

Bisbee '17: The deportation of Arizona copper miners is a “still-polarizing event”

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This is an edited version of a comment that was posted as part of the WSWs coverage of the 2018 San Francisco International Film Festival. Bisbee '17 has now opened in movie theaters in the US.

Directed by Robert Greene

In July 1917, 1,200 striking copper miners in Bisbee, Arizona were illegally kidnapped, loaded in cattle cars and dumped in the southwest New Mexico desert. The violent action, in which two men died, was orchestrated by the giant mining company Phelps Dodge and local politicians in the firm's pocket. This brutal episode of American history is the subject of Robert Greene's nonfiction film *Bisbee '17*.

To commemorate 100 years since the infamous deportation, Bisbee residents reenact on camera certain events leading up to the expulsion. Unfortunately, Greene's restaging is largely noncommittal, giving equal weight to the positions of the company, law enforcement and victimized miners. Despite the movie's false objectivity, the filmmaker should be commended for calling attention to the event.

That the traumatic deportation continues to weigh heavily on the collective consciousness of the small, rural town only a dozen miles from the Mexican border certainly comes across in *Bisbee '17*. It is, as the movie's media notes indicate, a “still-polarizing event.” Bisbee's more conservative citizens continue to unabashedly defend the mine operators and gun thugs who seized the strikers, while its “alternative” and working class population energetically take the side of the radical miners.

“Bisbee,” assert the press notes, “is considered a tiny ‘blue’ dot in the ‘red’ sea of Republican Arizona, but divisions between the lefties in town and the old mining families remain. Bisbee was once known as a White Man's Camp, and that racist past lingers in the air.”

This is both superficial and off-base, an attempt to inject contemporary racial politics into an episode that exemplified more than anything else the ferocity of the class struggle in America, then and now. In any event, *Bisbee '17* provides little evidence of a lingering racist past, beyond the prejudices that one might expect from the pro-corporate, pro-police social layer that exists in the town.

But the film does prompt further investigation of what actually happened in Bisbee in 1917. Here is a brief outline:

The radical-syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), known as the Wobblies, who began organizing Arizona miners in early 1917, called a strike in Bisbee—then the largest city in Arizona—in June. According to *Borderline Americans* by Katherine Benton-Cohen (who collaborated on the film): “In the summer of 1917, the IWW and its opponents clashed in a series of encounters across the American West and Great Plains.

“They were not alone on the nation's picket lines: that year saw more than 4,500 work stoppages in the United States, at least twenty in Arizona, including another IWW strike in Globe. But in the patriotic fervor of World War I, the Wobblies in particular infuriated many Americans. The union's constitution began, ‘The working class and the employing class have nothing in common,’ and the Wobblies were among the nation's most vocal anti-war activists. The federal Espionage Act, which made most anti-war activities illegal, was passed into law just days before the Bisbee strike began. The law aimed squarely at the IWW. By September 1917, hundreds of Wobblies, including Bill Haywood, would be arrested...”

“Nowhere, however, did anti-IWW responses reach the precision and scale of those in Bisbee.”

Phelps Dodge and the local establishment carried out its assault on the IWW and the strikers in the name of the American war effort. The mine owners called the strikers “unpatriotic” and the *New York Times*, in time-honored fashion, blamed the walkout on Germany. Of course, the strike also took place in the shadow of the Mexican Revolution, unfolding not far away, and the Russian Revolution, which inspired many of the IWW leaders.

On July 12, Phelps Dodge closed down access in Bisbee to the outside world by taking control of the telegraph and telephones. County Sheriff Harry Wheeler and more than 2,000 armed deputies rounded up the miners, forcing them at gunpoint into 23 railroad boxcars, whose floors were covered inches deep in cow manure, and shipped them 180 miles to Hermanas, New Mexico.

The penniless men were then relocated to the border town of Columbus, where the army put them in a “bull pen” for three months. News of the Bisbee Deportation was made known only after an IWW attorney, who met the train in Hermanas, issued a press release.

“On May 15, 1918,” writes Benton-Cohen, “federal attorneys secured the arrest of twenty-one mining officials, businessmen, and other deputies on charges of conspiracy and kidnapping. But a federal judge in San Francisco ruled that no federal laws had been broken, and dismissed the case. Two years later, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld his decision. That was the end of federal attempts at legal redress.”

The summer of 1917 also witnessed the great Butte, Montana strike by thousands of copper miners during which IWW organizer Frank Little, who called on workers to “abolish the wage-system and establish a socialist commonwealth,” was lynched by company goons and vigilantes.

None of the most far-reaching events, including the Russian Revolution, come in for mention in *Bisbee '17*, a pretty limited effort all in all.



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