

Paul Schrader's *Blue Collar* (1978) screened in New York City: A drama about auto workers

Sandy English

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Directed by Paul Schrader, written by Paul Schrader and Leonard Schrader

The Film Forum, the nonprofit movie theater in New York City, has extended its run of *Blue Collar*, the 1978 crime and social drama by veteran director-screenwriter Paul Schrader (*Hardcore* [1979], *American Gigolo* [1980], *Mishima* [1985], *Affliction* [1997], *First Reformed* [2017]). The film is also available for streaming.

The work was the first directed by Schrader (born 1946 in Grand Rapids, Michigan), after writing a number of screenplays, including for Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976) and Brian De Palma's *Obsession* (1976).

Blue Collar boasts impressive performances by Richard Pryor, Yaphet Kotto and Harvey Keitel, who play autoworkers at a plant that produces Checker cabs (the film was shot at the Checker plant in Kalamazoo, Michigan, among other locations in the state).

Schrader's film is certainly worth viewing. It is one of the few ever made in a working auto plant, and one of the shamefully few about work in the United States. It depicts the workers' circumstances accurately and vividly, including the stressful, troubling and humorous elements. It is often visually and aurally arresting: the viewer sees and feels the heat and incessant noise of the plant. The score, "Hardworkin' Man" by Jack Nitzsche and Captain Beefheart, gives a feel of the deadly weight of the machinery, and, by implication, of the whole weight of social pressures on an autoworker's life.

More importantly, *Blue Collar* addresses issues that are still of burning importance to workers: the role of the trade unions, collective action and racial "divide and conquer" politics.

Two black workers, Zeke (Pryor) and Smokey (Kotto), are friends with a white worker, Jerry (Keitel). The three make up a group. They drink at the local bar, which is full of autoworkers. They talk to each other on breaks at the plant, and socialize together. Zeke and Jerry are married and Smokey, an ex-con, is a bachelor. Together they endure the harshness of life in the plant. A racist foreman, Dogshit Miller (Borah Silver), goes down the line reprimanding and insulting workers, and not only black workers, in an incessant effort to speed up their work. "The plant [is] just short for plantation," says Zeke at a union meeting.

As difficult as this is for the workers, Zeke, Smokey and Jerry are also all under financial pressure. Zeke has an IRS man show up his house to tell him that he has claimed too many children on his tax return, six, when he only has three. In a hilarious scene, he and his wife produce three of the neighbors' kids as their own. The tax man informs the couple they have to pay back thousands of dollars.

Smokey is in debt to a loan shark, and Jerry, who moonlights at a gas station to make back the money he lost during a strike, cannot afford braces for his daughter.

The families bowl together, and Smokey throws a party (to attend it, his two pals lie to their wives) that features cocaine and prostitutes. On the whole, the lives of the workers and their families include both pressing troubles and tensions, but also warmth and love. The depiction is meaningfully realistic. While the film focuses on the three friends, we see other workers: the man who drives a forklift into a coffee machine because it won't work, and another worker, Bobby Joe (a youthful Ed Begley, Jr.), reading Joseph Heller's anti-establishment *Catch-22* in the locker room.

Without exaggeration or strain, *Blue Collar* is able to show in this friendship a kind of social solidarity that rings true. One feels convinced that in 1978 black and white auto workers could be friends, have common grievances and common interests. Credit goes to Pryor, Keitel and Kotto for playing this aspect of the film with humanity. That the three workers feel this connection and understand how it cuts across their lives in the factory is revealing. In one defining comment, the strongest in the film, Smokey tells the others, "They pit lifers against new boys, old against young, black against white, everybody, to keep us in our place."

One aspect of the workers' lives is especially significant. All three men, along with their coworkers, regularly attend union meetings (of the fictional AAW Local 291, clearly modeled on the United Auto Workers). Although the workers consider this an organization that represents them, their complaints at the meetings are generally dismissed by their fast-talking shop steward. The union meetings are contentious, and Zeke undoubtedly represents the thinking of many workers about the union bureaucrats at the time when he says, "When I take over your job, you know what I'm gonna do? I'm gonna get on my private jet and wing up to Palm Springs, hang out with [Local 291 president] Eddie Knuckles, and hit a few golf balls with President Ford and Nixon and them motherfuckers."

As corrupt and despised as the union is, workers still have some rights on the shop floor and negotiations can take place to save jobs, as *Blue Collar* dramatizes when Zeke, Dogshit Miller and the shop steward negotiate an exchange of bottles of liquor to prevent Zeke from being fired. In another scene, when an undercover federal agent, pretending to be a university researcher, approaches the workers in the bar asking about the union corruption, the workers understand who and what he is and refuse to snitch.

On balance, the filmmaker rightly highlights the hostility of the

workers to the AAW. When Zeke visits the local union headquarters to complain about a locker that won't work, the white-haired, chummy Eddie "Knuckles" Johnson (veteran character actor Harry Bellaver), shakes his hand and lies to his face. On his way out of the office, Zeke notices a safe.

He tells his friends about it, and, after some hesitation, they conceive of a plan to rob the union. The crime yields only \$600, but the workers discover records that show the union local has been lending money at exorbitant rates.

The three decide to blackmail the local, which backfires badly. By the conclusion of the film, Zeke has been bribed by receiving a shop stewardship, Jerry turns state's evidence to the FBI and Smokey is murdered (presumably by the union) in a vivid scene in an auto body paint station. This is possibly the most intense scene in the film, and the most symbolic: Smokey is the most class-conscious of the three friends, someone the union understands cannot be bought off.

Blue Collar ends when Zeke, now a shop steward, and Jerry, escorted through the plant by a federal agent, confront each other, literally trying to wring each other's neck. As they shout racial epithets at one another, the frame freezes and we hear Smokey's words: "They pit lifers against new boys, young against old, black against white. Everything they do is to keep us in our place."

When the film was released 43 years ago, there were nearly one million workers employed in the motor vehicle parts and assembly industries in the US, with the wages and benefits they had acquired in decades of struggle. The transformation of the trade unions, on the other hand, into open agents of the companies was well advanced. In 1979, only one year later, the UAW would facilitate the government buyout of Chrysler and force autoworkers into accepting nearly half a billion dollars in concessions, opening the door for what was to come. UAW president Douglas Fraser was named to a seat on Chrysler's Board of Directors in 1980, the first major union leader to gain such a position in the US.

Over the coming decades, the corporatist UAW would oversee waves of layoffs, dozens of factory closures, the isolation of strike after strike and the virtual replacement of middle-management by union stewards.

How does *Blue Collar* stand up to the test of time? Remarkably well, in most respects. Workers would recognize the fictional AAW of 1978 as an earlier, "work in progress" version of the UAW of 2021, with its wholesale corruption, its relentless, systemic lying and its bitter hostility toward the workers it "represents." And certain features of the AAW might seem like science fiction today, such as the union's protection of workers from even minor company misconduct.

Only a very brave or farsighted filmmaker, in the current climate of officially sponsored identity politics, would be able or willing to expose the social function of racism, much less show a class-conscious worker who explains that "Everything they do is to keep us in our place." The strongest feature of *Blue Collar* is its portrait of interracial solidarity, along with the workers' loathing of the company and their growing distrust and hatred of the union.

Schrader, from a strict Calvinist background with which he made a sharp ideological break, had absorbed enough of the political and artistic radicalism of the 1960s and 1970s to recognize that an honest artistic portrayal of workers' conditions was bound to lead in a certain direction. He commented revealingly in a 1978 interview with *Cinéaste* magazine: "While I was working on the script, I realized that it had come to a very specific Marxist conclusion. It seemed the only way to end it, the natural way to end it. I didn't end it that way out of

any pre-set notion; I didn't set out to make a movie that would end that way, it just seemed to be the logical ending."

While of course never a "Marxist," Schrader did rise to the occasion in 1978 when confronted with the realities of the auto industry. *Blue Collar*, not surprisingly, is much stronger in depicting the difficulties workers face than in suggesting what they should do about them. The film tends to give way along the lines of individual methods of coping with the brutality of the corporations and the rottenness of the union. Neither heroic martyrdom, nor betrayal or turning to the government, represents a way forward. Unfortunately, Schrader (along with American filmmaking in general) has never returned to the concrete problems of the working class, often preferring murky considerations of emotional and physical violence or extreme behavior of various kinds largely removed from a social context.

The director's pessimism in 1978, which had something to do with his subsequent artistic trajectory, although again unsurprising, was deeply misguided. Auto workers and the entire working class faced serious obstacles and enemies, including their "own" organizations. The auto companies in particular confronted an objective crisis and were determined to impose that on workers, with the energetic assistance of the UAW. However, the American working class exhibited tremendous, almost inexhaustible combativity in a series of bitter strikes in the 1980s, including PATCO, Phelps Dodge, Hormel, Greyhound, Eastern Airlines and others. The AFL-CIO was instrumental in isolating and strangling each of these disputes.

After one of the recent showings of *Blue Collar*, supporters of the Socialist Equality Party distributed the Autoworker Newsletter, which detailed the recent struggle of the Volvo workers in Virginia, in which the revolt of the rank-and-file against the UAW was a central question. Forty-three years have not passed in vain.

The Film Forum audience was quite diverse in terms of age, with many young people seeing Schrader's film for the first time. The Volvo strike material met with a favorable and in a number of cases enthusiastic response from audience members, most of whom did not know about the dispute. One student immediately communicated his solidarity to the Volvo workers. A teacher said that the unions were not doing what they were formed to do, and another, who had seen *Blue Collar* before, said that every time there was talk of unionization, he thought of this film.

To his credit, it turns out that Schrader's healthiest ambition for the film in 1978 has been realized. He told the *Cinéaste* interviewer, "If a percentage, however small, of workers who see this film say, 'Yep, that's just the way it works,' then in my mind the film will have been a huge success as a drama."



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