

Workers of the world, unite!

... and watch some Labour Day movies

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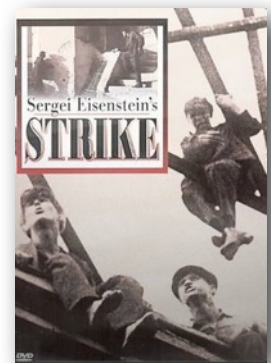
The annual Labour Day holiday – cheerily known in Quebec as La Fête du Travail – is celebrated the first Monday in September. It's a tradition of the North American union movement, dating back to the late 19th century. In the rest of the world, of course, May 1 – May Day – is the day workers unite.

The origin of the movement, and of Labour Day, was in the trades. It began as a fight by stonemasons in Australia in 1856, who dropped their tools to protest for an eight-hour day – and got it. In North America, it grew out of a successful strike by printers in Toronto in 1872; the U.S. proclaimed Labour Day in 1887 and Canada in 1894.

For both governments, making Labour Day – and not May Day – an official holiday was a deliberate choice. May Day was for the more radical, internationalist labour movement; Labour Day was the safer alternative, a celebration, not a call to arms. Many people don't even associate Labour Day with unions; it's just the end of a long weekend to close out summer.

Here are five classic films on DVD that focus on unions and the way they organize.

Strike (*Soviet Union, 1925*) Sergei Eisenstein's first motion picture is a classic of the silent era. With clever montage, double exposures, split screens and surrealistic effects, the black-and-white film depicts the cause, progress and aftermath of a violent strike by exploited factory workers in czarist Russia. The Image Entertainment DVD is excellent, with a new score and a full-length commentary by a Russian film scholar.

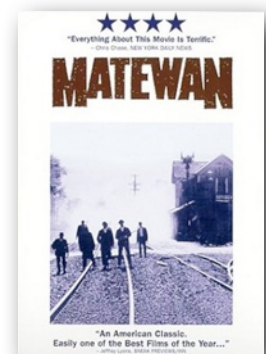


The Grapes of Wrath (*U.S., 1940*) Director John Ford brilliantly adapted John Steinbeck's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel about the Joads, a family of hardscrabble "Okie" migrants during the Depression who trek to California to work the orchards but end up victims of exploitation by land barons. Henry Fonda was nominated for an Oscar as Tom Joad. The extras-loaded DVD, a flipper disc, is part of Fox's Studio Classics series.

I'm All Right Jack (*Britain, 1959*) A madcap satire that cemented Peter Sellers's status in England as a comic genius. He plays Fred Kite, a ridiculously power-hungry union shop steward who sports a Hitler-like clipped mustache and succeeds in organizing a strike at a British missile factory that plunges the nation into crisis. The DVD is sold individually or as part of Anchor Bay's six-disc Peter Sellers Collection box set.

Reds (*U.S., 1981*) Over three hours long, this is an engrossing bio-epic about early-20th-century American journalists-cum-labour-agitators John Reed and Louise Bryant, and how their Communist activism in the U.S. and Russia turned to disillusionment. Warren Beatty wrote, directed, starred and produced; Diane Keaton played Bryant. Restored and issued on DVD last October in a two-disc special edition by Paramount.

Matewan (*U.S., 1987*) Independent film icon John Sayles directed this period drama about a real-life event, the Matewan Massacre of 1920. Chris Cooper plays a pacifist union organizer at a West Virginia coal mine who gets pitted against brutal bosses and their goons and scabs. The Canadian DVD by Seville Pictures is widescreen and anamorphic; avoid the earlier DVD release by U.S. distributor Artisan.



And 10 more union-themed films worth seeing: Salt of the Earth (1954), On the Waterfront (1954), Harlan County U.S.A. (1976), Blue Collar (1978), F.I.S.T. (1978), Norma Rae (1979), Silkwood (1983), Roger and Me (1989), Hoffa (1992), and a Canadian documentary, The Take (2004).