

IMMIGRATION, CIVIL RIGHTS, AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS LATINO WORKERS AND "SALT OF THE EARTH"

Labor struggles often involve issues of civil rights and women's rights. Immigrants and workers of color find themselves fighting for justice, equality, dignity, and respect as well as better wages and benefits. Often, their most important support has come from their communities, who see that they, too, have much to gain from the workers' struggle. In some struggles they have also received the support of other unions and white workers.

These kinds of struggles were celebrated in one of the most remarkable films ever made in the United States, "Salt of the Earth." Made in 1953 by writers and directors who had been "blacklisted" out of Hollywood (that is, during the Cold War, they had been accused of being "communists" and fired from their jobs), most of the film's cast consisted of Latino and Anglo miners who "played" themselves or characters like themselves in the film. There were only five professional actors, one of whom was Mexico's leading actress; the others were blacklisted white men who played the bosses and the sheriff. The film told the story of a Zinc miners' strike which protested low wages, discriminatory treatment on the job, unsafe working conditions, and the miserable conditions in which miners' families were forced to live in company housing. Organized in the Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers' Union, the miners fought not only a transnational corporate employer but also the government, whose courts and police sought to aid corporate management's efforts to break the strike and the union.

The dramatic core of the film comes when the picketing miners are arrested and served with an injunction, a court order, which limits the number of pickets they can have and what they can do to turn aside potential strikebreakers. The strike appears lost until the miners' wives point out that the injunction only mentions the miners and not them. They seek the right to replace their husbands on the picket lines. Although the men are hesitant, they realize that if they refuse, they will lose the strike. When the women take over the picket lines, they prove themselves to be capable, militant strikers, and they take the sheriff and the company by surprise. Meanwhile, the male miners take over the home and childcare duties of their wives, and they develop an appreciation for how hard the women have been working, every day. They embrace the women's demand for hot water and indoor plumbing in their company-owned houses, and, together, the men and the women win the strike.

The makers of "Salt of the Earth" were unable to gain commercial distribution for their film, and for nearly twenty years, it remained an "underground" treasure, shown in some union halls and college campuses. With the end of the Cold War and the rise of the civil rights and women's movements in the late 1960s and 1970s, "Salt of the Earth" emerged to become the celebrated classic that it deserved to be. It became a powerful expression of the ways that immigrant and labor rights, civil and women's rights could be fought together, and the ways that the arts could be used to tell these stories.