

The Last Truck: Closing of a GM Plant

On the evening of September 7 (Labor Day) HBO broadcast "The Last Truck: Closing of a GM Plant [in Ohio]", a documentary by Julia Reichert and Steven Bognar. The film interviews workers about their years at the plant, and counts down to the last day and the last truck, I found it powerful, both emotionally and aesthetically. Immediately afterwards. I wrote to H-Labor, the labor historians discussion list: "Shown this evening ... on HBO. Let's hope it stays around in one form or another. Powerful, poignant, sad beyond belief, brilliantly done. Says much about the strengths (and some of the weaknesses) of the American working class. I hope there will be discussion here." Nelson Lichtenstein (University of California, Santa Barbara) responded: "I did see it and was very impressed with personal stories and production values, but you know, I think Americans of all classes crave an analysis as well which points of fingers and charts a way forward. Ultimately, this was too sentimental." I replied: My earlier passing reference – "says much about... some of the weaknesses of the American working class" – was intended to be shorthand for such problems. As portrayed, the horrors seem to wash over the workers without resistance or ideas that things don't necessarily have to be the way they are. Skill, hard work, community on the job, – all strengths – offer next to no alternative perspective from which to see their situation. So far as I could tell, the only explanations offered for the catastrophe were 1) stupidity of the bosses; 2) failure to buy American. Not much of an analysis to deal with the new realities. So we are left wondering: how much of this is the film, how much the reality? Who was interviewed, who not, what was said, what not? Are there alternative versions of what happened? What were HBO's requirements? Nonetheless, a moving and powerful film, even with scenes that link a little to such diverse other films as

"Viva Zapata," or "Norma Rae." Reflecting on all this a few days later: The film remains a memorable one for me, and as the above indicates, it raises fundamental questions about consciousness of various kinds in the American working class. But, for reasons that are terribly unclear, it offers no way out, no suggestion of resistance, no hint of any disagreement among the workers about how to deal with this catastrophe – as if having had a history of immersion in such core American values as hard work would save us all. This is of no use to us today. As an afterthought, I reviewed my "Pop Front Culture: I Dreamed I Saw MTV Last Night," "The Nation," October 18, 1986, in which I criticized various left documentaries, including James Klein and Julia Reichert, "Seeing Red" (1983): "There is little sense of the complexity of the past and little confrontation between conflicting views... The simple repetition of pieties and platitudes by people who were 'there' is not history." "The Last Truck" is a chilling record of horror – and valuable as such. But we need to do more than record horror. Jesse Lemisch