

***Radium Girls*: In the 1920s as now, companies choose profits over workers' lives**

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Directed by Lydia Dean Pilcher and Ginny Mohler; screenplay by Mohler and Brittany Shaw

Streaming on Netflix, *Radium Girls*, originally released in 2018, is a historical docudrama directed by Lydia Dean Pilcher and Ginny Mohler. Scripted by Mohler and Brittany Shaw, the film recounts an important episode revealing once more the harsh reality of American capitalism.

Around the time of American entry into World War I in 1917, female workers began to be hired by corporations in the US (and Canada) to hand-paint watch faces with radium-based, self-luminous paint. Many of the women contracted multiple illnesses, including bone fractures and necrosis of the jaw, a condition dubbed “radium jaw.” It is unknown how many workers died. Radium had only been discovered in 1898 by Marie and Pierre Curie and its properties were not fully understood. However, the companies were aware of the dangers, and protected executives and scientists. The women workers were considered expendable.

“The women hired to paint dials came to be known as ‘ghost girls,’” according to the *Britannica* website, “because the radium dust to which they were exposed daily made their clothes, hair, and skin literally glow. Many of the women wore their best dresses on the job so the fabric would shine brilliantly when they went dancing after work. Some even applied the paint to their teeth because it gave them radiant smiles.”

What’s more, the painters ingested the radioactive substance because they were instructed to use their lips to bring their paint brushes to a fine point, as this saved time and money.

As part of a campaign by the companies, workers’ deaths were attributed by unethical and corrupt medical professionals to other causes. Syphilis was often cited

in attempts to smear the women’s reputations.

The story of the abuse perpetrated against the predominantly female workforce in the 1920s in New Jersey, some 20 miles west of New York City, stands out from most such cases by the fact that the resulting litigation was covered widely in the media.

Pilcher and Mohler’s *Radium Girls* opens with a carnival barker pitching “radium water” as “liquid sunshine” and the “miracle elixir of the age.” The drama, interspersed with black-and-white documentary film footage from the period, centers on the teenage Cavallo sisters. Both Josephine (Abby Quinn) and her younger sister Bessie (Joey King) work for American Radium in Orange, New Jersey, painting watch face dials for one penny a dial. A third sister, Mary, now deceased, was also employed at the factory. The siblings contest the diagnosis of syphilis that the company “doctor” cited as cause of death.

Monitored by supervisor Mrs. Butkiss (Carol Cadby) and manager Mr. Leech (Scott Shepard), the predominantly youthful workforce is told to lick the tips of their paint brushes for added precision—“dip, lick, paint” is the repetitive procedure. But when Josephine develops a swollen jaw, bleeds and loses a tooth, Bessie begins to suspect conditions on the job.

She meets two young Communists, Walt (Collin Kelly Sordelet) and Etta (Susan Heyward), who introduce her to local labor leader Wylie (Cara Seymour) in the Consumers League, a reform organization. Wylie suggests that Mary’s body be exhumed to prove company culpability. After American Radium’s quack physician declares the still virginal Josephine’s disease to be syphilis, an analysis of Mary’s bones finds them to have 1,000 times the safe limit of radioactivity.

In the course of the film, the comment of the great

Polish-French physicist and chemist Marie Curie is cited to the effect that “there is no way to remove [radioactive] substance from the human body once it has entered.” Curie died in 1934 from years of exposure to radioactivity.

Meanwhile, others in the plant are also getting sick. At a 1927 Communist Party New Year’s Eve celebration, a combative Bessie declares: “I am going to make American Radium pay for what they’ve done.” A bitter court battle ensues.

The movie’s postscript informs the viewer that radium was used to paint luminous clocks until the 1970s. Moreover, the case significantly impacted US labor law, despite the fact that the judge who negotiated the settlement of the court case against the company was a stockholder in American Radium. A title chillingly notes that if a Geiger counter (which measures ionizing radiation) is placed over the grave of one of the radium girls, “it will click for more than a thousand years.”

Radium Girls, a well-acted movie powered by the endearing King, does several things that are unusual. First, it showcases the brutality of corporate America and highlights its complete indifference to the health and safety of workers. This is hardly a matter of mere academic or historical interest. Thousands of workers die each year in the “industrial slaughterhouse” that is corporate America. Moreover, the current homicidal response of the government and big business to the pandemic demonstrates the same fierce determination to rake in profits at the expense of health and life.

While it may be that the movie has a feminist edge, the filmmakers are honest enough not to treat the fate of the radium girls as a gender issue, but as principally a class and economic one. One of the film clips from the time shows a demonstration, presumably organized by the Communist Party, explicitly calling for the unity of “white and Negro” workers.

In general, left-wing politics and their advocates are treated with some objectivity in *Radium Girls*. Walt, Bessie’s Communist Party boyfriend, is presented as a well-meaning human being, as are all those, like Etta, who attend Communist Party functions—a mix of blacks and whites. At one such affair, organizers screen footage of a protest against the impending execution of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti. At the time, there were mass protests against the state

murder—which ultimately took place in August 1927—of the two Italian immigrant anarchists. This was a campaign taken up by the socialist workers’ movement internationally.

One would like to think that a new generation of filmmakers is not so hampered by the anti-communist prejudices of the past.

Radium Girls is also rare in that very few American movies have been made about the early 20th century struggles of female (or male) workers. If filmmakers were to take up such real-life dramas, they would find no shortage of material. A quick glance at the historical record provides a number of potentially fascinating episodes:

- * The New York City shirtwaist strike of 1909, also known as the “Uprising of the 20,000”—a struggle primarily involving Jewish women working in the shirtwaist factories.

- * The 1910 Chicago garment workers’ strike, in which, at its high point, more than 40,000 workers were involved.

- * The 1912 Lawrence, Massachusetts textile strike, also known as the “Bread and Roses Strike,” which involved 20,000 immigrant workers led by the left-wing Industrial Workers of the World (IWW).

- * The bitter 1913 Paterson, New Jersey silk strike, a five-month long conflict in which approximately 1,850 strikers were arrested, including IWW leaders Big Bill Haywood and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn.

And there are many more such events.



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