

Black Legion (1937): American fascism, then and now

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Directed by Archie Mayo and an uncredited Michael Curtiz; screenplay by Abem Finkel and William Wister Haines, based on a story by Robert Lord.

In light of recent events, it seems worthwhile to take a look at—and recommend to readers—the 1937 political crime drama, *Black Legion*, featuring Humphrey Bogart, which deals with a fascistic movement of the same name active in the 1930s in the industrial Midwest of the US.

The Black Legion, an even more violent split-off from the Ku Klux Klan, claimed tens of thousands of members at one point (although it “recruited” or kidnapped individuals at gunpoint, making genuine membership figures impossible to determine) and received support and financing from the upper echelons of business and politics.

The Warner Bros. film, directed by Archie Mayo and an uncredited Michael Curtiz, is a gripping depiction of the organization’s thuggery and violence and their devastating social and personal impact. *Black Legion* is more limited in regard to the broader significance of the group’s activities, which it carried out in the midst of the Great Depression and immense social convulsions.

Because of Production Code censorship and restrictions Hollywood placed on itself, the full scope and role of the Black Legion could not be developed in the film. This was a virulently anti-communist, racist, anti-Semitic and nativist outfit, which carried out violent acts against socialists and Communists, trade union organizers, African Americans (Malcolm X believed his father was murdered by the Black Legion in Lansing, Michigan in 1931) and immigrants.

Moreover, as the 1930s wore on and explosive conditions developed in the factories, the Black Legion became—directly or indirectly—a weapon of the auto companies and the Michigan establishment in their campaign against unionization and, above all, socialism. The fascist gang reportedly included Detroit’s police chief among its members. Mark S. English in *Under the Star of the Guard: The Story of the Black Legion* explains that “the Black Legion penetrated police and fire departments, as well as high places in city, county, and state government, and was connected with the Republican Party.”

The parallels with the present situation should be evident. The fascist outfits today, with strong ties to law enforcement, the military and prominent figures in Washington and various state governments, have led the anti-lockdown efforts, doing the dirty work of the giant corporations in attempting to drive workers back to potentially lethal conditions, as well as the January 6 coup attempt.

Black Legion opens—in a sequence that of all the Hollywood studios probably only Warner Bros. at the time would have filmed—with a shot of a large, smoky industrial complex. The Mayo-Curtiz work then moves in as scenes of everyday life at the plant unfold before our eyes. Frank Taylor (Bogart), a hard-working machinist, with “the

cutest wife and kid you ever saw,” is in line for a promotion. He promises his wife Ruth (Erin O’Brien-Moore) the trappings of the American Dream. He is particularly excited by the prospect of a new automobile.

However, the more qualified Polish immigrant Joe Dombrowski (Henry Brandon), who has invented a piece of equipment to enhance production, is given the job that Frank was expecting. Angry and bitter, the latter becomes susceptible to the blandishments of fellow worker Cliff (longtime character actor Joseph Sawyer), who all too easily convinces Frank that immigrants are stealing American jobs. This is reinforced by a radio program (a reference to the notorious broadcasts of the fascistic Father Charles Coughlin) that indicts “hordes of grasping, pushing foreigners,” calling them a “peril” that must be combated. The rallying cry is “America for Americans.”

Cliff brings Frank to a secretive Black Legion meeting in the basement of a drug store. A Hitler-like demagogue spews out his poison: “If we unite with the millions of other red-blooded Americans under the banner of the Black Legion, we are invincible. With fire and sword, we’ll purge the land of these traitorous aliens and strangle their every deadly scheme ‘till once more our beloved stars and stripes will wave over a united nation—free, white, one-hundred-percent American!”

Frank joins the organization in a terrifying initiation rite, and at the point of a revolver somewhat reluctantly promises to “pledge and consecrate my heart, my brain, my body and my limbs, and swear by all powers of heaven and hell to devote my life to the obedience of my superiors and that no danger or peril shall deter me from executing their orders. That I will exert every possible means in my power for the extermination of the anarchist, the Roman hierarchy and their abettors...I swear that I will die fighting.”

In fine American business style, Frank’s induction also involves purchasing a dark hooded uniform embellished with skull and cross bones “for the nominal sum of \$6.50.” And for “those who do not own a revolver, place your orders for the Black Legion special. A regular \$30 revolver for the small sum of \$14.95.”

Soon afterward a menacing convoy under cover of the night heads to the Dombrowski farm. A fire is set, and Dombrowski father and son are brutally thrown onto a train leaving town.

In another memorable scene, the Legion’s accountant tabulates the disappointing monetary intake for his boss. “Bigger and better patriots” need to be recruited to increase the cash collection, he is told, and every member must enlist two new recruits within the next ten days.

After the beating and expulsion of the Dombrowskis, Frank becomes plant foreman. While bullying a worker to join the Legion,

however, he neglects his own job, and a piece of machinery is destroyed on the shop floor. Frank eventually gets fired and spirals out of control. Meanwhile, the fascist organization goes on a rampage flogging and beating its victims.

In his misery and disorientation, Frank starts drinking heavily, provokes his wife into leaving and sets up his best friend and neighbor Ed (Dick Foran) to be punished by his black-robed cohorts on a phony charge of wife-beating. It is Frank who ends up pulling the trigger, firing several bullets into Ed's back.

After the guilt-ridden Frank is captured and put on trial, he identifies the Black Legion members and with them is sentenced to life in prison. The judge intones: "Your idea of patriotism and Americanism is hideous to all decent citizens. It violates every protection guaranteed by the Bill of Rights in our constitution... We cannot permit racial or religious hatreds to be stirred up so that innocent citizens become the victims of accusations brought in secrecy..."

"We cannot permit unknown tribunals to pass judgments. Nor punishments to be inflicted by a band of hooded terrorists. Unless all of these illegal and extralegal forces are ruthlessly wiped out, this nation may as well abandon its constitution, forget its Bill of Rights, tear down its courts of justice, and revert to the barbarism of government by primitive violence..."

"As Abraham Lincoln said: 'Our reliance is in the love of liberty which God has planted in us. Our defense is the spirit that prizes liberty as the heritage of all men in all lands, everywhere. Destroy this spirit and you have planted the seeds of despotism at your own doors.'"

Black Legion is a socially conscious product of a studio that was the most sensitive to popular sentiments. Within almost inevitable confines, the movie expresses genuine revulsion against these fascist organizations. It hints at big business connections with mercenary financial interests. Besides the Black Legion's openly anti-immigrant thrust, the movie suggests its racist, anti-Catholic, anti-Semitic and even anti-communist inclinations.

The factory scenes are convincing, including the sequence in which Frank tries to recruit the southern worker for the Legion. The portrayals of the group's meetings complete with reactionary "patriotic" rantings, its initiation rights and the savage violence it metes out have an authentic ring. The actors are effective and, Bogart, in particular, still several years from his stardom of the 1940s and 1950s, gives a vivid performance. While some of the family moments are hokey and conventional, intimating that except for the Black Legion life in the Midwest might be heaven on earth, overall, the production has a gritty, concrete feel to it. We have no way of knowing which scenes were shot by Curtiz, a far superior director to Mayo, but the fluidity of some of the action sequences suggests the Hungarian-born filmmaker's touch.

The story of the Black Legion is a significant one and, as noted above, has a strong pertinence to the current period. Its main target was unionism and particularly communism. According to Chris Lause in his book, *Nativism in the Interwar Era*: "But to the Legion, communism was not simply a political ideology; it was a devious menace which had fully infiltrated leftist political organizations and labor unions.

"In Michigan the murder of American Federation of Labor worker John Bielak marked one of the Black Legion's most notable attempts to check communism's rampant spread. In the months leading up to his murder, Bielak, an employee for the Hudson Motor Company, had led a successful work stoppage for a wage increase in the company's

metal finishing plant. In response, the Hudson Company attempted to fire Bielak. However, the Hudson local, a powerful Detroit-based automobile union, struck in response to his termination and forced his reinstatement soon after...

"The Black Legion was not simply a vessel through which businesses could enforce their interests, but the Legion often allied with the interests of big business anyway."

The Black Legion had "unofficial friends such as Henry Ford in high places throughout the auto industry." writes Mark S. English. "Ford's anti-Semitic, nativistic views were highly respected by the world's leading Fascist, Adolf Hitler, who stated in March of 1923: 'We look at Heinrich Ford as the leader of the growing Fascisti movement in America. We admire particularly his anti-Jewish policy which is the Bavarian Fascisti platform.'"

The mass movement of the working class was primarily responsible for the destruction of the Black Legion. Sit-down strikes began in late 1936 and involved some 400,000 workers the following year—the year *Black Legion* was released. This was the beginning of the end for the fascist organization, which also faced a legal crackdown following a much-publicized murder.

In a 1946 speech, James P. Cannon, leader of the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party observed that American capitalism had taken "tens of thousands and hundreds of thousands of prejudiced hillbillies from the South, many of them members and sympathizers of the Ku Klux Klan; and thinking to use them, with their ignorance and their prejudices, as a barrier against unionism, sucked them into the auto and rubber factories of Detroit, Akron and other industrial centers." In capitalism's "harsh school the imported southerners learned to exchange the insignia of the KKK for the union button of the CIO, and to turn the Klansman's fiery cross into a bonfire to warm pickets at the factory gate...."

"You won't find Ku Kluxers or Black Legionnaires in the auto and rubber factories today—or at any rate, not many of them..."

"The American working class covered the great distance from atomization, from non-existence as an organized force, to trade union consciousness and organization, in one gigantic leap, in one brief decade."

Today the "gigantic leap" facing the working class is organizing itself as a politically independent force, armed with a socialist and revolutionary program.



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