

Let's Build a Ditch!

PETER ELLIS

IT WOULD BE very simple, but at the same time mechanical, to dismiss *Our Daily Bread* (United Artists) as a reactionary film. For after all King Vidor is not like the fascistic Walter Wanger producing *Gabriel Over the White House* and *Washington Merry-Go-Round*. He happens to be one of the few directors in Hollywood with any sincerity and honesty and at the same time a real feeling and knowledge of the cinema. Although he has made pot-boilers in his day he has also made the *Big Parade*, *The Political Flapper*, *Show People* and *The Crowd*. They're films not to be sneezed at.

His honesty has resulted in a sort of insulation from the Hollywood mob, and this insulation has led in turn to a detached sort of contact with the social forces of every day life. Like Chaplin (who is Vidor's personal, artistic, and political idol) he is a Hollywood anarchist with an inherent sympathy for the underdog.

The inspiration for *Our Daily Bread* was born out of the desire to do something other than rubber stamp movies. Like many confused and well meaning liberals Vidor fell for Roosevelt's demagoguery: back-to-the-land-for-prosperity. He then spent some time driving around rural California, to find that other people had also swallowed the same bait. And after being turned down by virtually every studio in Hollywood as a dangerous radical he really was convinced that *Our Daily Bread* was a contribution to the solution of the unemployment problem in the United States. With that firm conviction he mortgaged his personal property and financed his own production. Even there he was limited. The film had to be distributed. Exacting a promise that Vidor would modify his story somewhat, Samuel Goldwyn of United Artists consented to distribute the film.

It took two years to produce. In that time history was making rapid progress. And the film comes hot on the heels of the collapse of the Roosevelt scheme. Had it come a little sooner its false message might possibly have been more effective. Now, when two million more farmers are to be added to the relief rolls this winter, Mr. Vidor's "epic" of subsistence farming is exposed as confused and reactionary; rather than a film with a "limited political outlook."

However, at the same time, it is important to indicate that the reactionary tendency is due to the fact that Vidor steers clear (for manifold reasons) of integrating the process of the poor farmer's struggle against the bankers and politicians. He also isolates the members of the cooperative community from their former neighbors. It seems to me that these aspects arise from an undeveloped political understanding rather than organized anti-working-class propaganda. For the best scene

in the film is the sheriff's sale. Here we are clearly shown the conflict between the Sheriff and his deputies against the organized workers who "buy" back the farm for \$1.85.

There is a definite progress from *The Crowd* (1928) where the mass was the villain (a man's futile struggle against the stupid conventions and brutality of the masses) to

Our Daily Bread where there is established a definite sympathy for the mass; a faith in the success of cooperation and unity of workers.

This is graphically portrayed in the final sequence where the workers are organized to make heroic collective effort to save their drought-stricken crops by digging a three mile irrigation ditch in record time. It was definitely inspired by the "Let's build a railroad" sequence of the *Road to Life*. It is also a far cry from the typical sentimental white chauvinism of *Hallelujah!* to King Vidor's desire to make a film version of *Stevedore*.

Between Ourselves

JOSHUA KUNITZ, now on tour, will lecture in Chicago on the evening of October 15 at the Medical and Dental Arts Building Auditorium on "Life in the Workers Land." The meeting has been arranged by the Pen and Hammer and Friends of THE NEW MASSES. On Thursday evening, October 18, he will lecture at the National Student League headquarters in St. Louis.

In Indianapolis, on the evening of the 19th, Kunitz will lecture on "The Cultural Revolution in the Soviet Union." This meeting will be held at the John Reed Club, 322 Columbia Securities Bldg., 143 East Ohio Street. He will speak in Louisville on Saturday evening, October 20, under the auspices of the Pen and Hammer.

On Sunday evening, October 21, Kunitz will speak in Cincinnati at the Bureau of Jewish Education, 658 Rockdale Avenue, on

"U.S.S.R.—Where National Minorities Are Free." This lecture is sponsored by the Pen and Hammer.

A Hallowe'en Party under the auspices of the Friends of NEW MASSES (New York branch) will be held Wednesday evening, October 31, at Webster Manor, 125 East 11th Street. Ansel Robins and His Red Hatters will provide dance music. The party is free. Admission is by a \$1 sub (either an extension or a new subscription). These special subscriptions for admission to the party can be procured at THE NEW MASSES office, 31 East 27th Street, and the Workers' Bookshop, 50 East 13th Street, New York City.

We regret an error in reference to the title of Pat O'Mara's book on life in Liverpool. The complete and correct title is *An Autobiography of a Liverpool-Irish Slummy*.

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