struggle that takes us through the looking-glass world of Mexican company unions and corrupt government officials.

Lourdes became an activist because her shack is near a stream turned toxic for her children with the emissions of chemicals and sewage from the *maquiladoras*, which cynically release these toxic wastes when it rains. Her fight for environmental justice outside the *maquiladoras* resonates with Carmen's struggle for social justice inside them. Together with the accounts of other

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women workers, they make *Maquilapolis* a powerful and moving activist documentary about one of the major labor phenomena in the hemisphere and an important feature of globalization, as well as an innovative and successful experiment in filmmaking from below, with the workers themselves filming, doing the narration and both interviewing and being interviewed, while the professional filmmakers provide the postproduction polish.

Dignity of the Nobodies (2005) 120 minutes. Director: Fernando Solanas. Cinesur Productions (Argentina/FAX: [541147] 948513)
US premiere at Tribeca Film Festival, New York City, 2006.

Fernando "Pino" Solanas is one of Latin America's great filmmakers. In 1968, his *Hour of the Furnaces* combined French New Wave techniques with Latin American magical realism and Solanas' revolutionary Peronism to create a point-of-view documentary—with historical depth—that transformed Latin American cinema. During the decades that followed he retained his political commitment, which informed feature films like *The Exile of Gardel* (1985), *Sur* (1988), and *El Viaje* (1992), but it was not until the Argentine crisis of 2001–2003 that he returned to making documentaries.

The meltdown of an Argentine economy that during the 1990s had been the poster boy for neoliberalism and its Washington Consensus was a national tragedy of almost epic proportions. By the end of 2002, the economy had shrunk sixteen percent, formal unemployment was over twenty-five percent and more than fifty percent of Argentines, including seventy percent of its children, were living in poverty—in what had once been one of the wealthiest countries in the world. A fortnight in, 2001–2002, in which the country was ruled by five presidents, symbolized the political meltdown as well, in which a shrinking middle class and working class united with the multiplying poor to demand "*Que se vayan todos*!"—that the entire political class responsible for the national disaster be ousted from government.

Solanas, to his credit, was an early critic of the corrupt privatizations and deindustrialization of the neoliberal 1990s' "renovated" Peronist governments of Carlos Menem. His sardonic sendup in *El Viaje* (1992) of Menem as a "Frog-Man" leader of a Buenos Aires whose streets had turned into sewers brought Solanas both a court case and a drive-by shooting that wounded his body but did not stop his cinematic protests. The Argentine crisis that confirmed his charges also unleashed his documentary "guns." *Memory of a Sacking* (2004) was an enraged attack on an Argentine elite that had sold out their country and its people, who were left to pay the price of their betrayal.

Now, in the prizewinning *Dignity of the Nobodies* (2005), the second film of a projected quartet about the Argentine crisis, Solanas has made a documentary in a different key with a more positive message. It is a film of small stories about unsung heroes who struggled with success to save their own dignity and that of others during the grave Argentine crisis of 2001–2003, a film about "small

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victories." They are recounted with affection and presented with the cinematic genius of an innovative filmmaker, who fuses techniques from several genres—documentary, testimonial, fiction and essay—to draw us into the lives of his protagonists and make their stories real and moving. Many of them are workers, although too many of them are *ex*-workers, victims of Argentina's economic meltdown who are now struggling to survive. There is the teacher who organizes soup kitchens for impoverished children, the ragpickers who demand respect, and the nurses who strike for supplies for their hospital. One of the most uplifting sequences tells the story of the widow of a small farmer whose husband died of a heart attack when their indebted farm was to be taken from them, who organizes other farmwomen to prevent auctions of mortgaged farms by drowning them out with massed singing of the Argentine national anthem. There is also a segment on the *piqueteros*, the organized unemployed whose road blockades and sometimes violent demonstrations played a major part in toppling successive Argentine governments. And, there is a segment on workers in a "recuperated industry," a factory in Patagonian Neuquén, which the workers took over and operated as a worker cooperative when their bosses abandoned it during the crisis.

Inevitably, the film's exploration of the phenomenon of recuperated workplaces, which at their height in 2002–2003 encompassed some 150 enterprises that employed about 15,000 workers, and are now organized in two national federations, is limited. For a more in-depth account of these unusual twenty-first-century worker self-managed enterprises, we need to turn to a different kind of documentary—the activist videos of the Grupo Alavío film collective. This group of committed young Argentine filmmakers has been working since the crisis of 2002 to document the struggles of the workers of the recuperated enterprises and to create cinematic resources for those struggles. Like *Maquilapolis*, their films are collaborations between filmmakers and workers, although in this case the distinction between them is maintained. Grupo Alavío has made at least eleven videos about recuperated enterprises of diverse types. There is one about Hotel Bauern in Buenos Aires (*Bauern: Cooperative de trabajo*), another about a printer in the nation's capital (*Chilavert recupera*) and two about the Brukman clothing factory in the same city (*Brukman confecciones, el segundo desalojo, and Brukman, obreras en lucha*, Available together with English subtitles as *The Struggle of the Brukman Workers*).

One video focuses on a lumber cooperative in the interior province of Córdoba (*Madarera Córdoba Cooperatiaes*), while another is about a brick plant in Patagonian Neuquén (*Recuperando nuestro trabajo*). But it is the group of four films about another Nequén recuperated enterprise, the Zanon ceramic tile factory, that offers the best and most complete account of a recuperated enterprise, from its initial seizure by its workers and their successful resistance to efforts to evict them and take back the plant, through their creation of a self-managed enterprise and lobbying the government for legal recognition (*Zanon: Construyendo resistencia, Mate y Arcilla* [Zanon Under Workers' Control], *Recital en Zanon*, *Zanon: Acampe en Congreso*).

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The young Alavío filmmakers lack the resources of Solanas. They also lack his cinematic skills, the ability to create character in a vignette, to avoid talking heads by cutting away to live action and using voiceovers for the protagonist's reflections. It is a cinema of hand-held cameras, jump-cut editing and unshaped soundbytes. But what the Alavío documentaries lack in cinematic polish and sophistication they make up in authenticity. Some sequences seem more like documents than documentaries and their videos have a tendency to focus on conflicts that show both the brutal repression of the government and the heroic resistance of the workers. But, at their best, as in *Mate and Arcilla*, with its inimate portrayal of the recuperated Zanon factory in operation, Grupo Alavío brings us close to the complex realities of these recuperated enterprises and the lives of their workers and persuades us that workers can run factories—and "countries too," as one worker affirms. (Grupo Alavio has some videos with English subtitles. Email: alaviocine@yahoo.com.ar)

Brazil, where Lula, a former metalworker, is now president, could have been that worker's proof positive. Lula—Luis Inácio da Silva—was one of millions of Brazilians who migrated from the depressed and drought-stricken rural Northeast to the booming industrial center of São Paulo with his family in search of a better life during the postwar decades. The key to that better life was an industrial job, which Lula (like many others) left school to secure in São Bernardo, part of the ABC suburbs of São Paulo where the booming Brazilian automobile industry was then concentrated. Lula began as a line worker, became a plant leader and then a regional labor leader who helped create a new unionism free from the governmental and political party ties of past Brazilian labor organizations, a unionism that was at once pragmatic and militant, focused on local demands and conscious of their larger implications. This new unionism emerged in the late 1970s, when the military regime that had ruled Brazil since 1964 was embarked on an elongated transition back to democracy, a transition that Lula and the São Paulo metalworkers accelerated with massive strikes that rallied civil society to their side and merged their demands for higher wages with larger societal demands for democracy. Lula would build on his success as a regional leader to go on to found a new national labor confederation (CUT) and a new workers party (PT), for which he would run for the presidency three times unsuccessfully, before finally being elected president in 2002.

Metalworkers (Peões) (2004) 85 minutes. Director: Eduardo Coutinho. Distributed by Videofilmes Producoes Artisticas Ltda. in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; can be ordered with English subtitles by emailing producer Raquel Zangrandi: raquel@videofilmes.com.br

Metalworkers is centered around the great strikes during 1979–1980 of more than 100,000 São Paulo auto and metallurgical workers (which detonated a strike wave that involved millions of workers nationwide), strikes that made

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their leader, Lula, a household name in Brazil during the military dictatorship and set him on the road to the presidency in 2002. This film—a prizewinner in Brazil—was a byproduct of that election campaign, during which the filmmaker, Eduardo Coutinho, made another documentary (*Intermissions*) on Lula in his successful fourth presidential campaign.

Metalworkers focuses not on the former metalworker and union leader, but on twenty-one workers and activists, men and women, who took part in those crucial labor struggles three decades ago, yet have remained relatively anonymous since. Finding them was a labor of love by the director, who traced many of them back to the rural areas from which they—like Lula—had migrated from to become metalworkers in São Paulo. They are mostly retired now and look back with nostalgia and pride on that struggle, although their memories of the work itself is a mix of suffering and satisfaction. (Significantly, the original title in Portuguese was *Peões* or "Peons," which implies unskilled workers moved from job to job in a workplace shaped by functional flexibility.)

The film intercuts footage of the strikes with interviews with these workers reflecting on the origins of those struggles, their own part in them, and the directions their lives have taken since then, in almost all cases a direction different from what it would have been without their jobs as the metalworkers in São Paulo who participated in and benefited from these legendary labor struggles. None of them, however, benefited as much as Lula, who is an unheard presence in the film, seen in archival footage and through the memories and genuinely fond accounts of these worker activists.

Eduardo Coutinho is an accomplished filmmaker and the production values of *Metalworkers* are very good. He is also a skilled interviewer and director who is able to elicit and capture the personalities of these twenty-one workers so that they all seem individual and different from each other, even when responding to what are clearly very similar questions. The result is a documentary that is engaging as well as informative about one of the most important labor movements in Latin America during the past century, the workers whose activism sustained it and the labor leader whose role in it propelled him to the presidency of the region's biggest nation.

Taken together, these documentaries on workers in the three largest countries of Latin America—Brazil, Mexico, and Argentina—show the continuing interest of activist filmmakers in the situations and struggles of workers in the region. Labor unions in those countries may be in trouble and workers suffering the negative effects of globalization, as the articles in this special issue suggest, but the cinematic exposition and diffusion of the problematics and struggles of Latin American workers are alive and well.

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