



***Salt of the Earth* is a forthcoming LVCA dvd donation to the Ligonier Valley Library in Ligonier, Pennsylvania. Below is Kino Ken's review of The Film Detective's dvd release of the restored version of *Salt of the Earth*.**

14 of a possible 20 points = *1/2 (an outstanding film)**

**Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance
(j) designates a juvenile performer**

**United States 1954 black-and-white 92 minutes
(IMDB lists theatrical runtime at 94 minutes) Independent Productions /
The International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers
Producers: Herbert Biberman, Paul Jarrico, Simon Lazarus, Jules Schwerin**

Points:

- 2 Direction: Herbert Biberman***
- 1 Editing: Joan Laird, Ed Spiegel**
- 2 Cinematography: Stanley Meredith, Leonard Stark**
- 1 Lighting**
- 1 Screenplay: Michael Wilson**
- 1 Music: Sol Kaplan**
- 2 Locations**
- 1 Sound: Harry Smith, Dick Stanton**
- 1 Acting**
- 2 Creativity**

14 total points

Cast: Rosanna Revueltas* (Esperanza Quintero), Juan Chacón (Ramon Quintero), Will Geer (sheriff), David Wolfe (Mr. Barton, mine foreman), Mervin Williams (Mr. Hartwell, New York mining company office executive), David Sarvis (Mr. Alexander, mine superintendent), William Rockwell (Kimbrough), Henrietta Williams* (Teresa Vidal), Angela Sánchez (Consuela Ruiz), Clorinda Alderette* (Luz Morales), Elvira Molano (Mrs. Salazar, a widow), Virginia Jencks (Ruth Barnes), Clinton Jencks (Frank Barnes, a union organizer), Joe Morales* (Sal Ruiz), Ernest Velasquez (Charley Vidal), Charles Coleman (Antonio Morales), Victor Torres (Sebastian Prieto), Frank Talevera (j) (Luis Quintero, son of Esperanza and Ramon), Mary Lou Castillo (j) (Estrella Quintero, sister to Luis), Floyd Bostick (Jenkins), E. S. Conerly (Kalinsky), Adolfo Barela and Albert Munoz (miners)

During the late 1940s and early 1950s, both Hollywood and Congress decided it was in their best interests to ferret out and hound all Communist Party members who had infiltrated the American entertainment industry. Accusations were flung at Leonard Bernstein, Walt Disney, Aaron Copland, Elia Kazan, Charlie Chaplin, Orson Welles, Ernest Hemingway, Robert Nathan, Edward Dmytryk, James Cagney, Katharine Hepburn, Humphrey Bogart, Fredric March, Melvyn Douglas, Eddie Albert, Paul Muni, Canada Lee, Paul Green, Elmer Bernstein, Clifford Odets, Arthur Miller, Edward G. Robinson, Henry Morgan, Joseph Losey, Harry Belafonte, Artie Shaw, Howard K. Smith, John Garfield, Paul Stewart, Louis Untermeyer, Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee, Howard Fast, Carl Foreman, Judy Holliday, Leo Hurwitz, Burl Ives, Bill Melendez, Marc Connelly, Morris Carnovsky, Charles Collingwood, Abe Burrows, John Hubley, Martin Ritt, John Howard Lawson, Ring Lardner, Jr., Norman Lloyd, Oscar Brand, Pete Seeger, Josh White, Hershel Bernardi, Paul Robeson, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, Kenneth Roberts, Lena Horne, Larry Adler, Alfred Drake, Howard Duff, Jack Gilford, Tom Glazer, Morton Gould, Dean Dixon, Sidney Kingsley, Michael Wilson, Martha Scott, Irving Pichel, Rosaura Revueltas (who was deported to Mexico), Donald Ogden Stewart, Orson Bean, Yip Harburg, Harold Rome, Anne Revere, Burgess Meredith, Alan Lomax, Kim Hunter, Paul Jarrico, Sol Kaplan, Herbert Biberman

(imprisoned for refusing to testify before the House Un-American Affairs Committee), and Richard Attenborough. A dark time for the United States indeed.

After release from prison, the still-blacklisted Herbert Biberman, in consultation with two fellow Hollywood exiles, producer Paul Jerrico and screenwriter Michael Wilson, decided to create a contemporary pro-union docudrama about a recent thirteen-month strike against the Empire Zinc Mine in New Mexico. Striking miners there were predominantly Mexican-Americans. They were, for that reason, paid less than Anglo counterparts in other mines owned by the same company.

Customary monopolistic policies were in place at their Bayard, New Mexico mine. Workers lived in company homes and shopped at the company store for staples. Empire Zinc could hire and fire freely. It was legally permitted to repossess properties if renters became delinquent in monthly payments. Not a terribly uncommon situation. These practices insured money paid out in salaries circled back to the company in rents and company store purchases.

Safety and sanitation seemed to have been of little concern to management. After institution of a paired worker ban at Bayard accidents increased. That precipitated a confrontation between local management and labor. When foreman and supervisor refused to consider worker demands for safer conditions, miners elected to call a strike. Thus began a thirteen-month stalemate. Despite attempted use of scabs, a Taft-Hartley Act injunction against the local union's picket line, and repossession of a union firebrand's installment plan radio, Latinos refused to back down, resorting to women picketers that bypassed court-mandated obstruction. Finally, New York headquarters of the zinc mining company agreed to negotiations.

What *Salt of the Earth* spotlights is the period starting shortly before the strike and subsequent months of suspended operations at the mine. Many cast members were actual union miners from the area. Only a few professionals appeared in the production. Given amateur status of most performers, director Herbert Biberman nonetheless extracted from all of them characterizations that were not, as some reviewers have misleadingly claimed, wooden at all, but always appropriate to their context. Even extras stayed "in the moment" with proper facial responses and gestures.

Editing was quite competent. There were few overly protracted scenes and no risible gaffes stemming from wardrobe mismatches in successive shots. Chase scenes were compact and streamlined, as they should have been.

Lighting and sound recording were quite adequate, especially considering the threadbare production budget.

Cinematography was above average, with carefully chosen camera angles adding useful tension to confrontational episodes.

Where the film perhaps grated somewhat was in its parade of supervisory and law enforcement villains, depicted as lacking any empathy for strikers or friendliness towards the Hispanic community at large. Possibly it embarrassed them to know land they stood upon was likely sold to their ancestors by grandees of New Spain. Michael Wilson's screenplay comparing Juarez and Washington was also ill-advised, since Hispanic natives of New Mexico were no likelier than Anglo neighbors to recognize a deceased Mexican president's portrait. Nor does graphic brutality of a prolonged beating administered by deputies to a union ringleader add anything positive to the picture's stature.

Furthermore, a climactic rally by miners reversing as much as possible law enforcement's removal of furnishings from the residence of duly evicted Quinteros appears artificially staged and considerably less than credible.

Strident music supplied by Sol Kaplan is neither alien to screen context nor misplaced. Though at times it sounds rather inclined to overkill. Its main drawback is a complete lack of Hispanic flavoring.

Notable character renderings were turned in by Rosaura Revueltas, Henrietta Williams, Angela Sánchez, Clorinda Alderette, and Joe Morales. Rosaura served as *Salt of the Earth's* narrator and engagingly played the conservative wife of union-fixated Ramon Quintero. Henrietta, Angela and Clorinda deserved kudos for depictions of Latina wives pushed to forsaking traditional feminine roles by the impotency and arrogance of their husbands, police, and mine management personnel. Actually, the female empowerment theme of this film overshadowed a secondary one of necessity for unionization of labor and worker cohesion. Joe Morales turned in quite a respectable performance delineating a machismo, level-headed union leader bound to male chauvinism.

Art direction was apparent in somewhat primitive set furnishings. Those were spare, as they should have been, but quite evocative of what typically

would be found in mineworkers' rented cottages. Less impressive were minimalist scenes set inside Bayard's jail. Budget constraints and possible unfamiliarity with that particular interior caused viewers to potentially feel cheated.

Prior to *Salt of the Earth* very few American movies had explored labor troubles in the United States. Among those that did, the best known are *The Cry of the Children* (1912), *The Blacklist* (1916), *Our Daily Bread* (1934), *Modern Times* (1936), *Black Legion* (1937) and *Native Land* (1942). *The Cry of the Children*, a short silent film running about a half-hour, was directed by George Nichols and included shots of real child millworkers. From the same decade *The Blacklist* was a silent feature directed by William deMille, brother to Cecil. It runs fairly parallel to *Salt of the Earth* in telling of striking Colorado miners and a resulting blacklist created by management to punish them. King Vidor's *Our Daily Bread* promoted the idea of worker collectivization for the common good of a community, hardly a popular notion in Depression America. Chaplin provided an artistic satire in *Modern Times* on mind-numbing assembly line work. It didn't shy away from expressive shots of police violently assaulting a crowd of strikers. *Black Legion* was a feature drama directed by Archie Mayo and Michael Curtiz. Its plot involved the veteran native-born factory worker protagonist's being fired and replaced by a Polish immigrant. The newly jobless "American" looks to support from reactionary organizations such as the titular one to recover his position.

Of these varied predecessors, only *Modern Times* fared well at the box office. The rest lacked enough humor to be found endurable by moviegoers of the period.

No marvel of release timing, emerging during America's involvement in World War II, *Native Land* hammered away aggressively at infractions of Bill of Rights provisions during the Depression years in the United States. Co-Directed by Leo Hurwitz and photographer Paul Strand, with narration by Paul Robeson and participation of Ben Maddow in script development, that docudrama was even more bellicose than Biberman's later production. Few American theaters dared to exhibit it.

Salt of the Earth, principally because of graphic violence, is suitable film fare exclusively for adults. Both culturally and historically pioneering, it is well worth seeking out. Highly recommended by Kino Ken.