

Letters on the anti-communist purge of the American film industry

12 February 2009

On "The anti-communist purge of the American film industry"

Dear David,

Very enlightening review; even before reading Humphries' book one gets a good sense of the most critical issues raised in it. After highlighting some valuable analysis made by Humphries of the pervasive labor struggles in Hollywood, the character and objectives of the anticommunist witch-hunters, the treacherous role played by liberalism, one feels much better grounded in the history of blacklisting in general, and McCarthyism in particular.

Most importantly, your article does an excellent job in elaborating "certain vexing questions, with the character and the role of the Communist Party at their center." And one gets a sense of a far greater role of the CPUSA in facilitating the blacklist than commonly acknowledged by Hollywood blacklist scholarship. There is a great deal of confusion regarding the character of the American CP, so it may come as a surprise to learn that this ostensibly proletarian organization was the chief strike-breaker of the war period.

So, the tracing of the Hollywood left's degeneration and defeat at the hands of the HUAC to the "misinterpretation of the world war and the Democratic administration" is crucial in making sense of this historic defeat. This cannot be attributed to the supposed strength of McCarthy and his cabal; after all, he didn't enjoy mass support, and the CP was perfectly legal. And, as you state in our article, "no healthy party is simply suppressed out of existence...but by its own internal contradictions and the inviability of its program and perspective."

So I agree with emphasizing the critical role of the Stalinist CP, which was at the center of the campaign to

support the Kremlin's popular front policy, and thus subordinate the working class and the progressive Hollywood talent to one of the big business parties, the Democrats. In the end, all those gifted and sensitive filmmakers who were blacklisted, and artistically defeated, were left totally exposed to the attacks of the official anticommunism. There were also betrayed by the Democrats, the liberals and union officials, who sought "rapprochement with American imperialism." After all, the CPUSA line during the war was "Communism is 20th-Century Americanism." Thus many wartime patriots in Hollywood, those with Rooseveltian and antifascist, especially pro-Soviet, sympathies, suddenly found themselves on the wrong side of the Cold-War divide.

The great value of this review is precisely clarifying these political realignments and drawing out the objective role of the blacklist—to remove all ideological obstacles at home to the new era of American imperialism.

Thank you,

MK

Sydney, Australia

4 February 2009

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Congratulations on an exceptionally good article on Hollywood's blacklists. The only thing lacking was how terribly the families of those involved suffered when the men lost their jobs.

Carol B

London, UK

4 February 2009

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David,

Thank you for this very detailed review of Humphries's important book as well as your historical contextualization and interesting critical comments. It

is very much in line with the WSWS's important emphasis on recent history in danger of being forgotten, as well as its opposition to contemporary distortions, neglect and ideologically motivated denial syndromes currently practiced by the American institutional academy.

Some ten years ago, I co-edited Robert Rossen's screenplay of *The Sea Wolf* (1941), a film designed to be an allegorical attack on Fascism featuring John Garfield and Alexander Knox. When I mentioned the anti-Semitic aspects of HUAC, an anonymous reviewer bluntly responded, "There was no anti-Semitism in HUAC." This person had either not heard of Rankin or was in historical denial.

At present, Humphries's important book has been denied a paperback release in the hope that the current hardback price will prohibit wide readership, leading to certain elements responsible for promotion to acclaim that the book is now irrelevant, especially as we now live in a postmodern era where history is "bunk." The blacklist still continues today but operates in less explicit manifestations.

At least the WSWS does recognize what is important in terms of disseminating knowledge to a wider audience.

Tony W
4 February 2009



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