PART I

Before the Beginning

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Where in California Is Its Labor History?

IN AN AUDITORIUM IN DISNEY'S California Adventure Park, a film titled *Golden Dreams* screens a dozen times each day. Hollywood star Whoopi Goldberg plays Queen Calafia, a character lifted from a five-hundred-year-old Spanish romance. In that story, Calafia ruled over Amazons on an island west of the Indies named "California." This is the origin of the Golden State's name.

Calafia is our host through reenactments of well-known moments in California history. She shows us the first contact between Spanish *conquistadores* and the native population; the Gold Rush; building the railroads; the heyday of Hollywood; spread of suburbs and the "good life" of the 1950s; and the psychedelic era of the late 1960s, with hippies dancing in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park.

In addition to these standard snapshots in the state's family album, we also view images added in recent years, including the mistreatment of Asian immigrants by the white majority in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the migration of African Americans from the South to work in shipyards during World War II. The film makes an earnest effort to showcase the many ethnic strands of California history.

And yet something important is missing from *Golden Dreams*. Chinese laborers hang over cliffs in the Sierra Nevada in baskets to blast a passage through the rock for the Central Pacific Railroad. But we don't see railroad workers striking for pay equal to that of white workers, as thousands did in the spring of 1868. Black shipyard workers suffer discrimination. But we don't catch them demonstrating to gain full membership in the segregated union that controlled hiring, as occurred later.

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What the film lacks is a sense of collective struggle by working people on their own behalf, without which most workers would have made little progress toward their goal—the California variation of the American Dream.

True, we catch a glimpse of an actor playing Cesar Chavez calling Mexican American farm laborers out of the fields. Yet, when the workers respond to Chavez's entreaty, as they did so many times in the 1960s and 1970s, *Golden Dreams* fails to reveal that he is asking them to join a union, the United Farm Workers, the only farmworkers union that ever lasted more than a few years, which was Chavez's singular historical achievement.

It isn't as if the filmmakers didn't have any labor history in California to draw on. The state is home to more than two thousand union locals, ranging in size from a handful of workers to tens of thousands. At the peak of unionization in the 1950s, more than 40 percent of the nonfarm workforce belonged to unions. To a great degree, it was the successful struggles of unions, organized through the volunteer activism of their members in the mid-twentieth century, that lifted the working-class majority up into the middle class of home ownership and disposable income, in California as in the rest of the nation. Today, when the rate of union membership has fallen to its lowest point in nearly a century, over two million Californians still carry union cards.

But California labor history doesn't begin and end with union membership. Forming and maintaining unions is one part of a broader story, repeated countless times—in the coastal seaports, the Central Valley farms, the southern oilfields, and the Sierra foothills, in financial high rises and bungalow classrooms—of workers' journeys from isolation and powerlessness to community, strength, and hope. Their toolbox contains unions, to be sure, but also lawsuits, legislation, election campaigns, community murals, songs, demonstrations, and a mountain of dedication by ordinary people to shared ideas of fairness and social justice.

If Disney's filmmakers had considered California history from the point of view of working people, perhaps its narrator would have been Anna Smith, the widow of a disabled Civil War veteran and a single mother, who migrated to the state in 1875. She spoke at demonstrations called by the Workingmen's Party of California in the late 1870s, and led several hundred workers—who had elected her their "general"—on a march intending to join the protest by Coxey's Army in Washington, D.C. against the horrendous economic depression of the early 1890s.

With the benefit of Smith's perspective, maybe the film would have presented events that not only had an impact on California workers' lives but

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also involved workers organizing themselves to make history. We might have seen a reenactment of the 1934 San Francisco General Strike, where a struggle by dockworkers and sailors against terrible wages and unfair and oppressive hiring practices escalated due to violent employer resistance. Hundreds of unarmed workers were injured in clashes with police and hired thugs using, boasted one manager of the strikebreakers, the latest antiworker weapons. Two workers were killed. In response, after a dramatic silent funeral procession on the city's main boulevard, more than one hundred thousand workers, acting in solidarity, joined a four-day walkout from their jobs.

When the dust settled, the maritime workers achieved union recognition, a fair contract, and a hiring hall that shared the available work equally. But the effects of these events reached beyond the city and the state. The San Francisco General Strike contributed to sentiments in the U.S. Congress that led to passage of the National Labor Relations Act a year later, which set up the legal machinery for modern labor-management relations. In its wake, hundreds of thousands joined California unions, and millions more did so across the country. For many people, especially immigrants, the unions they joined in the 1930s provided their first access to participation in democratic institutions, economic security, and home ownership.

After World War II, California changed in important ways. So did the ways workers approached solving their problems. In place of direct workplace action, workers more often concentrated on political and legislative activities. We might easily imagine Anna Smith's view of the statewide election of 1958, which pitted a coalition of labor federations and civil rights groups against the gubernatorial ambition of a wealthy newspaper owner from Oakland, William Knowland, who bankrolled an antiunion "right-to-work" initiative on the same ballot.

The candidate favored by labor, Edmund "Pat" Brown, promised, if elected, to sign a bill outlawing employment discrimination based on race. (At the time it was legal for bosses to hire, fire, or promote someone based on skin color.) According to Alex Alexander, a Los Angeles laborer who worked on Brown's election campaign, once enacted, "the Fair Employment Practices Act made an enormous difference in the daily lives of people of color."

Golden Dreams might have looked for inspiration in its own backyard. High-profile struggles to unionize by Hollywood studio film workers before and after World War II—including Disney cartoonists—led to hearings in 1947 by the House Un-American Activities Committee. At these public events, created for maximum publicity effect by foes of unions and worker

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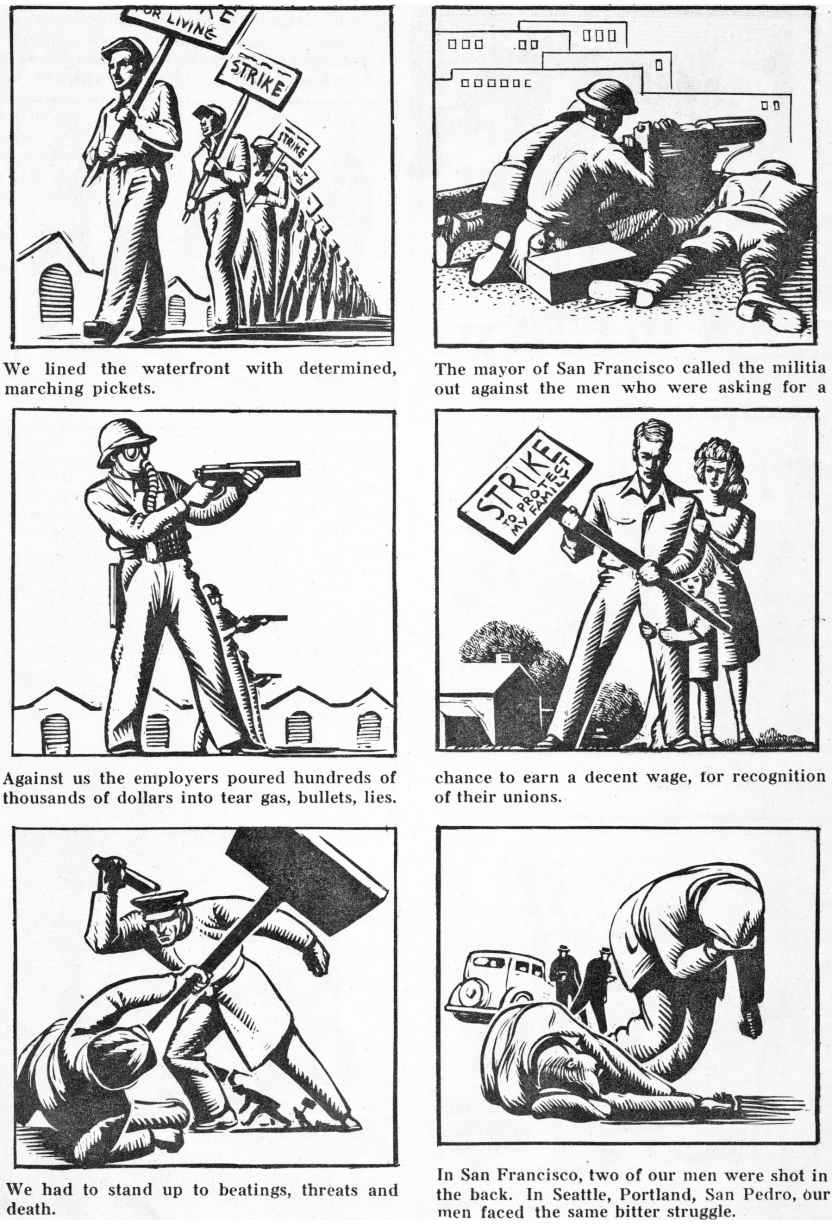

FIGURE 3. Artist Giacomo Patri's depiction of the 1934 West Coast maritime strike, from a 1945 union pamphlet for new members. Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University [Marine Cooks and Stewards].

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rights such as J. Parnell Thomas, the first shots were fired on the domestic front of the Cold War. Focusing on movie stars, screenwriters, and directors but extending their reach to technical and craft workers as well, anticommunist politicians used the hearings to divide workers, destroy progressive unions, and intimidate anyone who questioned their methods or authority. Hundreds of people (many of them union members) who refused to cooperate, or named by others as Communists, were placed on a blacklist, preventing them from working in the industry, launching what became known as "McCarthyism."

Instead of psychedelia, Anna Smith's perspective on the 1960s might have shown antiwar students becoming public sector union activists, bringing their compensation up to private sector standards. More recent depictions could have shown Central American and Southeast Asian immigrants organizing unions and worker centers to fight wage theft and enforce labor laws.

The import of these events is indisputable. Where, then, do we find this labor history of the Golden State? Not in *Golden Dreams*. Its racial sensitivity is intended, in all fairness, not to explain the past but to roll out the welcome mat for the theme park's diverse millions of visitors. This isn't history for participants in a democracy, but a guide for paying customers.

A better question might be, Why are these significant events, and the accomplishments of people like Anna Smith, missing from other films, from television programs, from textbooks, and from the awareness and memory of most people in California?

In exploring such questions in the following pages, the reader will enter into a largely submerged history. The lives and activities of working people have been neglected in the shadows cast by "great men"—politicians, military leaders, the very wealthy—whose actions in the glare of media attention seem to bestow on them a sense of inevitability and destiny.

Over the past few decades, new avenues of thought have been opened up by historians interested in other kinds of history: stories of women, of immigrants from non-European nations, of people of color. These studies have broadened our understanding of historical experience, but also fragmented what had once been a more unified view of our past. Critics of the new histories believe that in the transition to history with many voices and many experiences we are losing something crucial to a democratic society: a common knowledge of our past, a shared heritage we all value and use as a point of reference in our discussions and debates today.

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These critics have a point. But it makes little sense to try to turn back the clock to a type of history that can no longer satisfy everyone in our increasingly diverse society. *From Mission to Microchip,* like other labor histories, has a different perspective on how to achieve the important goal of a shared understanding of history. It proposes that the majority of the population has always been and will continue to be working people. Most women, most immigrants, most people of color, and most white people are workers, whatever else they might be. This means, once we begin to look at things from this point of view, that most history is *labor history*.

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On a Mission

HOW WORK DESTROYED NATIVE CALIFORNIA

A MISSION CULTURE

If you have spent much time in California, eventually you notice the tug of the mission period on the state's culture. For one thing, the missions themselves still attract tourists in the summer and busloads of fourth graders throughout the rest of the year. The visitors come to examine the reconstructed churches and outbuildings, walk through the cemeteries, and tour the modest museum exhibits. You can purchase mission souvenirs—"Collect plaster models of all twenty-one missions for $50!" advises a typical display—along with books and religious articles in the gift shop.

Beyond their cultural impact, the physical design of missions continues to exert an impressive architectural influence. A substantial number of public buildings built before 1950, especially in southern California, reflect the Spanish Revival or Mediterranean style. To this day a popular model of tract home continues to sprout row after row of little missions across the landscape.

Partly because of this visibility, the mission era also occupies a fuzzy spot at the back of public consciousness, in a borderland between historical knowledge and cultural dreams. Most Californians are somewhat aware that before the United States took in California as the thirty-first state, it belonged to Mexico and before that to the Spanish empire. They understand that the mission era involves Indians, colonization, the Catholic Church, and fine horsemanship by people speaking Spanish—even if the precise relationships among these elements aren't completely clear.

Earlier generations knew this picture through many movie remakes of *Zorro,* also a popular television series in the 1950s. But the real credit

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