

Momentous Right to Work Showdown Recalled

New Biography Retells Film Director's Battle Over 'One Dollar'

The Ten Commandments, *King of Kings*, *Union Pacific*, and *The Greatest Show on Earth* (winner of the 1952 Oscar for Best Picture) are just a few of the 70 movies that have helped immortalize director Cecil B. DeMille to audiences, critics, and historians here and abroad.

His innovations in the development of real sets and the use of close-ups as well as his all-star casts and showmanship have left a mark on the film industry that hasn't faded even today, nearly half-a-century after his passing.

But Right to Work supporters across America remember Mr. DeMille for yet another legacy that is still more important. This Right to Work legacy is recalled, briefly but vividly, in *Cecil B. DeMille's Hollywood*, a new biography by film historian Robert S. Birchard.

'My Union Was Demanding . . . That I Cancel My Vote With My Dollar'

As Mr. Birchard writes in Chapter 67, "Unconquered," this legacy began in August 1944, when Mr. DeMille received a notice from the bosses of the American Federation of Radio Artists (AFRA) union warning that AFRA members would be "assessed" one dollar each to fight California ballot Proposition 12.

Proposition 12 was a Right to Work measure that would have outlawed compulsory unionism in California.

Members who refused to pay the forced "assessment" would be kicked out of the union. Under the federal labor law



Mr. DeMille famously refused to fork over a \$1 union political "fee" to keep his Right to Work.

of the time, this meant they would be barred from working in radio.

Mr. DeMille knew that getting blackballed by AFRA union bosses would cost him \$100,000 a year, the then-princely salary he earned as the host of the *Lux Radio Theatre*.

But as a strong supporter of Proposition 12, Mr. DeMille opposed the assessment. And to him, it was also a matter of principle.

"[H]ere my union was demanding that I pay \$1 into a political campaign fund to persuade other citizens to vote against Proposition 12; was demanding in a word that I cancel my vote with my dollar,"

Mr. DeMille later wrote.

"Even if I were opposed to Proposition 12, I asked myself, did my union, did any organization, have the right to impose a compulsory political assessment upon any citizen, under pain of the loss of his right to work?"

Hollywood Director Became A Tireless Crusader For Right to Work Cause

As Mr. Birchard writes, Mr. DeMille was soon suspended by AFRA. He made his last *Lux Radio Theatre* broadcast on January 22, 1945. But that wasn't the end.

Two months later, friends of Mr. DeMille purchased radio air time so that he could recount, in a nationwide broadcast, exactly why he was fired.


The response, as Mr. DeMille wrote in his memoirs, was "overwhelming." Letters "came from every part of the country and from every fighting front where Americans were still at war."

He added that many of the most touching letters "came from union members or their wives. The gist of all of them was much the same: 'Do something to keep what has happened to you from happening to the rest of us.'"

As heartening as these letters were, they also "created a problem." Many citizens sent money -- \$1, \$5, \$10, "in some instances as little as a dime, all they could afford, for me to use to fight the power that could cut off a man's livelihood if he refused to pay its dictates."

Having been entrusted with an unexpected responsibility, Mr. DeMille decided to establish the pro-Right to Work DeMille Foundation for Political Freedom in September 1945.

This organization was one of the key precursors of the National Right to Work Committee, which was established in 1955 and has battled, with ever-growing success, for the individual employee's freedom of choice since then.

Of course, the freedom Cecil B. DeMille fought so selflessly to safeguard has yet to become a reality for the millions of working Americans who, even today, must fork over forced dues or "fees" to an unwanted union in order to keep their jobs. The Committee and its members will not rest until the free choice of every American employee is protected. 

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