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The Film & Photo League of San Francisco

Carla Leshne

Ours is a gigantic task, challenging the most institutionalized of all the bourgeois arts with its monster monopolies and gigantic network for mass distribution.

Sam Brody, 1934¹

In the early 1930s, the Workers' Film & Photo League emerged as a loosely knit alliance of local organizations that provided independent visual media to people in the United States, Europe and other parts of the world. Building on earlier activist models such as the agit-trains of the Soviet Union, the German workers' photography movement and silent-era labor films in the US, their efforts during the tumultuous years of the early Depression helped to define social documentary film and photography as a genre, while advancing independent media practices that survive today.² Working alongside groups such as the Blue Blouse players, the John Reed Clubs of writers and the Red Dancers, Film & Photo League members joined a widespread movement to create and disseminate cultural forms that would counter the "mainstream" media of its day.

Although members of the League believed that documenting social movements through film-making and photography was important, they also understood the significance of distribution. Film and Photo League members provided still photographs to publications such as the *Labor Defender* and the *Daily Worker*, and created alternative exhibition spaces for both still photography and film. Like the Workers' Film Societies in England and the Amis de Spartacus in France, the Workers' Film & Photo League sponsored exhibitions of Soviet films such as *Potemkin*, *Mother*, *Storm Over Asia*, and *The End of St. Petersburg*. The films for these exhibitions were often provided by Willi Muenzenberg's Mezhrabpomfilm; admittance fees benefited groups such as

Internationale Arbeiterhilfe or Workers' International Relief (WIR), which provided relief funds to striking workers around the world. Short newsreels produced by the Film & Photo League frequently opened the feature film screenings, attracting a wider audience to these popular events.³

The literature about the Film & Photo League has generally focused on the New York chapter.⁴ Rather than a single or unified group, however, the Workers' Film & Photo League was a movement. Collectives sprang up independently in many locations and united under a common name. Rebelling against mass media institutions that reflected the values of their well-financed owners, the local Leagues shared a common philosophy and motives, yet maintained their unique local character. Groups of alternative "media activists" (and sometimes individuals who represented themselves as part of the "League") formed in towns and cities in Japan, Germany, Holland, the United Kingdom, and the United States.⁵ Besides New York, North American chapters could be found in Detroit, Chicago, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and California; the histories of these other chapters need to be excavated and reclaimed to give a more complete understanding of this movement in documentary.

In California, three different collectives allied themselves with the Workers' Film and Photo League. Louis Siminow and others in the close-knit, radical Jewish community of Boyle Heights in East Los Angeles documented southern California labor

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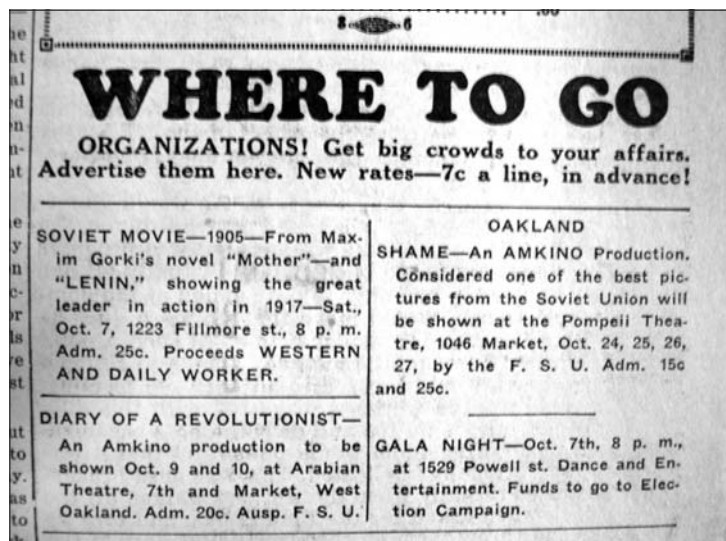


Fig. 1. Announcement in the *Western Worker* for the first California screening of *Mother* at the Fillmore Center, San Francisco, 7 October 1934. [Courtesy of the Labor Archives & Research Center, San Francisco State University.]

and social justice struggles.⁶ In Hollywood, the Film & Photo League was an alliance of writers, actors and filmmakers who held weekly screenings at a collective household jokingly known as the “Filth & Famine League” and contributed to the magazine *Experimental Film*.⁷ In the north, still photographers, filmmakers and labor activists joined forces as the San Francisco Film & Photo League.

The San Francisco Film & Photo League had a relatively brief history: its period of substantial activity lasted less than a year, from the fall of 1933 until the group was shattered by political oppression surrounding the San Francisco General Strike of July 1934. Three key figures in this collective were Lester Balog (1905–1976), Otto Hagel (1909–1973) and Hansel Mieth (1909–1998, born Johanna Geiges Mieth). Hagel and Mieth, who had grown up in Freiberg, Germany and run away together as teens, gained photographic experience as they vagabonded around Europe. They immigrated to the US at the beginning of the Depression: Hagel in 1928, Mieth in December, 1930. Upon her arrival, Mieth traveled across country (in an open car in the winter) to join Hagel in San Francisco. Lester Balog emigrated from Hungary in 1922, where his father had been a lawyer for the Socialist Party and he had been a semi-professional soccer player.⁸ Playing soccer in New York with the Labor Sports Union, and following in the footsteps of his activist parents, he frequented the Hungarian Worker’s Home, where he became the projectionist for early film screenings and became politicized especially around the Sacco

& Vanzetti trial.⁹ He went to Passaic, NJ as a cameraman after the hired crew left and helped to shoot dramatic documentary footage that appears in *The Passaic Textile Strike* (1926).¹⁰ Balog was a founding member of the New York Film & Photo League, which was formed in 1930.¹¹ Among his activities with this group, he co-edited *Bonus March/The Fight for the Bonus* (1932) with Leo Seltzer.¹² His cross-country travels would bring him to San Francisco in October 1933. Together, these three worked on the San Francisco Film & Photo League’s principle film, *Century of Progress* (1934).

A Century of Progress (1934)

Although its production history is still shrouded in mystery, *Century of Progress* is an 18-minute, silent documentary (with intertitles) that was apparently produced by the San Francisco Film & Photo League in 1933–34 and edited collectively by Otto Hagel, Hansel Mieth, Avedano Motroni, Lester Balog and others. It uses the motto of the 1933 Chicago World’s Fair as its title and as a structuring critique. Opening with scenes of the World’s Fair – American flags along the esplanade, a “Plantation Spectacle”, well-dressed couples being pulled in carts by depression-era workers, the intertitle, “A Hundred Years of Progress!” repeats over dancing skeletons, flag-waving, burlesque booths, racist attractions and pictures of Fascist dictators

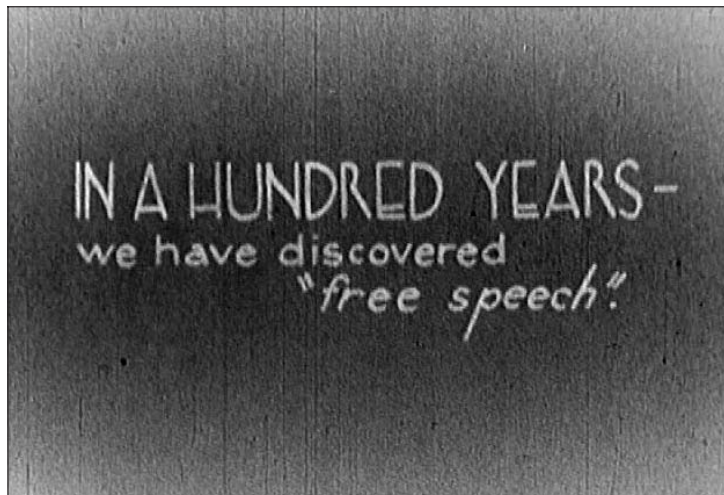
From the Fair in Chicago, the film moves to California and a dialectical representation of the Depression. A sequence that begins with the title “In a Hundred Years, we have built millions of homes” shows fancy housing and apartments for rent in San Francisco and then moves to footage of a Hooverville shack, shot beautifully at cooking time with smoke billowing through. After the title “... We have filled elevators with millions of bushels of wheat”, images of grain elevators, industrial silos and fountains of grain pouring are juxtaposed with scenes of a woman picking through garbage for food. After the title “We have built factories, but don’t use them,” the contrast between the promise of industrialization and the social reality of the Thirties is contained in one shot: the camera starts with a low angle framing of a smokestack reaching into the sky, then tilts down to a sign – “Help Wanted See Below”. The slots in the sign are empty and the factory is deserted. “In a Hundred Years we have developed the steam shovel.” Here the filmmakers

show dilapidated, rusting and unused heavy equipment. Following are stunning shots of a multitude of workers pushing wheelbarrows along a hillside, excavating for the St. Mary's Housing Project in San Francisco, shot primarily by Otto Hagel.

The title "In a Hundred Years – we have discovered 'free speech'" is answered by the irony of a newspaper headline "Legion Resolution Urges Death for Radical Agitators". The shot of the broken window which follows has a poster of Tom Mooney, the labor activist said to be wrongly imprisoned for a bombing in San Francisco. Photographs are in the background; this might be the Gelber-Lillienthal bookstore exhibit that was shut down by the American Legion in the fall of 1934. Police are shown breaking up a crowd listening to a soapbox speaker. Finally Lester Balog's Milwaukee demonstration footage is included.

Titles reading "In a hundred Years ... workers ... learned ... to ..." are intercut with shots of labor organizing and Hunger Marches. 1933 Cotton Strike footage shows Pat Chambers, Caroline Decker, Leo Gallagher and other well-known labor leaders of the time addressing crowds of workers, organizing. A line of cars heads out to the fields for a picket. A bugler calls in the workers from the field, and, in spite of the presence of the police, the workers emerge from the field trailing their cotton bags to join the organized, striking workers on the road. The funeral march for the fallen workers ends the film. A final title – "Organize!" – never appears. Inferred, it has been shown as a reality in the massive agricultural strike, and is left for the audience to finish.

Although there is some evidence that the San Francisco Film & Photo League was formed earlier in 1933, it was probably the arrival of Lester Balog and Edward Royce in October 1933 that brought initial energy to this collective.¹³ Royce, an organizer for the Workers International Relief, and Balog, a young editor, projectionist, and photographer, set out from New York on a trans-continental film tour in September of 1933. Departing from New York in Ed's car after an evening screening at the New York League headquarters, they brought with them a projector, a print of Vsevolod Pudovkin's *Mother*, and some New York Film & Photo League newsreels.¹⁴ Pre-arranged showings took place in 51 locales across the country at workers' halls, ethnic clubs, community theaters, and private homes. The second



half of the film tour was in California, where they traveled down the coast and back up the Central Valley during the fall of 1933 at the time of the largest agricultural strikes in California history.¹⁵

Along the way, Lester Balog shot footage of strikes, demonstrations, the World's Fair in Chicago, and a trial of labor organizers in Utah. The trip served as a benefit tour for the WIR, raising money to support striking workers (and the benefit film tour). Ed Royce was the featured speaker. Balog ran the projector and the movie camera. Balog's account of their activities often reveals the close connection between their film screenings and the political activities that they encountered on their travels. Balog described a screening in Milwaukee on September 26, 1933 to an audience of 500:

This was one of the most enthusiastic showings. It was also very useful as a last minute mobilization for a demonstration that day (27 September) in front of the Civic Club against Fascism on the occasion of a banquet for German Ambassador Luther. Took pictures of the whole affair. About 300–400 participated in it. They had no permit. Speakers were held on shoulders while others formed solid arm in arm around them. It proved to be a quite impenetrable human barricade. It lasted a full 60 minutes. Seven or eight spoke while the police charged several times. For a half an hour the cops found it impossible to reach the speakers. They had to be torn away one by one. ... By the way, the John Reed Clubs of other cities ought to learn from the Milwaukee JRC for the whole affair was organized in their hall ... The

Fig. 2. "IN A HUNDRED YEARS – we have discovered 'free speech'". Title card from *Century of Progress* (1934).



Fig. 3.
Milwaukee street
demonstration.
From *Century of
Progress*.

club is not only in “contact” with the movement, but it is an important factor.¹⁶

Balog filmed the demonstration; a short clip of the Milwaukee footage would later be incorporated into the film *Century of Progress*.

After an adventure in Utah, during which Balog’s undeveloped film was confiscated by authorities while he was recording a trial of union activists, the pair gave an evening screening at a roller rink between the towns of Price and Helper and the film tour proceeded to the west coast.

We arrived in Frisco on our very last gallon of gas. We didn’t have one penny, and we thought we can get into California for free. The only things we didn’t figure with were the Vallejo Toll Bridge and the Oakland Ferry. We solved the problem by leaving my 97 cents watch at the bridge and getting rid of Ed’s sweater (worth several bucks) at the Ferry.¹⁷

The night of their arrival in San Francisco, Balog and Royce showed their films to an audience of 1000 at the Fillmore Workers’ Center, which Balog described as “very enthusiastic”. They continued to Carmel for a showing the next night, where he observed that the audience in this “sort of artist colony” was not as enthusiastic as at other showings, and “although they liked the shorts, the feature didn’t go over very big”.¹⁸ Balog spent 9 October preparing for the continuing tour down the California coast, by helping to print 15,000 publicity leaflets. Over the next two months, they showed the films throughout California.

The second half of Balog’s letter detailing their journey is lost, thus the recounting of the exhibition tour stops abruptly on 14 October, in the middle of his stay in Tulare County during the 1933 Cotton Strike.¹⁹ Before the account ends, Balog describes in detail the volatile scene in the San Joaquin Valley. Royce, Balog and Sam Darcy, the regional head of the Communist Party, traveled together to the strike area, arriving on 10 October. They stopped off first in Fresno, where they attended the trial of leaders in the earlier grape pickers’ strike. After camping for the night outside of Tulare, they arrived at the cotton strike headquarters just in time to join 500 strikers as the assembly set off to the county seat of Visalia to protest the murders of two Mexican workers by vigilantes in Pixley the day before. Balog remarked “They had no parade permit, so I got the camera ready”.

The group arrived in Visalia where they held a rally on the front steps of the courthouse. Pat Chambers, one of the strike leaders arrested later that day and held in jail for the rest of the year, spoke to the crowd. Balog described the rally in terms of the movies:

One of the most active of the City Commissioners, Elliot, asked Chambers to let him speak (it reminds one of those moving pictures where the landowner is “explaining it” to his workers who are about to go on strike, and as a result the workers remain, take a wage-cut, and like it. Elliot must have imagined himself a movie-hero). “O.K. – says Pat – but let me introduce you” and he did *some* introduction. Pat Chambers knew him from a few previous strikes of the Cannery and Agricultural Workers Industrial Union. Anyway by the time he got thru with the introduction the commissioner didn’t feel like speaking. This was something he didn’t figure on. (You see in the movies there are no such strike leaders ...)²⁰

Footage of the event – shot by either Balog or Otto Hagel would later be incorporated into *Century of Progress*.

Balog’s activities switched gears later in the day, when he made a ten-foot banner for the slain workers’ funeral. The banner reproduced a statement made by the widow of one of the Mexican workers murdered (named Davila) to the effect that she had requested the union to take care of the burial, was in agreement with the principles of the union, and was calling on all workers to continue the

struggle. "Then Eddy squealed on me and I had to do all the stencils for leaflets", wrote Balog.²¹ In the following days, Balog filmed the funeral, attended meetings, avoided troopers and vigilantes, accompanied pickets, and stayed up all night to make leaflets (though the pad on the mimeograph machine was determined to be faulty at 5 a.m. on one of the mornings after his all-night preparations, and Sam Darcy had to drive up to San Francisco to get a replacement).

On 13 October, an incident occurred when Sheriff Hill, after warning the pickets to quiet down,

walks to his car, but seeing me with the camera, comes to me and tells me that since I have a camera he'll go and warn the pickets again and he wants me to take a picture of him doing the warning. When I told him that my assignment was to take pictures of "strikers picketing", he got red in the face, and I got pale, but I was lucky for just then a cameraman came there (Frisco news guy) and he took the picture. And I decided that from now it will be healthier for me to keep away from Sheriff Hill.²²

Though nervous, Balog was not intimidated by Sheriff Hill, and his reluctance to "favor" the sheriff by taking his picture was another way of making his commitment to the picketers clear. The "Frisco news guy", in his role as a mainstream journalist, had no defined alliances, and was willing to do what the sheriff asked. After returning to town that night, Balog continued in his letter, he attended the Strike Committee meeting and then the Executive meeting, where they decided to have posters and banners for the funeral of Davila and Hernandez the following day. "And of course I was to make the posters and banners. So I made 4 large oilcloth banners and 25 posters and spent my third night in the cotton strike area sleepless."²³

Anne Loftis discusses the 1933 Cotton Strike and its portrayal in the mass media in her book *Witnesses to the Struggle*, noting with some surprise that many large newspapers covered the strike sympathetically. Papers that sent reporters and staff photographers to the San Joaquin Valley often opposed the strike but, Loftis explains, they could not ignore eyewitness accounts and telling photographs. Loftis' analysis of the coverage reflects the media savvy of Balog and the Executive Committee:



The remarkable fact is that so many of their photographs appeared in newspapers that supported the growers' position in the strike. One in the *Los Angeles Times* showed a group carrying a sign that read: "General Strike. Stay away from the Cotton Fields and Join the C.A.W.I.U. Help win the strike."²⁴

Lester Balog not only took pictures with his camera, he also made them with his signs and hand-painted banners. Composing the content by taking an active part in the live graphics of the event, he used his skills to support the strikers and help relay their message to a wider public, through the mainstream press. He photographed the scene himself, but knowing that the pictures the "news guys" took would have a farther reach than his own, he found ways to manipulate pictures that he did not himself shoot. He had an understanding of graphic art and of the present day "photo opportunity," merging the two in his work.

Otto Hagel and Hansel Mieth had been working as pickers in the fields earlier in 1933 and were present with their cameras during the 1933 agricultural strike wave in California. Though the surviving portion of Balog's Cotton Strike account contains no mention of them, it is likely that they met during these last months of 1933 and began to work collaboratively. By the end of October, Mieth was back in San Francisco. Mieth's life-long relationship with Otto Hagel was turbulent; in the last years of her life, she spoke about the death of her infant daughter in 1933 and the pressures the death had on their relation-

Fig. 4. Pat Chambers of the Cannery and Agricultural Workers Industrial Union (CAWIU) addresses farm workers in Tulare County during the Great Cotton Strike, October, 1933. From *Century of Progress*.



Fig. 5. Filming of the demonstrations in Tulare County took place under the watchful eye of the local sheriff's department. From *Century of Progress*.

Fig. 6. One of the posters likely created by Lester Balog for the Cotton Strike, as seen in *Century of Progress*.



ship.²⁵ On 31 October 1933, having split up temporarily with Otto Hagel, she married Avedano Motroni, a window designer.²⁶ In following years, the San Francisco Directory lists Hagel as living with another woman, Arverii.²⁷ Despite these unconventional circumstances, Hagel, Mieth, Balog and Motroni all took part in the collective work of the Film & Photo League. They continued to film events throughout California as well as editing short newsreels of the 1933 Cotton Strike and the more ambitious *Century of Progress*.

Meanwhile the Film & Photo League set up shop at the Workers' Cultural Center at 121 Haight Street, in San Francisco. Also known as the Ruthenberg House, the building functioned much like Workers' Centers in New York, Los Angeles, Chicago and other towns. Usually housing the Communist Party

Headquarters as well as Workers' Schools, John Reed Clubs, bookstores, libraries, soup kitchens, Labor Sports Unions, workers' theatre groups, and Film & Photo Leagues, Workers' Centers were prominent in left cultural life of the period.²⁸

A December 1933 issue of the *Western Worker* announced the opening of the center on Haight Street. A library, showers and a restaurant were on the first floor, a ballroom was on the third, and

on the second floor, adjacent to the school classrooms, the Film & Foto League will conduct their classes in conjunction with the school, and they have, as well, a darkroom in the basement.²⁹

By February 1934, the WIR had also set up a "permanent strike relief apparatus" in the building, and a stage was built by the Workers' Theatre to put on plays.³⁰ Lester Balog is listed in the Spring, 1934 *San Francisco Workers' School Catalog* as a "Cinematography" instructor, along with "P. Otto" (likely a pseudonym for Otto Hagel, who was not a legal immigrant to the US). The class was to be a training ground for "Criticism of bourgeois practices, analysis of Soviet newsreels, documentary and acted films, Montage, film production and projection of working class newsreels and films".³¹ The catalog also listed a course in "Still Photography", with P. Allen and J. Fidiham instructing.

While teaching at the Workers' School, Balog and Hagel continued to put on screenings of Soviet films and their own newsreels around the state. Like other Film & Photo League groups around the country, they shot still photographs and film footage that would display social contradiction and the uneven distribution of wealth in Depression-era America. Although Mieth, by her own account, was not involved in shooting *moving* pictures, she was involved with post-production.³² It is not clear where the editing took place, but for some of the time, according to Mieth, it was in an apartment she rented with Otto Hagel, where Lester Balog sometimes slept in the bath tub.³³ (This information is complicated by the fact that in later interviews Mieth never mentioned her marriage to Motroni.) Although Mieth has maintained that she and Hagel had created the film and that she had been with him when he filmed the Cotton Strike, it seems likely that Balog was an important contributor. In a 1974 letter to Tom Brandon, Balog described the film as

started in Chicago by Leo Seltzer at the '33 World's Fair. Then a Milwaukee anti-fascist demonstration by yours truly. Next scenes in San Francisco of rusting heavy equipment and WPA pick-and-shovel project by Otto Hagel. Also by Hagel, a march in Sacramento. Finally my own stuff: the 1933 San Joaquin Cotton Strike.³⁴

Balog's memory of the detailed division of footage might be more accurate than Mieth's, though in an interview in his quite lucid 90's, Leo Seltzer could not recall ever shooting any film at the Chicago 1933 World's Fair.³⁵ A close viewing of *Century of Progress*, and a comparison of shooting styles seems to point to Otto Hagel as a primary shooter of the California footage in the film.

The issue of crediting work is a basic dilemma with collective endeavors. When everyone shares the labor and resources for the common purpose, the matter of personal recognition seems unimportant. Later however, as historians and others attempt to understand and describe the work, as people re-use footage in other non-collective projects, as false attributions are made due to confusion or lack of information, and as people sometimes distance themselves from their earlier endeavors, attribution can become a divisive issue. People feel later that the work they put into the collective was exploited in some way. Leo Seltzer, a member of the New York Film & Photo League, for example, still feels the necessity in his nineties to clarify his very active role in FPL productions, and recounts with some annoyance the fact that his footage was used in later Frontier Films work, without any credit to him.³⁶ The example of the re-discovered Cotton Strike footage typifies this challenge of collective work.

The history of *Century of Progress* after its completion is fraught for many reasons, including the complex and changing relationships among the principals, the political repression which fragmented the group, and misunderstandings that erupted over time. The film footage of the Cotton Strike was considered missing for many years. Hansel Mieth told various interviewers in the 1980s and 1990s that she thought the film and their movie camera had been stolen by the police in the 1930s. Indeed, the *San Francisco Chronicle* finds Edward Royce arrested in September 1934 at the police station for being a Communist when he went in looking for articles (very likely films) that had been confiscated during the San



Francisco General Strike in the summer of 1934.³⁷ In fact, Balog had possession or regained possession of a copy of *Century of Progress* and screened it over the years in various venues, including organizing events for the United Farm Workers in the 1960s.³⁸ Worried about the condition of the film, Balog donated it to the Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs at Wayne State University. Hansel Mieth rediscovered the film when Tom Brandon used it in Film & Photo League showings during the 1970s; afterward Mieth made sure that she and Otto Hagel received credit for their part in its production. Numerous publications attribute the film solely to Hagel and Mieth.³⁹

As part of their Film and Photo League activities, Hagel and Balog toured California, exhibiting Russian films that Royce had procured from a New

Fig. 7. The Ruthenberg House, San Francisco headquarters of the Workers School and the Film & Photo League. [Courtesy of the Labor Archives & Research Center, San Francisco State University.]

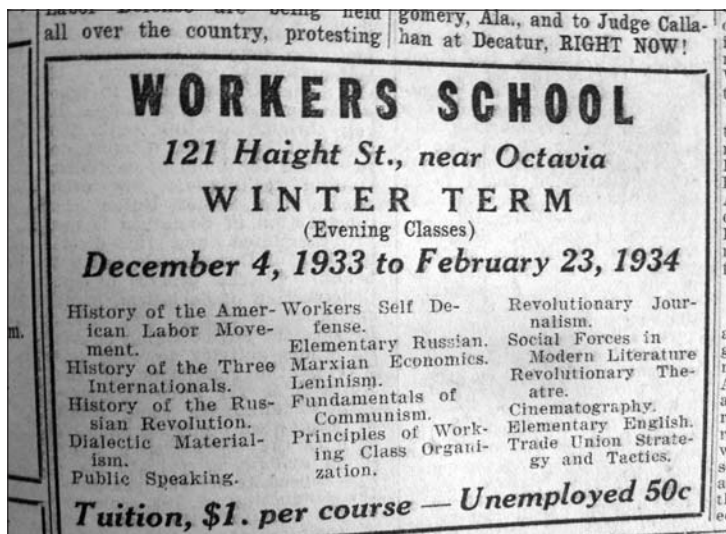


Fig. 8. Advertisement for the Workers School at the Ruthenberg House, 121 Haight Street, San Francisco. From the *Western Worker*, 11 December 1933. [Courtesy of the Labor Archives & Research Center, San Francisco State University.]

York distributor associated with the WIR.⁴⁰ In May 1934, returning north from a screening in Los Angeles, they passed through Tulare County, the site of the Cotton Strike and the Pixley murders the year before. Balog recounts that

some of the farm workers, they caught us, saw us, and they said, hey, what about the pictures you took? So all right, I said, let me show you. So that night they closed the pool hall for business and had a movie. And Pat Chambers was there ... And while we were running it – no charge, of course, there was no admission fee or anything, and the business was closed – no pool. So while I was projecting, about four troopers came in, big son-of-a-guns, you know? I am not tall, but they were about 6½ feet, and they stood around me – I didn't know what to do, I finished the film. I understand Pat meanwhile sneaked out, and when it was over they practically picked me up and took me to jail ... they charged me with running a business without a license ... they kept me 13 days in the police station, and then I got 45 days.⁴¹

The arrest was reported in the *Visalia Times-Delta*, which characterized the screening as a presentation by Chambers, who was notorious in the area for his organizing efforts with the Cannery and Agricultural Workers Industrial Union (CAWIU) the year before:

Pat Chambers, strike agitator, and communist candidate for United States senator, lost motion picture equipment, a ten-reel soviet pic-

ture and an operator last night when he ventured to appear as a showman in exhibiting the communist propaganda picture, "The Road to Life" in a Mexican pool hall in Tulare ... Between 75 and 100 persons, most of them Mexicans 20 years old or younger, attended the four hour performance. Members of the Tulare police department sat through the entire show.⁴²

This tiny mention in a small town paper brings to light the vibrant character of Film & Photo League screenings: 1930s media activists hold a spontaneous showing of a Russian film to a large group of Mexican youth in a California farming town – the picture elicits questions about alternative film exhibition practices in the 1930s, as well as about youth organizing among the farmworkers.

Of course neither the equipment nor the films belonged to Pat Chambers, much less the operator. While Hagel, because of his illegal status, slipped away, and Pat Chambers also eluded arrest, Lester Balog and Lillian Dinkin, an organizer for the Communist Party, were taken in to the Visalia jailhouse.⁴³ The *Western Worker* of 18 June reported the results of their short court trial on 5 June:

Taking only five minutes to arrive at a verdict they were already sure of, the jury yesterday found Lillian Dinkin and Lester Balog "guilty" of showing a picture without a license, and Judge Cross lost no time in slapping on a sentence of 45 days and \$100 fine for each ... Deliberate mis-statement by prosecution witnesses of the talk Comrade Dinkin gave between the Bonus March film and the "Road to Life" formed a large part of the "evidence" the jury used to justify their helping the frame-up.⁴⁴

When they arrested Balog, the police confiscated the projector, some sound equipment and Victrola records, the films he had been screening, and some money. After his release, he was picked up by Joe Wilson of the International Labor Defense, and driven directly out of Tulare, for there was a rumor that he would be picked up again for "vagrancy" if he were found walking in town.

The following year, Balog was still trying to get the films and other items returned. A letter from Hirsch & Kaye, the company from which he had leased the projector and screen and which had sent an employee to Visalia to reclaim the equipment while Balog was in jail, read:

Dear Mr. Balog:

The only equipment that we received from the police department in Tulare is that equipment which we have delivered to you through Mr. Reynolds. The chief of police in Tulare may truthfully feel that he delivered “everything” but that could also be a general term.⁴⁵

Finally, the chief of Police issued a letter on February 26, 1935 certifying that “the entire equipment, including films, taken from Lester Balog in Tulare at the time of his arrest was turned over to Mr. H.L. Bush of the Hirsch & Kaye Company of San Francisco”. The letter continues on however, “The Films were later turned over to this Dept. and were returned to the Garrison Film Distributors Company of New York on February 12th 1935”.⁴⁶ Perhaps the Cotton Strike footage and/or the more finely edited-*Century of Progress* was one of the returned films, and Balog was able to retrieve it at some point from Garrison.

While Lester Balog was in jail in Tulare County, the 1934 San Francisco General Strike was getting underway. Balog got out of the Tulare jail and was driven to San Francisco just in time to be present for the vigilante raids on 17 July, the second day of the strike. Many sites of political/cultural activity that had flourished were destroyed, including The Workers Cultural Center at the Ruthenberg House on Haight Street, the *Western Worker* editorial offices and the printing plant that the paper contracted with, the longshoreman's strike kitchen, the Mission Workers' Neighborhood House, and the Workers' Open Forum at 1223 Fillmore⁴⁷ – where Balog and Royce had presented a film program upon their arrival to San Francisco in October, 1933. Unknown men, most likely hired by the employer groups and closely followed by police, broke in and demolished as much as possible of the workers' cultural movement as the General Strike began to affect the city.⁴⁸

The vigilante raids of the 1934 General Strike in San Francisco were not an isolated set of incidents, but rather the culmination of a pattern of political repression in Depression-era California. In the summer of 1932, the *Western Worker* reported that police had raided the John Reed Club of Los Angeles just as they were organizing a statewide conference.⁴⁹ According to the *Western Worker*,

The attack on the JRC is part of the campaign of terror which has been launched by the “Red



Squad” within the last few weeks, and which has resulted in the breaking up of many workers' meetings and daily raids on workers' headquarters.⁵⁰

Artists, writers, theatre groups, filmmakers, and photographers whose cultural and media work strengthened the left became targets. The mainstream mass media was used to arouse public sentiment against those who threatened the capitalist system during the Depression era. The John Reed Club headquarters in Los Angeles was hit again in February of 1933.⁵¹ Newsboys were arrested for selling the *Western Worker*, bookstores selling radical publications were shut down and their owners thrown in jail, street theatre players were beaten up. In July 1934, while Balog languished in jail, San Diego police arrested Louis Siminow of the Los Angeles Film & Photo League for showing a film.⁵²

With San Francisco in disarray, and the local Film & Photo League darkroom and meeting space destroyed, the people who created the short-lived Film & Photo League movement in San Francisco dispersed. It is doubtful whether the Film & Photo League ever re-established itself as a group in San Francisco after the destruction at the Ruthenberg House. Lester Balog and Consuelo Kanaga sneaked into the raided *Western Worker* office and took photos of the destruction. Ed Royce was arrested later that year when he went to the police station to claim property that police had taken during the July raids.⁵³

Another collective effort, the Photo-Commen-

Fig. 9. Ruins of the Ruthenberg House, vandalized by vigilantes during the San Francisco General Strike, July 1934. [Courtesy of the San Francisco History Room, San Francisco Public Library.]

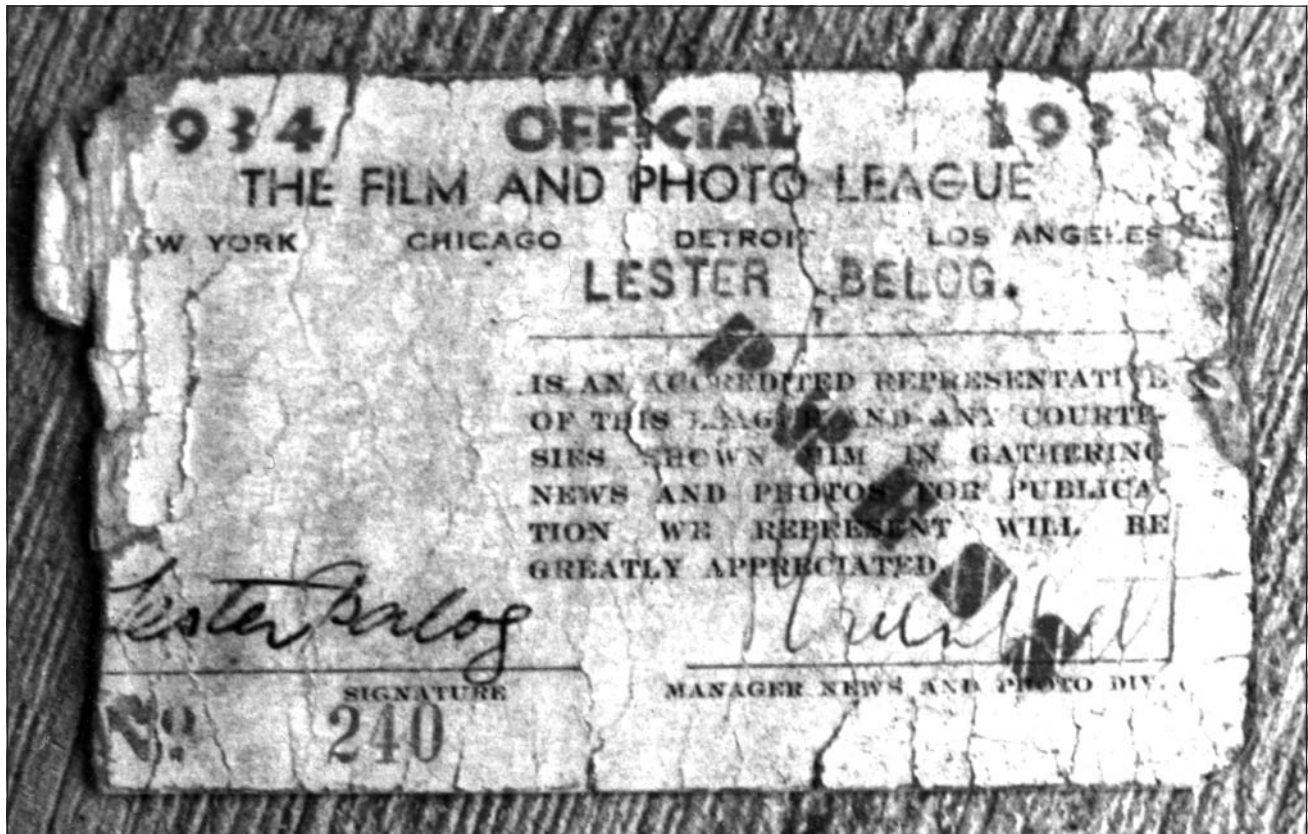


Fig. 10. Lester Balog's press card, identifying him as a credentialed representative of the Film & Photo League (albeit with name misspelled).

tors, a short-lived group that included Balog, Hagel and Mieth, Dorothea Lange, Consuelo Kanaga, Willard Van Dyke and Ansel Adams, among others, organized a large photo show at the Gelber-Lilienthal Gallery and Bookstore sometime in 1934, bringing together one hundred "photographs of social significance". According to Balog,

the pictures went up and they were up one day, two days maybe. There was criticism by the American Legion and they ordered a couple, two or three pictures, taken out. First, the Tom Mooney picture. Dorothea Lange had a beautiful picture of a pair of legs: a girl sitting on a bar – not a bar, a drug-store stool, legs crossed, a beautiful pair of legs, with an enormous run in her stocking. And she called it "USA, 1934". It was very clever, and I liked it. It was beautiful. That was objected to ... and there may have been one other ... Anyhow, the group was very indignant and they said we either have all or none, so they took it out.⁵⁴

Balog's description of reaction to Lange's

"USA, 1934" reflects a common theme of censorship during the thirties. Though the expression of sexuality was the more publicized complaint of censoring boards, political censorship was rampant. Was it the legs or the message that Lange's photo conveyed that brought the wrath of the Legionnaires and the pressure from the gallery?⁵⁵

By 1935, Roosevelt's New Deal was being implemented across the country. Hansel Mieth got a job, not in the WPA Art project – they told her that her portfolio work was not "Art", but propaganda.⁵⁶ She joined the women's sewing project until she convinced the administrators of the WPA Youth Project to let her run a photography project in San Francisco's Mission District. From there, she went to work for *Life* magazine. Otto Hagel produced a pictorial book on waterfront workers in 1937 for the International Longshoreman and Warehouse Union, and also published photographs in *Life*.⁵⁷ They moved to New York for a few years, and then returned west to buy a chicken farm in Santa Rosa, and raised chickens between their photo assignments.⁵⁸

Lester Balog went to work for the California

Conservation Core in Plumas County, photographing forest service projects. In 1941, he took perhaps his best known photograph, of Woody Guthrie holding a guitar with letters painted on the front: "This Machine Kills Fascists". Balog later served in the military during WWII as a photographer and film editor. In the late forties, he, like Hagel a few years before, worked for the International Longshoreman and Warehouse Union, as a photographer for their newspaper, *The Dispatcher*.⁵⁹ In the fifties, he moved to Cambria with his wife, Frances, and ran a movie theatre, though the audiences for the radical fare that he most liked to program were sparse.⁶⁰ In his later years, Balog was known around the state for his continued commitment to radical film.⁶¹

In 1953, former Communist leader Louis Rosser, a party member from 1932 to 1944, read from the 1934 catalog of the San Francisco Workers School and named Lester Balog at the state Un-

American Activities Hearings. When Tom Brandon asked Balog in the seventies what had happened to the films, he answered:

Burned them! Believe it or not. I must have had seven or eight 400-foot reels, silent, 16mm. And what happens is, there were many people on it, some of whom were Lefts, Communists, Socialists, who were in demonstrations that may have had signs ... in '52, we had some "visitors" and that worried me, and my wife too ... I didn't want to incriminate people who may have changed since then... after three or four days, I burned the stuff. Yeah, I know, it broke my heart.⁶²

Fortunately, the film that was perhaps the greatest accomplishment of the San Francisco Film & Photo League, *Century of Progress*, has survived.

Notes

1. Sam Brody writing in the *Daily Worker* quoted in William Alexander, *Film on the Left: American Documentary Film From 1931 to 1942* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 30.
2. For a treatment of silent era labor films in the United States, see: Steven J. Ross, *Working Class Hollywood: Silent Film and the Shaping of Class in America* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998).
3. On Soviet Films in England, see: Bert Hogenkamp, *Deadly Parallels: Film and the Left in Britain 1929-1939* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1986). On the Amis de Spartacus: Jonathan Buchsbaum, *Cinema Engagé: Film in the Popular Front* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988). On Willi Munzenberg: Babette Gross, *Willi Munzenberg: A Political Biography*, translated by M. Jackson (Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1974), and Russell Campbell, *Cinema Strikes Back: Radical Filmmaking in the United States 1930-1942* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1982).
4. See: Alexander, *Film on the Left*; Tom Brandon, "Survival List: Films of the Great Depression" in David Platt, ed. *Celluloid Power: Social Film Criticism from "The Birth of a Nation" to "Judgment at Nuremberg"* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1992); Russell Campbell, *Cinema Strikes Back: Radical Filmmaking in the United States 1930-1942* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1982); Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London, New York: Verso, 1997); Leslie Fishbein, "A Lost Legacy of Labor Films", *Film and History*: 9:2 (1979), 33; Leo Seltzer, "Documenting the Depression of the 1930s: The Work of the Film and Photo League" in Platt, ed. *Celluloid Power*; Russell Campbell, "Leo Seltzer Interview: 'A Total and Realistic Experience'", and Tony Stafford, "Samuel Brody interview: The Camera as a Weapon in the Class Struggle", *Jump Cut* no. 14 (March 1977), 25-30; Fred Sweet, Eugene Rosow and Allan Francovich, "Pioneers: An Interview with Tom Brandon" *Film Quarterly* 27: 1 (Fall, 1973): 12.
5. Russell Campbell, "Film and Photo League: Radical Cinema in the 1930s" *Jump Cut* no. 14 (1977), 23-25.
6. I treat the Los Angeles groups in a longer work-in-progress on the Film & Photo League Movement in the USA.
7. Filth & Famine League: Leshne interview with Helen Gorog, April 2002. Also mentioned in Stuart Timmons, *The Trouble with Harry Hay: Founder of the Modern Gay Movement* (Boston: Alyson, 1990), 74.
8. Leshne Interview with Leslie Balog, 23 April 2002. Lester Balog's daughter, Leslie also published a memorial compilation of Balog's documents and photographs: "Lester Balog", in *Left Curve*, no. 7 1978.
9. Participation in the Hungarian Club and Workers' Sports League: Interview with Lester Balog by Tom Brandon, 1974, Tom Brandon Collection, Film Study Center, Museum of Modern Art (TBC). See also Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London, New York: Verso, 1997) for a treatment of ethnic Workers Clubs in the formation of radical culture in the 1930s.

10. AFI Catalog, "Passaic Textile Strike (1926)", <http://www.afi.com/members/catalog/DetailView.aspx?s=1&Movie=1544>. The film was begun by a hired crew as a melodrama; the documentary footage shot by union members and supporting activists appears at the end of the film.
11. Alexander, *Film on the Left*, 5–6.
12. "Film and Photo League Filmography", compiled by Russell Campbell and William Alexander, *Jump Cut* no. 14 (1977), 33.
13. A group of still photographers issued a mission statement for the San Francisco Film & Photo League, declaring it to be a non-political organization. The group may have renamed itself shortly later to become Group f64. -Mission statement in Willard Van Dyke Papers, the Center for Creative Photography, Tucson (WVDC). Tom Brandon, in his notes for an unpublished book, took personal credit for starting the San Francisco group on a trip in 1933, TBC.
14. The film, based on Maxim Gorky's novel *Mother*, was called "1905" in some publicity ads. *Mother*, like many of the Russian films that the Film & Photo League screened was "illegal" to show – a license from the National Board of Censorship of Motion Pictures for public screening was rejected in 1927, and not granted until 1933. The film was publicly released in 1934 under the title *Mother 1905*. Vladimir K. Petric, *Soviet Revolutionary Films in America (1926–1935)* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1973), 39.
15. A description of the tour can be found in a partial letter from Lester Balog, TBC. Lester Balog's daughter, Leslie Balog, has the original copy.
16. Balog letter in TBC.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. The Cotton Strike involved over 18,000 workers. See: Devra Weber, *Dark Sweat, White Gold: California Farm Workers, Cotton, and the New Deal* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).
20. Balog letter in TBC.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
24. Anne Loftis, *Witness to the Struggle: Imaging the 1930s California Labor Movement* (Reno/Las Vegas: University of Nevada Press, 1998), 28.
25. Interviews and conversations with Lynn Bonfield of the San Francisco Labor Archive, and Georgia Brown, Hagel and Mieth's close friend. Also see the documentary film *Hansel Mieth: Vagabond Photographer* by Nancy Schiesari (Filmmakers Library, 2003).
26. Marriage Certificate, 31 October 1933, Recorder's Office, San Francisco.
27. *Polk's Crocker-Langley San Francisco Directory 1935 & 1936* (R.L. Polk & Co., 1935).
28. For treatment of other cultural groups in the thirties, see Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front*.
29. *Western Worker*, 11 December 1933, 3.
30. *Western Worker*, 12 February 1934, 5; *New Theatre*, July 1934, 17.
31. *San Francisco Workers' School Announcement of Courses*. National Republic papers, Hoover Institute, Stanford University.
32. Hansel Mieth interview with Steve Zeltzer, 1987: Mieth mentions that Otto Hagel did all the moving picture filming in the short time that they owned a film camera. Hagel and Mieth later collaborated on many still photography projects.
33. Leshne Interview with Georgia Brown, 2002.
34. Balog letter, 1974, TBC.
35. Leo Seltzer to Carla Leshne (interview), 12 November 2000.
36. Seltzer to Leshne, 12 November 2000.
37. "Alleged Red Leader Seized", *San Francisco Chronicle*, 2 September 1934.
38. A mention of one of Balog's screenings can be found in John Gregory Dunne, *Delano: The Story of the California Grape Strike* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1971), 163 (thanks to Richard Steven Street for noting this reference). Balog continued to be dedicated to using film for political organizing, running a one-man film exhibition service throughout the sixties and seventies, until his death in 1976.
39. For example: Loftis, *Witness to the Struggle*, and Ken Light, *Witness in Our Time: Working Lives of Documentary Photographers* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000).
40. Interview with Hansel Mieth by Steve Zeltzer, 1987; letters between Edward Royce and Garrison Films in the Files of the Communist Party USA in the Comintern Archives, Fond 515, Library of Congress.
41. Balog interview, 18 March 1974, TBC.
42. "Communist Film Seized at Tulare: Pat Chambers Escapes After Presenting Show", *Visalia Times-Delta*, 25 May 1934, 6.
43. The *Visalia Times-Delta* reported that Dinkin was a waitress residing in Tulare.
44. *Western Worker*, 18 June 1934, 2.
45. Hirsch & Kaye to Lester Balog, 2 February 1935, TBC.
46. Tulare Chief of Police to Lester Balog, 26 February 1935, TBC.
47. David F. Selvin, *A Terrible Anger: The 1934 Waterfront*

- and *General Strikes in San Francisco* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1996), 194–196.
48. “300 Put Under Arrest. Police Squads Join in Citizen Attacks on Radicals’ Offices”, *New York Times*, 18 July 1934, 11.
 49. California convention mentioned: *Western Worker*, 15 May 1932, 5.
 50. *Western Worker*, 1 July 1932, 2.
 51. *Western Worker* 20 February, 1933, 1.
 52. “Red Squad Smashes JRC Headquarters in LA”, *Western Worker*, 20 February 1933, 1; “Arrest of Newsboy in Attempt to Halt Communist Papers”, *Western Worker*, 15 February 1932, 4; “Arrest of Tulare Workers’ Book Shop Agent”, *Western Worker*, 15 January 1934, 2; “San Diego Police Raid Anti-Fascist Movie Showing”, *Western Worker*, 16 July 1934 (first edition), 1; “The Living Theatre”, *New Theatre*, July 1934, 16–17.
 53. “Alleged Red Leader Seized”, *San Francisco Chronicle*, 2 September 1934.
 54. Balog interview, TBC.
 55. Movies also underwent censorship during this period. Many of the writers of the New York and Hollywood Film & Photo Leagues turned their attention to film censorship. The very first article in the first edition of the NY Film & Photo League’s publication, *Film-front*, discussed the “Decency Campaign” in Hollywood, which the FPL writer saw as much a campaign of political repression as it was about sexuality and the church.
 56. Hansel Mieth, “On the Life and Work of Otto Hagel and Hansel Mieth”, *Left Curve*, no. 13, 12.
 57. Maritime Federation of the Pacific Coast, *Men and Ships: A Pictorial of the Maritime Industry* (San Francisco: Wobbers Inc., 1937).
 58. See Kenneth Kann, *Comrades and Chicken Farmers: The Story of a California Jewish Community* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993) for an understanding of the radical chicken farming coops in Sonoma County.
 59. Although Otto Hagel’s work is remembered and prominently displayed in the lobby of the ILWU in San Francisco, Balog’s photographic work was all but forgotten. His name never appeared in any photo credits in the *Dispatcher* and no one knew of his work, until it became clear that a box of his negatives left at the *Dispatcher* offices corresponded to almost every published photograph in the *Dispatcher* between 1946 and 1948.
 60. Leshne interview with Francis Balog, 2001.
 61. See Leslie Balog, “Lester Balog”, in *Left Curve*, no. 7 (1978).
 62. Balog interview, TBC.

Abstract: The Film & Photo League of San Francisco, by Carla Leshne

The Workers’ Film & Photo League movement of the 1930s gave rise to local groups of film activists across the United States. San Francisco’s Film & Photo League coalesced in 1933, documenting California labor struggles and social conditions during the Depression, as well as acting as a distribution network for censored Soviet films and American newsreels. The San Francisco Film & Photo League production *Century of Progress* (1934) is discussed in detail.