

Hollywood's Yes-Men Say "No"

The acquiescers of the Golden West stick their chins out (but can they take it?) when it comes to unionism

By Andrew Collins

DURING the first week of September, the Los Angeles section of the National Labor Relations Board will begin hearings on the screen writer. About two years ago when the writers attempted to organize, they formed a Screen Writers' Guild. Membership mushroomed; the producers were alarmed, took certain steps of their own, and mysteriously everything blew up. With the Wagner act the revived Screen Writers' Guild suddenly realized the significance of its experience. Its former leaders had been blacklisted out of the industry. A company union, Screen Playwrights, Inc., had been recognized as the writers' bargaining agency, though its membership never came to even 20 percent of the Guild membership. A small clique was isolated in this company union, leaving the field clear for the new organization.

The Guild today includes a majority of the writers in every classification, in every studio, and in the film industry as a whole, according to a report by Dorothy Parker, chairman of its membership committee. The Screen Playwrights, Inc., prevented a Labor Board hearing during July and opposed a consent election. With both groups girding themselves for the showdown, the Playwrights have been caught out on a limb: no argument can conceal the fatal defect in their claim to speak for the writers—the writers in overwhelming numbers are now speaking for themselves. The Playwrights, therefore, threaten to carry the issue to the Supreme Court to prove that writers "are in a category with bankers" and the Wagner act does not apply to them; that if it does apply, they are the recognized agency and the Screen Writers' Guild is a malicious interloper, a late-comer muscling into their field to do havoc.

Comic relief in the struggle has been supplied by Major Rupert Hughes. The major is caught in crossfire between both groups. It is true he is a vice-president of the Authors' League of America of which the Screen Writers' Guild is part; but he is also an officer of Screen Playwrights, Inc., and he was a key member of the junta which, together with the producers, scuttled the Guild last year. The major himself touched off the fireworks when he refused to resign from either the Playwrights or the Authors' League; the major detected a conspiracy among screen writers to "sovietize" the film industry and the writing profession; the major, whose chores for Hearst have not dimmed his wit, decided that he must retain his office among

those who were opposing "the autonomy of individual writers" (read "right to work"), that he must bore from within and frustrate the "menace of regimentation, coercion, and segregation." The major, with his letter to the Authors' League refusing to resign either post, drew heavy fire from Marc Connelly, president of the League. According to *Variety*, show-business trade journal, Connelly's answer "sprained the Hollywood welkin in several places, language sizzled on the floor, and mugs scrambled for the exits . . . while old Lazarus Producer? Well, Lazarus laughed—as usual." Said Connelly to "My dear Rupert: In sum, your letter is pernicious syncretism. It is spiced with untruthful and misleading implications, misquotations of fellow writers, and unqualified misstatements of fact."

Morrie Ryskind took a page in the *Hollywood Reporter* and headlined it: "I remember when Rupert Hughes was considered an historian—but I'll never trust his data any more." And went on: . . . "At this period," continues Mr. Hughes, the eminent fictioneer, 'when there was no organization of screen writers, the Screen Playwrights, Inc., came into being.' Just like that—came into being, no less! A virgin birth—OSER!

"Rupert, you're getting to be a big boy now, and it's time somebody talked over the facts of life with you. Look, Rupert—will some of you young ladies leave the room?—I've got something to tell you. I know that up to now you have believed that the stork came and dropped the Screen Playwrights, Inc., right into the producers' laps. Well, Rupert, it wasn't the stork. (This is a little more embarrassing than I thought, but I must go through with it.) Look, Rupert, one lovely night a papa producer was walking in the moonlight with a mama writer who had voted against Article XII (as per instructions). 'I'll bet you can't guess what I'm thinking of,' said the papa bird. 'I'll bet I can,' said the mama bird. 'Let's get out of the light and talk it over.'

"So they got out of the light and talked it over, and out of that beautiful company union was born the very next day the Screen Playwrights, Inc. That's the whole story in a nutshell, Rupert, and though you may be hurt now, in time you will realize how sweet and wonderful it all is."

This battle in Hollywood is complicated by several factors. It has the earmarks of a literary vendetta; it moves like serial horse-opera; and the entire controversy has rung in remote issues, with the Screen Play-

wrights, Inc., holding out for the Supreme Court and "writers who are more like bankers than workers." Immediate issues have been abandoned while the company union proclaims that it opposes collective bargaining, opposes unionism, and opposes the Soviet Union; withal insisting that it is the bargaining agent of writers, that it is a legitimate union, that it hates propaganda.

What does the Screen Playwrights actually look like from inside? The following is a report of a meeting of the Screen Playwrights, Inc. It was read by Jimmy Gleason at a meeting of the Screen Writers' Guild and greeted hilariously. In many ways it is incredible even if it happened only once in a lifetime. There is cruel significance in the coincidence that this meeting took place during the same week that the Writers' Congress was in session in New York. Here, then, are the Screen Playwrights, Inc., as they are, speaking their own lines.

THE BULLETIN BOARD in the lobby of the Hollywood-Roosevelt Hotel carried this notice: "Screen Playwrights, Florentine Room, 8 p.m." At 8 p.m. I walked up to the Florentine Room and from the door saw John Lee Mahin addressing a group of four people at the front of the room. I returned fifteen minutes later. By then, there were about twenty people there. Howard Emmet Rogers was at the door. I took a seat well back in the room. Mahin and Rogers paraded the aisle and stood near the door talking.

Ben Markson introduced himself to me. He then introduced me to Rian James and several others. Bill Conselman entered. I was introduced to him. He said, "There's a goddamned publicity men's meeting downstairs and a Republic Pictures convention. I'll bet half our people get lost." Mahin went to the bar and rounded up a few others. He then called the meeting to order. There were thirty-five people there. Two others arrived in the course of the meeting, making a grand total of thirty-seven. Mahin sat at a table in the front of the room. In a semicircle around him were members of the board of Screen Playwrights, Inc.: Rogers, an unidentified man, Bess Meredyth, George Bricker (and wife), Bert Kalmar, Patterson McNutt, William Conselman, Major Rupert Hughes, Ben Markson, an unidentified man, and Preston Sturges. Before them were the writers and spectators, nearly all non-members of the Playwrights, among whom were Rian James, Harry Tugend, Milton Sper-

ling, three girls who were not writers, several men and women.

Mahin called the meeting to order.

[John Lee Mahin is now president of Screen Playwrights, Inc. Those who know him insist that he is the innocent dupe of Howard Emmet Rogers who dominates him completely.]

"For the benefit of those who don't know us very well, I would like to explain what the Screen Playwrights is and who we are. Around me here are most of the members of our Executive Board. McGuinness has sent word from Oceanside that he can't get here.

[James K. McGuinness is a producer at M.G.M. who, therefore, has no right to belong to a writers' organization at all. With Rogers and McNutt, he forms a trio (Mahin acts stooge) that supervises the political rectitude of the film community. McGuinness was scenarist of *China Seas* and *West Point of the Air*. It is important to observe that nearly all of the motion pictures which have been boycotted or attacked for their anti-labor, militarist, or imperialist propaganda originate in this group.]

"Grover Jones is sick.

[Jones is an old war-horse of the Mack Sennett days and proudly "anti-intellectual." He wrote *Lives of a Bengal Lancer* and *Annapolis Farewell*.]

"These members of the Executive Board and I will try to answer any questions you may have. Have you any questions? Well, maybe I had better tell you the story of this organization first. You will hear us called 'rats.' Especially Rogers, McNutt, McGuinness, and I are called 'rats' by the others. I would like to explain why. This is not a company union. Last spring after the rum-pus we were accused of being a company union. Why? Well, they'll tell you that we used company cars for our organization work. But I have here in my pocket"—Mahin taps his right breast—"bills for taxis that we used. We dug into our own pockets to cover some pretty stiff expenses a year ago. As others joined us, they chipped in. But we never took any money from any producer.

"They'll tell you that we got Neil McCarthy, the lawyer for the producers. That's not true. He's a good lawyer and he's handled producers' cases, but sometimes one pro-

ducer sues another and he's appeared against a producer.

"In the year of our existence we have done what no other group has ever been able to do. We have sat down with the producers man-to-man and they have signed an agreement with us. We have gained many things for writers. For example, writers' names must appear on all paid advertising and lithographs. And in trade papers. That never happened before.

"I went to that meeting of the Screen Writers' Guild last night. There were one hundred and ninety-seven people there and about twenty of them were our members who went there to observe. There were lots of people there who were not writers. Ernest Pascal presided. The feller from the National Labor Relations Board was at the table. But Dudley Nichols acted as—well, I don't know just how you would describe his position—he was active.

[Mahin was whistling in the dark. There were more than four hundred and fifty writers present at the Screen Writers' Guild meeting the previous evening at the Hollywood Athletic Club. All except about fifty became members of the Guild. Some studios are 100 percent Guild today. Ernest Pascal presided because he was president of the original guild which was destroyed by the Screen Playwrights and the producers. Mahin was disturbed by Nichols's activity; Nichols was a prime mover in revitalizing the Guild under the guarantees of the Wagner act; he is now its president. "The feller from the N.L.R.B." was Ralph Seward, attorney of the Labor Board, who clarified the rights of the Guild and answered eleven questions posed by Mahin himself, the questions being in the form of

threats to the membership implying the long drawn-out and costly procedure that might be involved in a struggle for recognition; the strategic position of the producers; and, in general, reflecting the mischievous plans which the Screen Playwrights have since been following in their company-union character.]

"Last spring we decided to break away from that leadership when we saw that it was futile. It was more than futile. We saw that it was drifting into dangerous waters. A responsible group of writers decided to call a halt. You'll hear us called rats—but it wasn't anything like that."

Howard Emmet Rogers arose and took the floor. Mahin explained that Rogers, having become a "writer-producer" during the year, was now only an associate member—he could talk but not vote.

[Rogers has manipulated his very limited ability into an important position in the industry by just such services as he is now trying to perform for the producers in this instance. It was Rogers who threatened to resign at M.G.M. because Ernst Toller had been signed as a writer. Rogers haunts anti-fascist or pro-Spanish government affairs and even anti-Nazi meetings to record the license numbers of cars parked in the neighborhood. He is the keeper of the producers' blacklist in this connection. He is fanatically fascist and anti-Semitic.]

ROGERS: "A good part of that is aimed at me. I was in the thick of it last spring. I'd like to explain why this organization came into being. Maybe that way you'll get an idea of the irresponsible leadership we had to deal with. You'll be able to understand why it took them three years to get nowhere and we were recognized and the producers talked to us as soon as we were ready.

[Rogers then continued at length to charge that the heads of the Guild had never put in writing their specific demands—at least, they had never shown them to him. He then charged that after the two groups had broken apart, he attempted to amalgamate them but was prevented from doing so by the trickery of the Screen Writers, who inserted Section XII "secretly" into the proposed constitution. Section XII has been the sore point of much controversy—it deals with the manner in which a strike may be called.]

"We didn't realize what that meant at the time. But later that evening I found out we had signed a call for a strike! If a young writer had scored a hit, he couldn't sign a new contract! I called McNutt—he'll tell you this himself—and he told me I was crazy. But next day he realized I was right when our lawyer [McCarthy] explained it all to us. Then we all resigned and immediately organized this organization."

Ben Markson asked for and was given the floor.

"Why don't we lay down and die? We've got to face the facts. Look at all these empty chairs. That doesn't look so good to me. As I understand it, if we don't get some members quick, we're through. What's wrong with us is what was wrong with the Screen Writers. Without an issue, we haven't a leg to stand on. What is the issue, I say, and where are the members?"

MAJOR RUPERT HUGHES: "I must explain that this was not intended to be a general



Waiting for Lefty

Jack Walters

meeting. We asked the hotel to give us a sort of living room and it's not our fault that we drew this barn-like expanse of auditorium with so many empty chairs. We thought it would be better to have a series of meetings with small invited groups so as to answer your questions individually and give you concentrated attention."

Conselman arose and said very loudly and indignantly: "Why are you beating around the bush, Howard? Tell them what the issue really is—communism or conservatism!"

[William Conselman is the creator of Ella Cinders. Remember how Ella handled the foreigners? the agitators? the Reds? Conselman is opposed to propaganda.]

ROGERS: "That's it in a nutshell, Bill, now that you've put it that way. There's the same group still trying to put it over on the rest and if we don't watch out they may still get away with it. But all that aside, I ask these people what is the difference between the Screen Writers and the Screen Playwrights? I went to their meeting last night. I tried to get in. But I was kept out. I was warned by the officers that the members would gang up on me if they saw me at the meeting. Fine democracy, that is—but that's the sort of people they are!"

Several people asked questions from the floor. Milton Sperling was particularly insistent on the provision of the N.L.R. act as it had been interpreted at the Screen Writers meeting the previous evening. Conselman got up angrily and demanded, "What's the idea of so many questions? If we have to answer questions all night to get members, I say to hell with it!"

RIAN JAMES: "We were brought here to have questions answered. Do you see anything wrong with that?"

ROGERS: "You're perfectly right. (Then, to Conselman.) Take it easy, Bill. These boys have to find out for themselves."

Sperling still insisted on knowing what the Playwrights were going to do about the voting provisions of the N.L.R. act. "A majority is a majority and bargains for all. What will you do if the Screen Writers get 51 percent and you get 49 percent? Will you dissolve or amalgamate or what?"

McNutt made a rambling response. "The producers deal with whomever they please. The majority vote gives the Screen Writers bargaining rights but that does not mean that the producers have to meet any of their demands. Then what do they do? They put on armbands and start marching in a circle—and we walk through their circle and take over their work."

MAHIN: "The vote is based on numbers. There is an average of three hundred and forty-seven writers on studio payrolls. But writers can't be sovietized. Majority or no majority, the producers can take \$75 men and put them to work for a few weeks on the materials they have around."

ROGERS: "I ask you, why did the Guild's constitution call for such crazy fines and

penalties? Why, they could fine you up to \$10,000. I wonder what a writers' organization could have that would be worth \$10,000 to betray? I think writers should be able to trust each other. Our fines only go up to \$250."

HUGHES: "I wonder whether our friends out there realize that producers and writers can get together like gentlemen?"

ROGERS: "The reason the producers listened to us was the imposing quality of the eleven names that signed the first request for an appointment with them. They just couldn't say *no* to those eleven names. How do those names stack up against the opposition? The producers know us and whoever is in with us is in with them."

MCNUTT: "Gene Fowler made a damn clever remark when we got together last year. He said, 'What writers need is to protect themselves against—writers!'" (Laughter.)

BRICKER: "Another thing. What made me decide against the Screen Writers was the way their leaders were always calling producers 'bastards.' Now, I know a lot of producers. Many of them are friends of mine that eat at my house and I go to theirs. No friend of mine is a 'bastard.' What's more, I know a thing or two about labor. I've handled strikes from the employers' side. The employer always has an ace in the hole. Why, for a few lousy dollars—what would seven to ten thousand mean to a producer—they can lay new names on the writers' payroll at \$50 a week for a few weeks and make any kind of majority they like. And that's not the only thing. I could show them how to handle this. Now, my friends, it is sometimes wise to be selfish. We're all out for ourselves and I'm sure the producers will find a way to play ball with the group that plays ball with them."

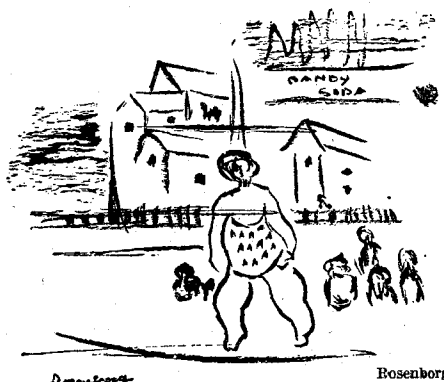
[A few days later, George Bricker was handed a raise and a new contract by Warner Bros.]

Interruptions repeatedly by Conselman: "You're either in or out. I don't know what all this gab is for."

SPEHLING: "But I know and you know that employers don't give up without a struggle. They fight and squirm and even shed blood."

ROGERS: "What would a \$500-a-week man want that they would shed blood over?"

SPEHLING: "Well, not exactly blood but didn't you have a hell of a time getting the concessions that you told us about?"



ROGERS: "Nothing of the sort. The producers saw us and behaved like real gentlemen. They know what it is they must fight against."

Meantime Bert Kalmar was getting restless and passed Mahin a note.

MAHIN: "Bert Kalmar is right. The point is whether we collaborate with producers who are evidently willing to collaborate with us or whether we tag after a pack of nuts!"

(General acclamation—amidst which McNutt observes: "There's the whole issue!")

RIAN JAMES: "Of course, now that you make this radical situation clear it's altogether different. I understand."

[Rian James is now a full-fledged member of Screen Playwrights.]

MCNUTT: "It's a question of leadership. Either a pack of Reds or the top men of the business."

MAHIN: "Here is a list of our members. (Reads names.) Those are all names that a producer would respect!"

ROGERS: "Over at M.G.M. we figured over the ninety-three writers on payroll for the year and seventeen of them wrote 90 percent of the productions. Do you realize what that means? Seventeen good men whose work means jobs for thousands would be saddled down by seventy incompetents. It's a case of good writers against bad writers—the studios will know who is who in a showdown."

[One of the evils of studio writing is the screen credit system, here endorsed by Rogers. It is to writers what the star system is to actors. Screen credit in no way reflects the ability or effort of a writer. It is subject to politics, prestige, whim, and chance. The younger writers who do the rough work sometimes spend years before crashing through to a credit. Rogers realized the foolishness of his attitude a few weeks later and issued a call to junior writers to come into his mob in a restricted status. None came.]

ROGERS: "Before we break up, I'd like you to see how things are done by this group. The other day we got a call from R.K.O. that one production would have no writers' credits on the advertising because three scenarists and three adapters were all claiming credit. Of course, that's something no arbitration board would allow anyhow. That was three in the afternoon. We made an appointment at the studio for five-thirty and we got the writers together and they immediately straightened the mess out so that only the three scenarists appeared. The producers thanked us and told us that the mess had taken up six weeks of time. The funny thing is these writers weren't even members of our organization, but we protected them all the same. Read them the letter from Briskin, Johnny."

Mahin read a two-page letter in which Briskin explained that four sets of lithographs would not carry writer-credits because they had gone to press before the agreement had been signed.

McNutt: "I wonder how long it would take a radical to get a letter like that from a producer."

O N Boston Common their heart ash
blows
And gently yielding, the rank grass
knows

One August midnight of every year
Since 1927 appear

These ashes in rendezvous on the field.
O tenderly knowing, the green blades shield
Where men sought pasturage in commune,
Where broomsticks trained by oppression's
moon

And truth once tarried to turn the mass;
These are not alien to this grass—
O firmly growing, O grass that sighs
For limping liberty lost in lies.

Here stir the ashes of two who died
That blindness bloat on their blood for pride.
The flesh and bone was the state's to burn
But ever the heart ash must return,
Petals of splendor that vaulted the flue
Flowered of freedom life never knew.
For flesh and bone on that August night
Was strapped to a throne of deathless might.
O voltage beyond man's blundering sight,
O pitiful anguish resembling fright.
(A fisherman and cobbler dared to dream
That love might triumph in mankind's
scheme.)

Marauders of dreams are men who slay
But they cannot burn the dream away.
It lives, it haunts like a prayer unsaid
All those who judged the dreamers be sped;
It sifts through the sleep of each betrayer
Till doom itself concocts them a prayer,
Till men call forth from betrayal's slime
Their own oppressors and weigh their crime:
And some shall be judged to live again
As less than the dogs who deemed them men,
For seeing how men by men are rent
Dogs with their status must be content.

Now this is the whispered word that goes
Sharper than north wind, sweeter than rose,
Longer than life till all men are free—
This is the story the grass told me.
So if you have hearts with which to hear
Louder than rhythm of Paul Revere
Stronger than Garrison "who'd be heard"
Listen to death's undying word:
Here once again, but patience, Sacco,
We've but begun. It is I, Bartolo!
New earth is ours and all earth grew:
We live in millions, they slew but two!

Do you remember the night we died?
The limpid anger, sorrowful pride.
The harbor, Nicola, we could see
No stain remain of a stamp tax tea.
But there were boats patrolling slow
And this time tyranny ran the show.
The tea came in, the revolt was lost—
Each August midnight we'll count the cost!
Yes, they filled the lower railroad yards
With squads of wooden machine-gun guards
And floodlights painted this park grass white—
But we walked out over the world that
night. . . !



Nicola Sacco

Miracle in Boston

(Chapter for a New World Testament)



Jo Page

Bartolomeo Vanzetti

We walked as only free men may go
(O high is the wind on the road we know)
We ran, and not since the world began
Did two men go as fast as we ran.
We flew so fast that the stars stood still
For we outran time into freedom's will . . .
And our burned-out eyes began to see
A summer and autumn of men made free,
And our lips renewed to sweeter bliss
Than ever was drunk in passion's kiss
(O summer of toiler taking his fruit,
O autumn of slavery's shriveled root!)

It is good to live when spring's soft cry
Opens the earth, but better to die
For a spring whose blossom shall set men free,
O spring after winters of tyranny!
O warming of heart and soul and mind,
O ultimate harvest of mankind . . .
Rebirth of love, what flaming flower
In gardens of soil may match your power,

What beauty of painted petal or tree
May equal the beauty of men set free,
What song of spring may a poet sing
Better than man's own awakening?

Nicola, know then we are alive!
Only a moment it took us to dive
Through spurious waters etched in fire,
But see how emergence lifted us higher
Now are we surely Carducci's own
For only in us is the future sown,
And we are that future, freed at last
Of groveling present and hideous past.
The world has offered us earth's new heaven
Where every August since '27
Workers arise with our life-filled urns
(O precious the wage that rebellion earns!)

From Boston Common their heart ash blows.
Over the older city it goes
Into the new, that their souls might retrace
Their funeral march. At Langone's place
They greet the undertaker who chose
Tuxedos to shroud their workers' clothes.
They pass along down Arlington Square
Where roses were strewn which still lie there,
Witness to pelting crowds and surging
Comrades annoyed by policemen's urging:
They hear a woman's voice head the way
Shouting a workingmen's Judgment Day!

They linger where rain beat on the hearse
(Too late, O mother, O cooling nurse!)
They enter Forest Hills' furnace again
And their winding sheet is the healing rain.
Rising, they meet the rain, their mother.
The heart ash lifts above the smother
And finds the flue, climbs on the sky
There on that bosom forever to lie
Drinking miraculous milk alone . . .
(O the hearts of these are as our own,
Guilty of hope in humanity—
Guilty they were as so too are we!)

We then the ashes drawn of their pain,
They the arisen and we the slain;
And Boston shall have them new to kill
Longer than Boston has Bunker Hill . . .
How strange the story that they who came
By sorrow in revolution's name
Should haunt a hill where Yankee pride
Hurled the first spear in monarchy's side,
Or linger bravely and undismayed
By Boston Latin School's pious shade
Where three hundred years of learning, free,
Were futile to save democracy!

And ages hence they shall tell who pass
Of heart ash hidden in common grass.
By common men shall the tale be sped
Of two who died yet never are dead.
(O life miraculous, blind with sun
O boundless brotherhood but begun!)
And long as poverty shall be here
These ashen petals must appear
Until the song of a spring is heard
Never propounded by man or bird!
O song no music can ever write
O man's deliverance out of night!

C. A. W.