

WORKERS' STRIKES IN LOCAL FILMS AND *MADE IN DAGENHAM* NARRATIVES

MARY ANNE CLAIRE M. UMALI

ABSTRACT

This paper examines local films that tackle the subject of worker's strikes that had women characters in comparison to the British film, *Made in Dagenham*, which was about a strike led by women in 1968 and spurred political debate, leading to the United Kingdom's Equal Pay Act 1970.

Keywords: labor strike, women workers, *Sakada*, *Sister Stella L*, *Bayan Ko: Kapit sa Patalim*

THE MOST STRIKING CHARACTERISTIC OF *MADE IN DAGENHAM* IS IT IS a story about a successful strike led by women. Nigel Cole's British historical movie released in 2010 was based on a workers' strike back in 1968. It was led by 187 women, Ford's car seat sewing staff who voted for a 24-hour work stoppage. They started off with their demand to elevate their working grade from unskilled to match the men's grade doing similar work and ended up fighting for equal pay. The movie tried to show how this "little strike" gripped the headlines of the United Kingdom that spurred a political debate on gender and labour that eventually led to the Equal Pay Act 1970.

Strikes alone as a subject matter are somewhat the unicorn of films mainstream, independent, local, and foreign. What more a strike by women? What more a strike portrayed in such a positive light?

THE WOMEN IN LOCAL FILMS ABOUT WORKERS' STRIKES

Among contemporary local films alone, one would be hard-pressed to find titles tackling strikes or even just labour unions; and they are usually grim melodramas—which is of course, understandably so, as they expose the plight and violence bestowed upon workers. In acclaimed filmmaker Nick Deocampo's

Sinegabay, a catalogue of Filipino films geared towards “educating young people about problems and issues of their society” (Lumbera, 2008: ix), the only movies that mainly involve strikes or labor unions are *Sister Stella L* (1984) and *Bayan Ko: Kapit sa Patalim* (1985). Beyond this list, there is also *Sakada* way back in 1976.

In *Sakada*, the story focuses on farm workers in a sugarcane field. It starts with the killing of the leader of a peasant union by the hacienda owner’s goon. The film, then, tracks the lives of his mourning family that continues to suffer the grip of the hacienda’s family. Moving from farm to factory workers, we have *Sister Stella L* which revolves around the strike under an oil factory. The film moves through the eyes of a nun, who at first is generally nonpartisan and pacifist, but eventually forms a strong relationship with the union that helped her deeply understand their predicament and gather her resolve to join their struggle. Lastly, *Bayan Ko: Kapit sa Patalim* provides a sympathetic view of strikebreakers or scabs. It explores the “damn if you do, damn if you don’t” decision of a printing press worker to continue working in the midst of a strike so that his pregnant wife can deliver their baby in a hospital.

It is interesting that among these few three movies about fighting for labor rights, two underscore the role of women in organizing. In *Bayan Ko*, the latest film among the three, the woman’s role is mostly a supporting one, a way to move the plot and provide an emotional anchor for the audience as the wife helplessly holds onto the dead worker at the end of the movie. On the other hand, the earlier films, *Sakada* and *Sister Stella L*, the women take on more active roles.

In *Sakada*, we have the following women: the daughter of the dead peasant leader who decides to sell her body in the city, based on the determination to escape the suffering of heartbreak and rural life; the wife of the peasant leader’s son—who established the union in the hacienda—who joins the farmers’ struggle after an emotional fight with her husband; and mostly importantly, the widow who after hacking sugarcanes in rage and melancholy, gives a fiery speech to call on women to join the cause for justice. *Sakada* depicts women’s concerns as relationship and family-oriented which fuel their participation in the workers’ struggle. The climax of this portrayal is clear in the montage of the widow’s memories of her children’s suffering. In contrast to her son’s focus on demystification, exposing the mode of production and consumption in the hacienda that keeps them under the mercy of landlords, the widow focuses on agitation, appealing through images of loved ones and family to root their collective anguish and articulate the necessity to fight (Marasigan 2007).

However, even in its portrayals of being more active, just like *Bayan Ko*, a woman’s role is confined to embodying emotions and being the suffering wife, lover, mother, or daughter. They are basically people only through their relationship with their men.

Sister Stella L is a movie that goes beyond this gender assignment. In this movie, family and relationships are valued but not at the expense of being the defining essence of women. It does so, most obviously, by making a woman its main character. Thus, there is very ample time and space for the movie to explore—and the movie did take the chance to explore—the nun’s various standings in life: her relatively safe past, her currently religious work, her potentially dangerous future, her dreams, fears, principles, and the like, and then how she connects all of these to her social and

national involvement. Sister Stella went back and forth among various conversations/ consultations (with her religious order, her convent ward, her nun activist mentor, her ex-boyfriend journalist, the union leaders, and the wives and children of the strikers) and persecution (particularly under the hands of the hired goons of the factory owner) in the process of completely throwing her life into the workers' struggle. Her big decisions and actions are rooted in the heart of her experiences and after long drawn-out reasoning. They are not simply whims—which is the gaslighting assertion of her ex-boyfriend—and not mainly fuelled in respect to the men in her life. In *Sister Stella L*, the many tight relationships of women with fellow women guide them in their decision-making. In fact, even the male characters are shown to consult the women and to change because of the women's influence. This is highlighted in the female boss' consistent care for and reprimanding of the journalist, who found himself getting increasingly involved in the strike as Sister Stella's courage rubbed off on him. There is a sense of give and take among the characters, female or male; they all learn from one another.

Of course, the movie still usually subscribes to traditional gender roles such as the nurturing and supporting tasks from women and the providing and leading tasks from men, but this portrayal might be better read within the context of when *Sister Stella L* and even the other two films were created. These films were explicitly focused on instigating a social, if not national, consciousness among its audience at that time. *Sakada* was shown just a few years right after Marcos declared a military dictatorship. Marcos banned the film shortly afterwards (Marasigan 2007), while *Bayan Ko* was also banned because it included footages of actual protest demonstrations; Lino Brocka reportedly took the fight of this banned screening to the Supreme Court (Philippine Entertainment Portal 2008) and *Sister Stella L*, is an anti-Marcos propaganda; the director of the film explicitly stated that *Sister Stella L* is such (Sallan 2016). Both were released a few years after Martial Law was lifted. Though it definitely did not mean that men and women during the 70s and 80s were strictly adhering to the traditional gender roles that the movies were portraying, it can be a record of the protest era's prominent gender discourse, which seems to be a mix of traditional and radical and an intersection of class and gender when it operates under the discussion of labor and organizing.

It is a film *of* the past, not just *about* the past. At this point, it should be noted that the local movies above, unlike *Made in Dagenham*, are not categorically-speaking, historical films. This should be noted because films of the past and historical films operate under different genres carrying different implications. In general, films and other works of art are located within contexts, such as the usual suspects of economic, social, political, and cultural, that make them fertile for discourses. However, films drawn from specific historical landmarks weave the past to the present; they unavoidably affect the telling of a past story from the point of contemporary, multiplying the mentioned contexts.

Historical films adapt past non-fictional events that made an impact on its society which pushed it towards a trajectory leading to the present—a present that is still in dire need of remembering events that transpired in the past. These types of historical films, then, have the responsibility of re-telling a necessary story, the question of necessity depending on what is being missed or unexplored in the present-day narrative and consciousness. They have the responsibility to capture the muted truth of the past to turn up the volume of the truth of the present.

Like the challenge to historical films, *Sakada*, *Sister Stella L*, and *Bayan Ko*, that are films *of* the past, had that responsibility too—and took on this responsibility—of airing narratives of muted truths to the consciousness, but of the audience at that time. And though these films are based on fictional events, they are not any less real. Their showing took part in stoking the climate of protests that toppled the dictator then. Watching them now, they can stand as witnesses to the past and its muted truths by a society that still feels the need to turn to these witnesses.

Why do we feel the need to look back to begin with?

Three decades have passed since the film's portrayal of gender, class, labor, and organizing could have been further developed through the medium of film. If there are other films out there that do tackle these topics, they are definitely not accessible to the majority in this local movie industry already beset with battles to produce socially-relevant narratives in general, let alone strikes or labour unions.¹ Also, the dictatorship that it fought against may have been toppled then, but its fight remains in the midst of a society that is deaf to violation of workers' rights² But the tradition of these types of films seems to be currently on pause in the local scene. And this has to be addressed considering they are fertile ground for a wide array of analyses that involve making people think *and* move, and again, capable of bringing silenced voices a megaphone.

A review of the foreign film *Made in Dagenham* is one contribution to jumpstarting this stalled discourse. It is rooted in the same tradition of portraying workers' struggle in movies; at the same time, the positionality of the workers' struggle in a developed country, with a state that has a history of colonization, allows us to glimpse at the differences, similarities, and the relationship of first world and third world countries in respect to gender, class, labor, and organizing. And as a historical film, we can gain not just a history lesson on an impactful event that can serve as inspiration and proof that strikes do *work*, but also an interrogation of unexplored narratives and consciousness through the present and "modern" interpretation of the past.

The "modern" take of *Made in Dagenham* is arguably its popular culture approach in presenting the story of the strikers. The way it casts a positive light on a usually grim drama reveals its attempts to connect to a wider audience, and more significantly, make this audience smile.

The local films discussed end with either tragedy or a call to action after a tragedy. With a topic that seems so bleak and even fruitless to some, *Made in Dagenham* goes against the general perception and afforded a happy ending to the strikers. The strikers are not portrayed as impulsive and foolish, not people who will end up realizing they are fighting for nothing, and hence, not people who are *losers*. The movie can already be subversive in itself for presenting strikers who are *winners*—and their win welcomes narratives on gender, labor, and organizing that are still integral to today's discourses of gender, labor, and organizing.

THE NECESSARY FEMININE WORKER

The narrative of the movie depends on both women and society's transformation because of the collective struggle the women machinists undertook. It does so through centring on the lives of the women strikers, and it does so by creating fictional characters

of the said strikers, most especially the fictional worker-turned-leader Rita. She is characterized as an “ordinary” working mother who is nudged into the role of the spokeswoman of her fellow workers. She exudes nervousness, but she is also often on her toes, embodying wit and courage that she and her comrades need to fight the good fight against capitalist employers and bogus unionists that, maliciously or not, deprive them of their rights.

The soft-spoken Rita is pushed into the forefront of this struggle when Connie, their shop steward, has to relinquish more and more of her active involvement in the strike because of the need to tend to her husband suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder from the Second World War. From a harried mother having to take care of the household chores and getting bullied by her son’s pompous teacher, Rita is developed into an almost full-time organizer, leading her co-workers into one demonstration after another, answering journalists’ questions with ease, and facing compromising unionists and stubborn capitalists with firm principles and loyalty.

It is interesting to see how Rita handles Ford’s divide and conquer tactics that involves exploiting simple ambition (the female machinist who almost sells her soul to the devil in exchange for modelling) while dealing with the tension at home brought about by her larger role in the strike. In other types of movies that might pander to drama and stereotypes, a leader character like Rita might have had a melodramatic confrontation (a snappy or even a shouting exchange of dialogue perpetuating the virgin/whore dichotomy) with a “traitor” character like Sandra that could either make or break the decision of the latter to take up the modelling job offered by Ford in exchange for her compliance. But *Made in Dagenham* veers away from this trap by veering away from vilifying the feminine. The movie made it a point not to look down on ambitions or careers that are usually categorized as feminine. The movie legitimized Sandra’s desire to be a model.

Sandra: *This is something I've always wanted.*

Rita: *I know.*

Sandra: *I mean, I don't even know if I care about equal pay. I mean, it's still a shitty factory. This is just a brochure, but, you know... It's only trade, but it'll lead on. Get my foot in the door, you know? I just don't want to let you down.*

Rita: *You haven't let us down. You haven't gone back to work, have you? Because that's the deal here, isn't it? They set up this shoot, you go back to work? Only you haven't gone back to work, have you? So...*

Sandra: *But if they don't use these photos...*

Rita: *Sandra. Look at you. You are a model. You're a natural. They couldn't get better. You could, though.*

Sandra realized she didn’t have to choose between anything, and she only had to choose to stand by her loved ones, her co-workers. The movie underscores that wanting to be a model is not a bad thing; it didn’t place a hierarchical status between the machinists’ struggle and her modelling ambition. And furthermore, Rita’s approach towards Sandra is a quite traditionally positive value associated with femininity: she simply talks and extends her understanding towards her comrade. There is no thunderous catfight

spectacle to resolve the conflict.

This trajectory of not vilifying or belittling the feminine can be seen in other subtle ways in the film. An example is the wonderful acting of Sally Hawkins who played Rita with a speaking trait of as if she's always on the verge of crying. Rita radiates emotionality up until the end of the film. She never loses touch of this even in her transformation from being an "ordinary" working mom towards being an "extraordinary" leader. And though her emotionality is not her defining essence as a woman, it is a trait associated with femininity that she doesn't have to transform, just because the standard of leadership is associated with the masculine idea that logic is the polar opposite of emotions. She is explicitly nervous but she forges on; she defines bravery and leadership on non-traditionally masculine terms, on her own terms.

Another example is the running joke of the women's—from the strikers' leader, to the wife of the Ford executive, to the labour secretary's—shared interest in the inexpensive but fashionable brand of coat. Again, their interest in this something that is usually categorized as feminine is part of who they are, their female personality, and something they do not have to discard. It may look like something trivial but these *women* are the ones interested in it, much like how *women* are interested in elevating their work grade and securing equal pay may look like something trivial to the blinded (male) privileged just because these are *women's interests*. Pushed even further, it can be argued how this "trivial" running joke on this fashionable coat represents women's issues that are dismissed because they are simply "personal" yet it cuts through different classes and sectors.

THE PERSONAL IS STILL POLITICAL

The classic slogan of "the personal is political" is displayed in the continuous interaction between private and public spheres in *Made in Dagenham*. It moves back and forth between households and work spaces, between intimate gatherings at the pub and political demonstrations at the streets, between private talks (of the central woman character and her male ally) and public forums (among the women strikers and male dominated union), and so on and so forth. Transformations within and beyond these spheres are manifested along with the transformation of Rita, Sandra, and the other female characters. At home, Rita's husband Eddie is at a lost handling the children and domestic chores. He initially pretends nothing is wrong, but he holds a grudge against his wife who leaves him with traditionally female obligations. He struggles with the knowledge that he should be proud of his wife yet he does not know what to do with his resentment. He, then, justifies this resentment by blaming it on Rita not acknowledging his "suffering" of enduring the changes brought on by the empowerment of his wife.

Eddie: *Christ, I like a drink, but I ain't out on the beer every night or screwing other women, or... 'Ere, I've never once raised me hand to you. Ever. Or the kids.*

Rita: *Christ.*

Eddie: *What? Why are you looking like that?*

Rita: *Right. You're a saint now, is that what you're telling me, Eddie? You're a bleeding saint? 'Cause you give us an even break?*

Eddie: *What are you saying?*

Rita O'Grady: *That is as it should be. Jesus, Eddie! What do you think this strike's all been about, eh? Oh yeah. Actually you're right. You don't go on the drink, do you? You don't gamble, you join in with the kids, you don't knock us about. Oh, lucky me. For Christ's sake, Eddie, that's as it should be! You try and understand that. Rights, not privileges. It's that easy. It really bloody is.*

Eddie gets educated on what it is to be an ally. Yes, not all men are obstacles to the development of women. But yes, all women have experiences of being deprived of the respect that they deserve. Thus, the first rule of being an ally is not to expect a cookie for each time they resist asking a woman to make them a sandwich.

Rita's husband could have also taken lessons from the sympathetic union leader Albert. He does prod and convince Rita to take the struggle further from dispute over grading onto equal pay, but he does so as a guide. The women take the center stage and he merely helps set up the stage. He doesn't want to take credit whatsoever. Moreover, his presence and insider information are crucial for the women to be one step ahead of the other union leaders who are already compromising with the capitalists because of greed (the unionist who wastes the union's funds on fancy dinners) and twisted rationalizations (pushing back the struggle of women workers in favour of supposed more important labor agreements).

The women strikers standing up for themselves end up transforming the workers' movement by cutting its way through corrupt unionists' motives and bringing to the table a gender fair narrative for the male dominated union to bite. They give birth to a movement within a movement, pushing what should be already a progressive movement to grow more and grow better, inviting allies to this gender-specific cause, and inviting everyone to remember who or what the real enemy is—not simply some men nor some women, but capitalists and their system of devaluing workers' labour which means perpetuating harmful gender concepts to maintain their profit.

These 187 women are able to bring the capitalists' production to a halt showing them their immensely significant worth that pressured both their employers and their government. *Made in Dagenham* shows how the actions of 187 women can elicit panic, enough so that an industrial relations employee flies from America to, at first, bribe (such as the striker with an ambition), then blackmail (such as the corrupt union leader), and lastly, threaten (such as warning the pull-out of Ford's operation in the UK if the latter gives in to the women's demands). The actions of 187 women are able to force their country to confront the gender wage gap and actually do something about it.

The revolution of these women is the revolution of their men. The revolution of women is the revolution of society. To quote Albert who derived from Marx: "Progress can be measured by the social position of the female sex."

TRUTHS AND HAPPY ENDINGS

Within the context of sharing a feel-good story on the triumph of women strikers, *Made in Dagenham* succeeded in discussing optimistic narratives on gender, labor, and organizing. However, the movie, within the context of its characteristic as a true-

to-life story, its impact and relevance to its milieu may still be an open ended question. Does *Made in Dagenham* as a historical film actually work? Does the movie present its optimistic narratives by capturing the essence of the 1968 women workers' strike? And if not, what are the bearings of dropping the ball in capturing the truth of the past? Is the movie still able to provide a truthful present without further muting the truth of the past?

For instance, it is very surprising that a film about a collective struggle, led by a small group of women that pressured large institutions into action, feels compelled to make up fictional characters to present the story of real life women. These are women who fought the good fight; are they and their views not interesting enough to flesh out characters on the screen that the film has to make ones up from scratch? This hints at a lack of proper consultation with the strikers whose middle-aged and heavy set figures are replaced by younger, thinner, and "prettier" actresses. Creating glamorized versions of the strikers so the historical arc can be anchored properly into the medium of film—one that is obviously attempting to achieve a level of pop-culture—is an acceptable defence, if only it is able to stay true to the strikers by staying true to their solidarity and motivations.

Why does a film that explicitly states that it is about collective action have to create a fictional leader in Rita, that seem to be the only woman striker that should take the sole credit in the direction and actions of the strike? For a film about collective action, the story has to create and highlight *individual* heroes, pushing the actual group struggle to the background as if mere stage props for the "collective action" slogan of the film. It may also be the reason why instead of Rita's comrades being the one to reel her back into the active involvement in the strike, the film chooses the rich educated housewife of the Ford executive for Rita's motivation. The movie is too busy underscoring how gender cuts across class that it actually forgets underscoring how collective action is one of the main reasons the strike even moved towards being the trigger for the enactment of 1970s Equal Pay. The film remains trapped behind an individualist lens, which require it to conjure up a character that an individualist lens can simply follow and attribute the success to of what can be properly done by collective effort.

The creation of Rita et al. also paved the way for the movie to take giant strides and leaps in terms of plot progression on how the women's strike paved the way for Equal Pay Act. To adjust to the motivations of its fictional characters, *Made in Dagenham* tells a story of women, with the help of their union leader ally, eventually realizing that equal pay is the logical conclusion to their struggle for proper work grading from unskilled to semi-skilled. However, the actual story of the actual women strikers' tells it differently. According to Australian feminist Germaine Greer (deriving from one of the strikers, Rose Boland), "the issue was never stated in these terms before the meeting of the women with Barbara Castle, who had been banging on at the unions about equal pay for years. Invoking the notion of equal pay proved a very skilful diversionary tactic. Castle sidestepped the issue of the correct grading of the women's work and entitlements and offered instead to bring their pay as unskilled workers into line with the pay of male unskilled workers. The women's pay would be increased from 87 percent of the unskilled rate to 92 percent. It was another 16 years before the machinists of Dagenham could get the status of their jobs upgraded to semiskilled." Greer goes even further to assert that "In other words, the strike failed" (Greer and Campbell 2010).

Be it a failure or an accidental triumph (because whatever happened with the grading, the consensus is still that this strike led to an important formal introduction of the Equal Pay Act), what is more interesting is the motivation of the women machinists behind the focus of grading, never made clear in the film because the movie became a story about different women machinists. According to English feminist Beatrix Campbell who was able to interview them in the 70s: “The money mattered, they said, but their greatest concern was control over their time. They wanted paid time to work with, rather than against, the demands of daily life. They wanted ‘facilities’ at the workplace.”

This is interesting because the essence of this historical event offers a deeper and more progressive discourse on dismantling the public and private divide that the story of Rita and her gang touched on. As Campbell eloquently puts it, “We have the opportunity, on the screen, to revisit those wonderful sewing machinists: to listen to their stories that are never only about the strike and always about life” (Greer and Campbell 2010).

Nevertheless, *Made in Dagenham* dragged a significant historical event from the shadows into the limelight. As mentioned, accidental triumph or not, the women’s strike affected labour policies in “in England and America, at Ford and many other manufacturers and elsewhere in the developed world” (Ebert 2010). It is an important step in trying to close the gender wage gap—in the developed world, at least. So, the question of the film’s effectiveness in fulfilling the responsibility of re-telling a necessary story may be best left to its British and other first world countries’ audience. Because from a woman worker of the third world viewer, the dropped ball on solidarity, power of collective action, and politics of time discourses might be more important—considering that the triumph of the strike, accidental or not, also paved the way for “one reason so many jobs are outsourced to places where labor unions and equal pay do not find favor” (Ebert 2010).

This is another explanation of the stalled tradition of workers’ strikes in local films, and this also reveals the relationship of first and third world countries. Though many of *Made in Dagenham*’s strengths on re-telling gendered traits, class conflicts, and the division of labor are welcome developments in the discourse, the lack of significant developments “off-screen” for the conditions of women workers in third world countries—which was the result, again, accidental or not, of the triumph of the strike—will surely affect the continuation of tradition of films like *Sakada*, *Bayan Ko*, and *Sister Stella L*. But local films should continue all the same. And they can start by picking up the ball on solidarity, power of collective action, and politics of time discourses that might just be able to help positively portray and get that much needed inspiration to seize that happy ending among our own workers’ battles.

NOTES

1 An example is how in early 2017, celebrity turned politician Senate Majority Leader Vicente Sotto III proposed a separate movie festival for independent films so that the Metro Manila Film Festival would not lose its commercial viability and would supposedly not take away Christmas from children and family moviegoers. This proposal is a response to the 2016 MMFF that, under the chairpersonship of Liza Diño, aimed to promote culture and societal awareness in the country (Jimenez 2017).

2 On 1 February 2017, fire engulfed the House Technologies Industries in Cavite. The report of a fact-finding mission headed by the Center for Trade Union and Human Rights (CTUHR) asserts that 1,328 HTI workers are still unaccounted for, contrary to the official statement of the HTI Management. The report includes the following findings: "a) Workers say that many of their co-workers were trapped inside the burning building, b) Workers are being prevented by the company and the local government from coming out and sharing their own accounts of the fire, c) various occupational health and safety and general labor standards violations committed by the HTI." This tragedy follows the fire in Kentex factory that killed 72 workers in 2015 (Center for Trade Union and Human Rights 2017).

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