

first of all, respect

In the midst of an extremely tense labor situation in Quebec, Harry Gulkin signed a much disputed collective agreement with the Syndicat national du cinéma and shot a feature film. Below he gives his impressions of this contract, and of the situation in general.

The technicians and producers in Quebec have not been getting on well together. The labor conflict which had been simmering since April and which had proved immune to attempts to negotiate a resolution finally came to a head as the union used illegal means to stop productions and to pressure the producers into signing its proposed collective agreement. In August, the Supreme Court of Quebec issued a temporary injunction against the union officers and some of its members. Since then, a relative calm has come back to the filming scene though the 280 members of the Syndicat national du cinéma are boycotting all productions of members of the Association des producteurs de films du Québec.

Since last year was exceedingly difficult for film production in Quebec, the present situation – causing diminished production and a tenuous atmosphere – may prove critical. One can't help but wonder whether the rich and easy relationship which once characterized some Québécois productions – and which created a series of local masterpieces – can ever be recaptured.

Harry Gulkin, who is not a member of the APFQ, signed the new collective agreement with the SNC in order to shoot *Jacob Two - Two ... Cinema Canada* asked for his impressions of the shoot, and of the situation in Quebec. We thank him for taking the time to make the following comments on the situation.

Harry Gulkin was the producer of *Lies My Father Told Me* and is now producing *Jacob Two-Two Meets the Hooded Fang*.

by Harry Gulkin



Harry Gulkin

In early 1972, I discussed with Bernard Lalonde, then president of the SNC, and with Michel Brault, a project to produce, in Montreal, a film of

international stature under the direction of Jan Kadar. I received a letter from Lalonde on behalf of the SNC welcoming such an initiative as a step which would enhance the development of the Canadian film industry. (It is interesting to note that an equally enthusiastic letter was forthcoming from Victor Knight who was then president of ACTRA.)

During the shoot of *Lies My Father Told Me*, when we ended up in extreme financial difficulty, I found that one of the very few groups which understood that the film *had* to be completed was the crew – members of the SNC – and the SNC office itself. At one point, when we were completely out of money and my house was mortgaged and I had no further personal resources or credit, crew members came forward and lent me the money to buy raw stock from Kodak. Further, the then business agent of the union, Simone Lefebvre, offered the services of the union office to keep my books during that particular period.

Despite the long and prolonged difficulties of completing *Lies My Father Told Me*, the enthusiasm of the key crew members for the project never flagged and their pride in being part of this significant step forward in Canadian filmmaking was an important factor in the completion of the film.

The Role of the Union in the Development of the Quebec Film Industry

I cannot say for sure, but I do not believe that there exists anywhere else in the world a group of key technicians who insist upon first read-

ing a scenario before agreeing either to work on a film or to the conditions under which they will work on that particular film. In Quebec, an entire cadre of people exists whose commitment to its work is based not only on the sustenance, professional and monetary, which it draws from it, but also on the imprint it can make upon its own audience and upon the film audience of the world.

On such a fertile bed, it is possible for producers to achieve the kind of cooperation and the kind of commitment to a project which is so difficult in more mature filmmaking societies. Elsewhere there is, if not a boredom – because people working professionally do not ever *really* get bored – certainly a much more mechanical and less concerned approach to the eventual outcome of any particular project.

In the context of the development of a national film industry, capable of reflecting the life of this country, both here and abroad, a symbiotic relationship between technicians, artists and producers is essential. In order to achieve the kind of motion pictures with the impact that I have been seeking, one would have to develop these relationships in great depth. Clearly, these relationships cannot be evolved without the closest collaboration with the chosen representatives of the technicians: to wit, the SNC.

Like all organizations, the SNC can be irritating and frustrating in particular instances and demands. But its general attitude, in my experience, has been one of cooperation, of collaboration, and of support.

My single great reservation about the SNC's policies has to do with the restrictiveness and the protectiveness with which it views the bringing in of people either from elsewhere in Canada or from abroad. It frequently views this as a threat to the employment possibilities of SNC members. I believe this to be a mistaken view and will continue to challenge it. When, for example, a director coming from someplace other than Quebec wishes to bring with him a director of photography with whom he has worked, I think there can be no question that he must be accommodated. But beyond this protective approach – which, by the way, is common to every technicians' union anywhere in the world – producers and directors, in my opinion, can and do receive more from this union than from most others.

There appear to be exceptions. Louise Ranger, a Montreal producer, pointed out that I was having no problems because I had one of the best

available crews working on **Jacob Two-Two**. She went on to say that, because the projects that I undertake are quality projects which people wish to work on, they naturally extend their full collaboration. This, she said, was not always the case: when working on exploitation films – films of either the sex, violence or action variety – for producers whom they respected less, crews generally looked to the films primarily as a source of money, not professional gratification.

This involves a moral judgement on the part of the crews and this is perhaps a dangerous thing, as Gilles Carle has commented. On the other hand, who is to deny the right of technicians and crews to make their value judgements with respect to what they wish to do in life, and to project these – or at least to extend these assessments and these judgements – onto the people to whom they offer their employment from time to time?

An important point which has been raised is that there are no problems in the current agreement so long as one is working with the top technicians. But if they are not available, one is confronted with very serious problems – in both hiring and terminating the employment of technicians who are not quite as good.

This is a very important question and I think that it can be resolved – but not by producers reserving to themselves all prerogatives of hiring and firing. While producers need this authority, protection must be built into collective agreements so that these practices are not abused. What we are dealing with here are standards of competence, of efficiency, and I believe these can be dealt with by a joint committee composed of representatives of the union and of the producers, which certifies the competence of people working in the industry. This leads closer to the kind of partnership which must exist even *within* the tension that exists between employer and employee, between producer and crew.

My Experience on Jacob Two-Two

I was the first producer to sign the new SNC agreement. I am not a member of the Association des producteurs de films du Québec and was therefore not restrained by that membership from concluding such an agreement. I believe that I still remain the only feature film producer to have signed the agreement, although I be-

lieve one or two producers of commercials have signed it since.

The agreement was not signed blindly. I had perused it carefully and had assessed where it might affect the course of production. My conclusion was that there was indeed very little to be concerned with, and this proved to be the case during actual production.

There is nothing in the agreement which I signed that impeded my rights as the general manager and producer of the film. It did contain certain protective devices, of so mild a character compared with other union agreements that I couldn't find it within me to fight against them. In any case, during the course of the shoot, neither I nor my production manager, nor the director, found that any of the clauses within the union agreement (an agreement which, by the way, we scrupulously observed) impeded the smooth and proper flow of the production.

Perhaps the panic with which most producers view this agreement should be pointed in other directions.

Perpetual Crisis

The film industry generally is in a state of perpetual crisis. In Quebec, it is composed of a group of small, under-financed entrepreneurs who are, with a few exceptions, perpetually on the verge of extinction. Producers find it difficult to compete in the small market which is Canada. They find that they must be competitive with respect to price, whether they produce industrial films, commercials, or feature films limited to either the Quebec or the Canadian market.

As a consequence, much of the work that is done is shoddy and cannot, in fact, compete in appeal. The frustration which arises from this situation is often directed at the technicians and the crews who are, after all, only insisting on their fair share of the rewards which accrue from their work. The producers might better search for appropriate marketing solutions, which can in turn be found once the product is improved.

It is too much to expect workers in the Quebec film industry to accept worse conditions and less protection than are accorded to employees in other industries in Quebec or to film workers in other countries. Our industry will not command the respect, will not command the support which it deserves from the people of Quebec by remaining among the most exploitative branches of industry in this country. □