



## MIGRANT CONFLICT IN JOHN STEINBECK'S "IN DUBIOUS BATTLE"

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### ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the migrant laborers conflict in their journey. John Steinbeck's novel was based on real-life experiences, which brought him in direct contact with migrant labor and labor organizers. Steinbeck was more interested in exploring the human dilemma than in taking a political position on a specific event. Steinbeck would continue to be relevant with a labor conflict between migrant apple pickers and the local growers association as the backdrop. The usual repressive measures have been used against these migrants shooting jailing without charge, refusal of trial by jury, torture and beating by night riders. But even in the short time that these American migrants have been out here there has been a change.

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American literature has offered many facets to world literature and covered themes and aspects such as adventures, religion, philosophy, slavery, and in short an entire gamut of human experience. The stock market crash of 1929 only made matters worse. Banks were forced to foreclose on mortgages and collect debts. Unable to pay their creditors, many farmers lost their property and were forced to find other work. But doing so proved very difficult, since the nation's unemployment rate had skyrocketed, peaking at nearly twenty-five percent in 1933.

After a rocky beginning his works showed his interest in earthbound subjects and the means of life and survival. John Steinbeck was a keen observer and chronicler of the changes that were taking place around him. Eventually he dealt with the agricultural

matters so long that he was recognized as an expert of rural affairs.

Migrants attaches the particulars about the attention of the migrant in California, their adaptability to the situation, adjustment with the rich owners and the migrants spirit of sharing ideas, thoughts and things. It was observed that the migratory movement to the west contributes to the ascertaining of new social values and to the establishment of new family roles.

Before, drafting the story, Steinbeck wanted his readers to identify themselves with the migrants and to feel their enhancing enduring strength, despite their loss and suffering. Migration had become a common phenomenon in many parts of our contemporary world. Migration mean a movement, or a journey or wander for a significant

distance by a large group of people who have been displaced from their original homeland, but who are bound together by some kind of common identity - national, ethnic, religious and so on.

Steinbeck's *In Dubious Battle* his interest in the common people but took a deeper and darker turn. Throughout the 1930's California was affected by strikes throughout the state. In this novel he explored organized labor's turbulent crusade in California's pea -picking industry. His novel was based on real-life experiences, which brought him in direct contact with migrant labor and labor organizers. Steinbeck was more interested in exploring the human dilemma than in taking a political position on a specific event. Thus a small labor dispute in California orchard became the symbol of man's eternal, bitter warfare with himself.

*In Dubious Battle* depicts the great depression with the worst economic slump that had ever existed in the United States. This novel clearly portrays the socio and economic environment in which the migrant workers were evolving the difficulties to sustain and maintain adequate existence of life. This economic depression was lasted for more than decade. The exploitation of one group by another is the very essence of capitalism. The main cause of migrate on reflected with the large group of peasants and farmers because of their low pay and poor housing and unemployment.

Steinbeck's fictional work, *In Dubious Battle* describes the account of a strike by agricultural laborers in order to better their living conditions. One can see that the endless pursuit of material possessions increases the disparity of the American population between affluent landlords and poor farmers. Therefore, this discrepancy creates the poverty of farmers who are obliged to borrow money from the rich. One can remark that landowners avail of this situation to behave dishonestly. Consequently, man is no more the cure of man because everyone tries jealously to gain the maximum of possession to the detriment of someone else. This frame of mind turns the American culture into an individualistic society. This individuality was often the source of all difficulties happening to the migrant workers as well as for all

immigrants who plan to come to the supposed Promised Land California.

The main plot of the novel took place in the apple orchards of California during the depression period. It revolves around the actions of two communist radicals of Mac and Jim. He meets Mac and was taken under his wing. Initially Jim's only duties are typing letters and other various petty odd-jobs. This bought out a lot of changes , Mac learns of frustration over wage cuts of some apple pickers in the Torgas Valley and sees a chance to "get a good ruckus going"(IDB 37) and Jim's first real activity.

Once they arrived the valley, Mac and Jim took up their job in a luck coming across with one of the pickers daughters going into the labor. By helping the girl they earned the trust of the other apple pickers and are taken into the group. Then they proceeded to go orchards with the other men in hopes to promote a strike. They eventually got into some of the men's heads and the idea of a strike started to circulate and they got close to some of the natural leaders of the group. They finally broke the strike and Mac does a lot to get workers organized and work together. These are the various incidents that involved the strikers and orchard owners. This made Jim to involve more and got into the work.

Steinbeck would continue to be relevant with a labor conflict between migrant apple pickers and the local growers association as the backdrop against which Jim Nolan becomes involved in the labor movement and rapid maturity with the organizational fieldwork for the Party before meeting an early and violent death.

After being accepted as a Party member, Jim is mentored by Mac McLeod, an experienced field worker, who the Party sends to take advantage of a wage conflict between apple pickers and their bosses in the Torgas Valley. Mac takes Jim along to give him hands-on training in fieldwork.

From the beginning, Mac tells Jim they have to be alert and take advantage of any opportunity given them to get the men to accept them and allow themselves to be organized, and Mac has a genius for recognizing opportunities. When he learns the daughter-in-law of London, the unofficial leader of

one group of men, is about to give birth at the pickers' primitive camp, he risks the girl's life to exploit the situation and ingratiate himself with London. Using that relationship, Mac convinces the workers on three ranches to go out on strike against the growers, then secures private land for the strikers to camp on and brings in a doctor who sometimes works for the Party to set up the camp and oversee sanitary conditions.

Although Jim is eager to get involved in the strike, for the most part Mac uses him only to mix in with the men and find out how they feel about what is going on. After Jim goes out with a group of pickets and is wounded, Mac keeps him closer than ever, but all the time Jim is watching and learning how Mac manipulates men, and he is becoming as single-minded about putting the Party's needs above the needs of individual men as Mac himself is.

Finally, an act of vigilantism against the man who has let the striker's camp on his land ends their welcome, and without a place for the men to stay, the strike is doomed. The only questions are whether the strikers will stay and fight as long as they are able or whether they will just quietly break up and go away.

Mac and Jim are tricked into going out alone into the orchard, where a vigilante ambush awaits them. Mac realizes their danger too late, and Jim pays with his life. Seeing another opportunity to revive the faltering strike, Mac brushes his emotions about his friend's death aside and takes Jim's body back to the camp, placing it on a platform where the strikers can see it and using it to rally them to remain united.

Steinbeck replied, in response to the critics' estimations about the location, "I have usually avoided using actual places to avoid hurting feelings, for, although I rarely use a person or a story as it is- neighbors love only too well to attribute them to someone... as for the valley in *Dubious Battle* it is a composite valley as it is a composite strike" (Benson 298). More important than pinpointing the actual location is that the similarities between the novel's events and various strikes in California attest to the poor working conditions for farm labors that they were obviously rampant in 1930's. The underhanded deeds of the Growers Association and vigilantes in

the Torgas Valley were unfortunately all too real in many California towns, as Steinbeck witnessed firsthand while travelling and collecting stories from labor organizers and migrant workers during this period. The events of the novel could have taken place almost anywhere in central California as perpetuating injustice against the migrant workers seemed common place. This work is considered as one of the most courageous and desperately honest books that have appeared in a long time. It is also both dramatically and realistically, the best strike and labor novel to come out of contemporary economic social unrest.

He also examines the ever- widening scope of its destructive power becomes a central focus of human attempt to reconcile their self-destructive tendencies with their tendency of great compassion and love from a multitude of perspectives.

An important aspect, the difference between the two characters and the strikers, Jim and Mac's hunger is of different kind from the workers plight. A literal hunger for edible food and a personal, emotional hunger for the action the work provide. This difference, separates them from the group whose hunger is basically physical, although the workers have ideas of their own too and cannot be merely treated as men with stomach, as Doc , the camp doctor observes that Mac overlooks the possibility of these men only being commanded by their hunger as " you practical men always lead practical men with stomachs. And something always gets out of hand, they don't follow the rules of common sense and you practical men either deny or refuse to think about it"(IDB 133).

To the fact observed that Jim and Mac do not arise as natural leaders from the apple pickers community, they are mere strangers who forced their way into group of workers but who never really became a part of it. Furthermore, unlike the workers, who have a closer relationship to land, the two leaders came together from town and can only understand the strike rationally.

Attempts to organize have been met with a savagery from the large growers beyond anything yet attempted. The usual repressive measures have been used against these migrants shooting jailing without charge, refusal of trial by jury, torture and

beating by night riders. But even in the short time that these American migrants have been out here there has been a change. It is understood that they are being attacked not because they want higher wages, not because they are Communists, but simply because they want to organize. And to the men, since this defines the thing not to be allowed, it also defines the thing that is completely necessary to the safety of the workers.

The effect has been far from that desired. Now in California anger instead of fear. The stupidity of the large grower has changed terror into defensive fury. The granges, working close to the soil and to the men, and knowing the temper of the men of this new race, have tried to put through wages that will allow a living, however small. But the large growers, the only group making a considerable profit from agriculture, are devoting their money to tear gas and rifle ammunition. The men will organize and the large growers will meet organization with force. It is easy to prophesy this. There is tension in the valley, and fear for the future.

It is fervently to be hoped that the great group of migrant workers so necessary to the harvesting of California's crops may be given the right to live decently, that they may not be so badgered, tormented, and hurt that in the end they become avengers of the hundreds of thousands who have been tortured and starved before them. Steinbeck purposefully gave the novel a dark and violent tone to realistically portray labor disputes.

This novel is as well as a quite good illustration pinpointing the American Society was profoundly divided society during the Depression era. The distribution of wealth were scattered in 1920's and it was disparately between the rich and the middle class between the industry and agriculture and the imbalance of wealth resulted in unstable economy and migration of farmers for better living. Industry and agriculture were engulfed by a rising tide of bankruptcy. On a human level, the most visible measure that the world economy has failed the tremendous and unprecedented surge in unemployment. The workers can no longer keep on living that life of misery and utter destitution, they endeavor to demonstrate out in the streets of the town. Seeing that situation is not in favor with them,

the owners urge the police, the army and the courts to react against that demonstration. Then, all the underprivileged class of workers are banned to wander or to enter the city where the owners live *In Dubious Battle*. When the workers intend to lead the procession and also keep on striking because they just want to be bettered so that they might live a decent life.

With a raising intolerance towards groups or individuals who perceived to be economic rivals or outsiders many people began to blame their neighbors for the economic collapse, be it other countries or completing economic groups, individualists, bankers, farmers and workers. Because society expected man to provide for his family, the trauma of the Great Depression was more often severe for men than women. Many men agreed that women, especially married women should not be hired while their husbands were hired. Yet the percentage of women in the workforce actually increased slightly during the Depression as women took jobs to replace their husbands' lost pay checks or to supplement spouses' reduced wages. In some cases, married women workers were forced to resign from the workplace.

The author brings out the harsh condition of migrant worker's camps and exposes us to makeshift abodes people suffer from starvation and illness while sleeping in the woods with negligible sanitation. He presented the workers as selfish, cowardly, greedy, dirty, cruel, lazy or plain stupid. It is all evident by the varied degree of characters that Steinbeck made a strict analysis of people migration. Thus novel deals with a cliffhanger between the conflict of labors and owners. The labor battle rages with migrant's significance and their value of life.

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