

## \*!?! Unions

d./sc. Seaton Findlay ph. John C. Walker ed. Bob Cooper sd.re.rec. Paul Sharpe m. Stock (Alan Parker, composer) p.c. Crawley Films col. 16mm running time 27 min. 47 sec. dist. Canadian Labour Congress, 1979.

Strange title for a film, **\*!?! Unions**. The Canadian Labour Congress spent \$100,000 to have the film made, believing that a lot of Canadians hate unions. Most people only think about them when they feel the effects of a strike. ("Goddamn unions!") Or when they read in newspaper editorials the dire warnings of Big Labour's power ("Goddamn unions!") Or when the price of a bus ticket goes up after a new contract has been signed. ("It's the goddamn unions, I tell ya!")

**\*!?! Unions** presents a series of vignettes that show unions doing much more than just fighting for bigger pay cheques. We see immigrant workers learning English in special union classes set up at the workplace. We watch a young worker assisted in finding a job by a union-sponsored unemployment centre in Halifax. And former New Democratic Party leader Tommy Douglas makes a speech about how the labour movement has always been in the forefront pushing for medicare, pensions, and civil liberties legislation. Billed as "the human side of unions," the film argues that the labour movement is committed to helping people and communities in many ways unrecognized by the daily press and national news.

But few people will be convinced by **\*!?! Unions**. The film is too confusing. It not only lacks focus; it lacks exactly what it claims the labour movement has — commitment. In a film that purports to show "the human side," we should get some feeling for someone. But too many issues and too many vignettes mean that we don't really identify with anyone.

Each episode is introduced by a blacked-out screen with the voice of some anonymous Canadian asking why, for example, the unions don't do something about drug and alcohol abuse among their members. But the blackouts are too long, and one tends to feel that the projectionist should be sobered up before the labour movement tackles the inebriated working class. Curiously, it is not the projectionist's fault, simply an idea that doesn't quite work. (Although it does make for easy and cheap over-dubbing into French.)

The vignettes which follow prove that unions do have programs specially tailored to their members' problems. But by jumping from alcohol problems to marital problems to the problems caused by multinational corporations in Canada to the need for the labour movement to support the NDP, the film satisfactorily proves none of its arguments. Tommy Douglas, for instance, gives one of the most staged speeches of his career. It sounds more like a high-schooler's essay, "Why I Would Vote for the NDP" than Douglas' familiar rallying cries for progressive social legislation. Tommy is polite and proper, nice and inoffensive, but hardly committed.

Crawley, and director Seaton Findlay cannot be faulted for the film's lack of commitment — the one quality that might have been able to integrate all the disparate images. After all, in sponsored filmmaking you do what your client wants. In putting **\*!?! Unions** together, it was the CLC who was calling the shots. The Labour Congress admits that they were afraid to hire a more political filmmaker who would bring with him or her that sense of commitment. They felt the result would be too close to propaganda.

Like it or not, when you are trying to tell your side of the story it is going to be 'propaganda' of a sort. It is interesting to note that Findlay also made **Evidence of Progress**, for Exxon Corporation: a bril-

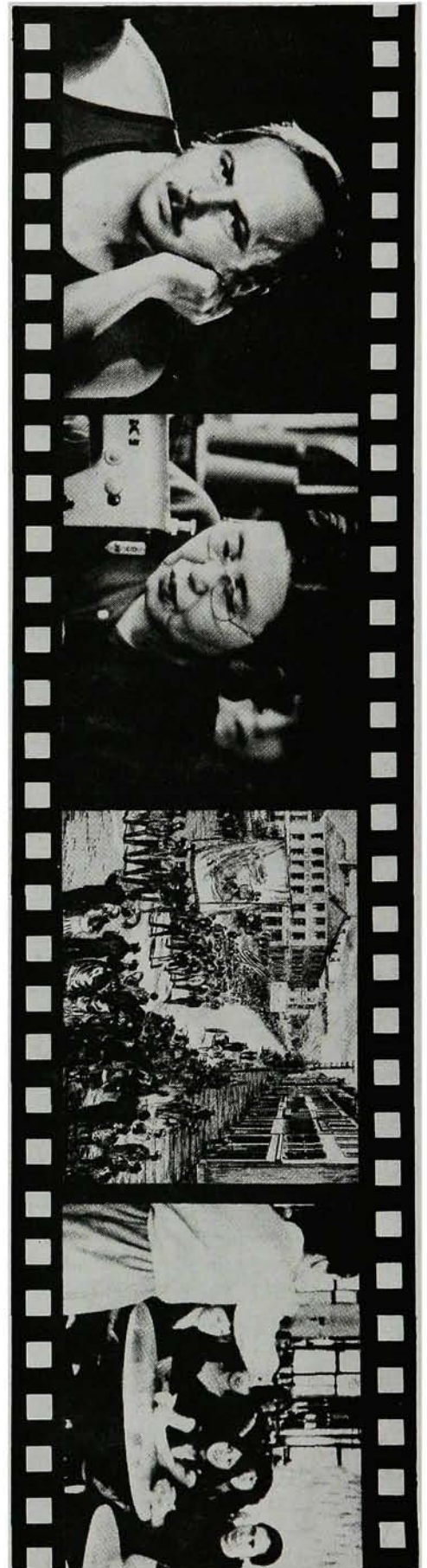
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## SHORT FILM REVIEWS

liant example of propaganda! At its conclusion the audience is inclined to not only fill up at the nearest Esso station, but to give the gas pump a little hug of thanks as well. When *Unions* ends, the audience is not sure of any message. Perhaps it is as simple as, "Unionists are human beings too" — but most of us already accept that. (*Globe And Mail* editorial writers and exasperated film producers are exceptions, of course.)

Anyway, the questions remain: who is to blame for rising prices, the failures to settle contracts and find jobs for one million unemployed Canadians? The

CLC seems to ignore the nasty side of things in *Unions*. It's good to know that unions are teaching immigrants how to speak English, but perhaps the new Canadians will just join in the chorus — "Goddamn unions" — unless they, and we, are given better explanations of the battles taking place at the nation's bargaining tables. If those explanations are to be told in film, only the goddamn unions are going to put up the money. They've got that. All they need now is the commitment.

Stephen Bingham

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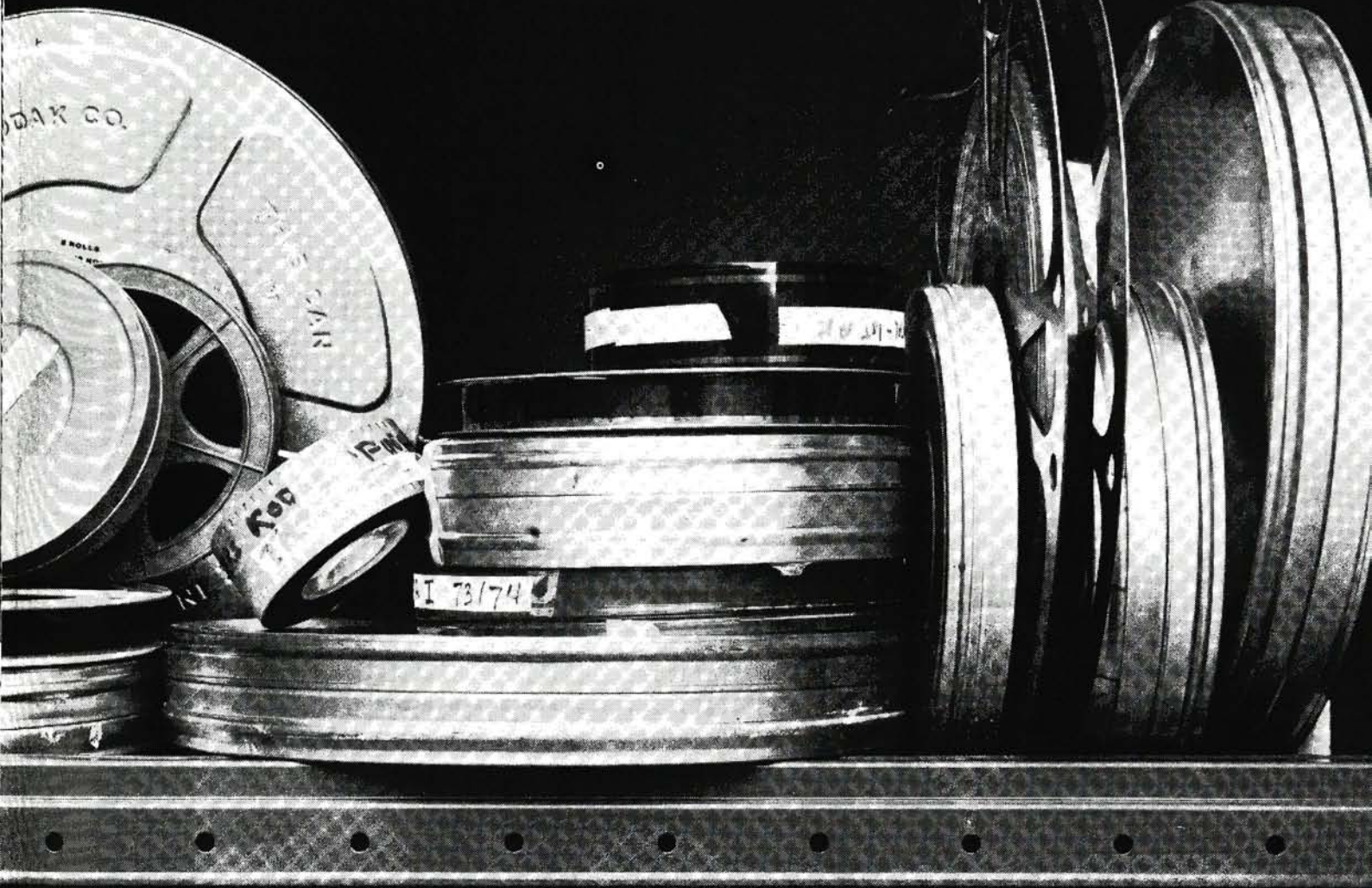
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