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# The Disney Strike of 1941: From the Animators' Perspective

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# The Disney Strike of 1941: From the Animators' Perspective

An Undergraduate Honors Project Presented

By

Lisa Johnson

To

The Department of History

Approved:

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# The Disney Strike of 1941: From the Animators' Perspective

By

Lisa Johnson

An Honors Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for Honors

in

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## Introduction

On May 28<sup>th</sup>, 1941, seventeen artists were escorted out of the Walt Disney Studios in Burbank, California. They were fired for pro-union activity. Later that evening, fellow outraged employees gathered and made stirring speeches in support of their colleagues and urged for swift action. Three-hundred workers went on strike the next day. The few who had remained loyal to the corporation and the management gathered and toasted to a quick end to the strike. This end was not imminent, however, and as the weeks dragged on, the strike turned very ugly. Disney had worked hard to create a family atmosphere among his workers; so why did they betray him and go on strike?

This study identifies and explores the tensions that led to the Disney Strike of 1941. The main goal of this paper is to demonstrate that this strike exhibited different problems than what is typical of strikes during the 1930s and early 1940s. This work examines these issues with a more critical eye. This work also addresses the problems with the existing historiography surrounding the strike and determines why these problems exist. There are clear indications that the animation industry experienced different problems in comparison with most industries of the time with regard to issues of intellectual property rights, screen credit, and professional differences over standards of excellence. Intrusive management practices contributed to tensions between workers and exacerbated conflict on the shop floor. There was also a growing sense of disparity between management and the workers, particularly as the Disney Studio expanded. These points of contention are not seen within the traditional historiography pertaining to

the Disney Studios or Disney himself, but are seen within the reflections of animators themselves. These are problems that are more common in more recent labor history.

This paper is divided into four sections. Chapter One presents a narrative of the strike itself. Chapter Two addresses the question: Why is this strike different? Chapter Three scrutinizes the most recent historiography and questions its current validity. The Afterword explores the various roadblocks to the researching process with regard to this particular topic.

This paper seeks to contribute to the current scholarship on the topic by analyzing the testimonies of various animators. Also, interviews with Disney animator, writer, and union leader Tom Sito help to clarify issues of professionalism within the Disney workplace and are also useful in offering an informed perspective of the available historiography. Resources that deal specifically with the subject of the Disney strike lack the depth that is necessary for giving a well-balanced and accurate description of the causes of the strike. At times, authors mention information but seem to be missing the implications of what the information may mean. This work is meant to further the study of animation labor history as a genre and also expand the margin of labor issues that confronted workers between the labor struggles of the 1930's and World War II.

## The Strike

The Walt Disney Studio has entertained generations of Americans and has created a cultural phenomenon that has embedded itself deeply within the nation's popular culture. Many Americans associate the Disney Corporation with a happy-go-lucky atmosphere and Walt Disney with the image of an inventive genius. The strike of 1941 has conveniently been erased from the common American historical memory. The 1941 strike took place in the context of a rapidly changing and developing industry.

Animation rests at the heart of the enterprise and Disney's studio is infamous for devising a large-scale system that created high-quality animation at a fast production rate. Before the invention of this system, animation was treated as a moving comic strip. It was in black and white and did not have sound. There were no features-length films, instead there were generally short little animated vignettes shown with other various live action footage and news reports as well as vaudeville entertainment. Some smaller studios [such as Hearst, Leon Schlesinger (later known as Warner Bros), Fleischer, MGM] succeeded by creating likeable characters, generally cats. However, these characters were crudely drawn and did not exhibit any complex character development of personality. Animation was generally jerky and of poor quality. <sup>1</sup>

Walt Disney was the first to truly develop the profession of animation. He was the first to have an animation studio that put forth great amounts of money to train his

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<sup>1</sup> Shamus Culhane, *Talking Animals and Other People: The Autobiography of a Legendary Animator* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 136-137. Neal Gabler, *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination* (New York: Random House Inc., 2006), 116-119, 230-233. Tom Sito, *Drawing the Line: The Untold Story of the Animation Unions from Bosko to Bart Simpson* (The University of Kentucky Press, 2006), 13-14 and 79-80.

workers. He was the first to use technology (different cameras, the moviola, etc.) in the process of animating on such a grand scale. He was also the first to bring a great amount of prestige to the career of being an animator. The Disney Studio grew in power and influence and brought animation to a new level of competition.<sup>2</sup>

The Disney studio witnessed labor problems that were unlike previous labor struggles of the past decade. Due to the creative nature of the work, some of the labor struggles that the workers experienced were different from those of other organized labor groups. Industrial unions that included the semi-skilled and unskilled workers (for example: the steel workers, the automotive workers, or the textile workers) tended to focus on wage scales and safety within the workplace. The struggles of the animation industry dealt with intellectual differences, recognition, and workplace atmosphere. These issues are more common and more acceptable in the mindset of labor relations today. The importance of many of the problems the animators faced was unrecognized when they were taking place because these were not viewed as typical sources of contention that could be argued with an employer.

The Disney Cartoonists' Strike of 1941 was a decisive and crucial event for the animation industry. It occurred at a time when the Disney Studio was in the process of expanding and developing various technological innovations (such as using different cameras and animation techniques). In 1937, the animation crew finished *Snow White*, a feature that pushed them all to their limits. They worked long hours, many of which were spent frustrated and rushed. They hardly left the studio. The studio promised to reward

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<sup>2</sup> Tom Sito, interview by the author, email, 12 September 2007.



all of their efforts, but when the time came, no reward was in sight. Rumor had it that some of the workers received bonuses while others did not which created great discontentment among the workers and resentment towards upper management.

The workers and management moved from the old studio at Hyperion Avenue in Silver Lake to a new building in Burbank California in 1939. Within a matter of years, the studio changed from “a handful of artists working in day-to-day collaboration with Walt [Disney]”<sup>3</sup> to a workforce of more than eight hundred Disney artists<sup>4</sup>. Such progress requires a lot of resources, particularly money. As the infrastructure of the studio expanded, the company was also experiencing the pressures of World War II on foreign markets. In spring of 1940, the sharp decline in the European markets led to a million dollar loss on the movie *Pinocchio*. The studio lost even more money after *Pinocchio* due to the fact that it required a new, specially designed sound system, FantaSound. This sound system was incredibly expensive and very few theaters were willing to upgrade. By February of 1941, the studio owed Bank of America over two and a half million dollars and its loan agreement allowed them to borrow about twenty thousand more.<sup>5</sup> Disney, himself, refused to sell stock which led to a further deterioration of the studio’s monetary situation.<sup>6</sup> It was a tumultuous time which excited and scared many. Uncertainty was in the air and there was the distinct feeling of uneasiness that comes with rapid change.

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<sup>3</sup> Bob Thomas, *Walt Disney : an American original* (New York : Simon and Schuster,1976), 165.

<sup>4</sup> Tom Sito, *Drawing the Line*, 106.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Barrier, *The Animated Man : a Life of Walt Disney* (Berkeley : University of California Press, 2007), 163.

<sup>6</sup> Barrier, *Animated Man*, 152.

As the studio expanded the workers' discontent grew. They differed with management over intellectual property rights, screen credit, and professional differences over standards of excellence. They were also very weary of the long hours spent in a very tense and sometimes hostile work environment. Walt Disney also felt the pressure. The business grew beyond the small community that Disney had once managed and he found it impossible to be directly involved in all of the undertakings of the studio. As time went on, Disney became increasingly aware of his growing lack of personal control over his pictures, he became more tyrannical and more determined than ever to prove that he was in charge. He was also fearful of the growing labor agitation within the animation industry. In response to this, he created a company union, known as the Disney Federation of Screen Cartoonists, which did little but serve as a puppet union to keep those who complained at bay. The result of all of these tensions was a showdown with Art Babbitt, a head animator.<sup>7</sup>

Babbitt originally was the head of the Disney Federation of Screen Cartoonists. Leonard Genofski, the Disney Federation of Screen Cartoonists' lawyer as well as the legal representative for the Screen Writers' Guild advised Babbitt that if they were going to form a union they better "behave as a union behaves". This was taken by Babbitt to mean that they would not always be able to have the luxury of being polite and they

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<sup>7</sup> Arthur Babbitt was born in 1907. He was an "animator, director, union activist, [and] teacher". He is known mainly for his creation of Goofy, Geppetto in Pinocchio, the Stork in Dumbo, and the Wicked Queen in Snow White. Originally he was going for pre-med at Columbia University and was using odd art jobs to pay the bills. He got a job at Van Beuren Studio then became an animator at Terrytoons. After seeing *Skeleton Dance*, he decided to go work at the Disney studio. He was one of the highest paid animators and he had the highest respect of many of the Disney artists. He lived in plush conditions but his talent earned him every penny. He was critical to the development of the studio training programs and this earned him the respect of many of the newer generation of animators. He had won over 100 awards and contributed greatly to the art of animation.

would have to demand what they desired. On this advice, Babbitt called a meeting with the company lawyer Gunther Lessing<sup>8</sup> and Walt's brother and business partner Roy Disney<sup>9</sup> and asked that the inkers be given a two dollar raise in pay. Roy was furious and told Babbitt "You keep your nose out of our business or we'll cut it off!"<sup>10</sup> It became clear to Babbitt that this union only served as a means of keeping the workers from becoming involved in industry-wide unionism. Disney artist and union leader, Tom Sito, knew Babbitt personally and observed that he "sincerely desired to be a spokesman for his fellow artists".<sup>11</sup>

Herbert Sorrell, a union organizer eager to gain more prestige, approached Babbitt.<sup>12</sup> The two decided to organize the Disney workers to join the Screen Cartoonists' Guild. The Screen Cartoon Guild Local 852 (later known as the Screen Cartoonists Guild) was created in 1938 as a local of the Painters, Decorators and Paperhangers Union. The Guild was also allied with the Conference of Studio Unions.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Lessing gained this position because he was one of the people who helped financially back Disney when he first started. He was extremely anti-union and had a certain amount of influence over Walt. Many considered him to be incompetent and felt that he got in the way of solving problems. (Sito, 114)

<sup>9</sup> Roy Disney typically handled the business and financial aspects of the studio. He dealt with the bankers and dealt with the employees who asked for raises.

<sup>10</sup> Klaus Strzyz, *Art Babbit Interview* The Comics Journal #120, March 1988, 77-87.

<sup>11</sup> Sito, *Drawing the Line*, 117.

<sup>12</sup> Sorrell was a labor organizer in Hollywood. He grew up in California and by the age of twelve, he was working in a sewer pipe factory. He then tried boxing and then scenery painting for movie studios as careers but then found his strength in labor organizing. He became business manager of the Motion Picture Painters union, Local 644. He then became head of the Conference of Studio Unions (an International union belonging to the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners and represented the Carpenters, Painters, Cartoonists and several other crafts working for the Studios in Hollywood)\*. His skills as a veteran negotiator were critical to the strike becoming as significant as it was. He used the Disney strike to gain prestige and this worked, as this was valuable experience for the CSU strike that led to Hollywood's Black Friday in 1945.

<sup>13</sup> Tom Sito, *Cartoonist's Unions: A Legacy of Artists Helping Artists – A Survey of Our History*, The Animation Guild, Local 839 < [http://www.animationguild.org/Home/home\\_FRM1.html](http://www.animationguild.org/Home/home_FRM1.html) > (10 August 2007).

Babbitt and Sorrell worked furiously to have the Screen Cartoonists' Guild officially recognized as representative of the workers. They gathered four-hundred union cards out of a staff of five hundred and sixty eligible workers and approached management. Disney responded by gathering "the gang" and begged them not to unionize. First he tried the old "familiar family" approach and then turned to a more patronizing manner.<sup>14</sup> This did not work and in fact, it angered many of the staff. On May 26, 1941, the workers voted to strike and the next day, Disney's backers urged him to talk to his employees but he refused. On May 28<sup>th</sup>, a final negotiation meeting was held however, Disney was not willing to give anything. Herb Sorrell decided to play rough and threatened Disney: "I can make a dustbowl of your studio!"<sup>15</sup> Babbitt and other head animators were immediately fired out of spite.

This action was a clear violation of the National Labor Relations Act which was signed into law in July of 1935 and created the new National Labor Relations Board. The original National Labor Relations Board existed from August of 1933 to July of 1935 and its main function was to mediate labor disputes. This new National Labor Relations Board enforced the rights of workers. It was responsible for holding union elections and for halting unjust labor practices. The validity of this organization was challenged by multiple employers who refused to accept this as law until 1937, when the Supreme Court confirmed its constitutionality. This board established strong guidelines concerning employers' rights to hire and fire workers. It had declared that workers could not be dismissed for union affiliation and that those who were fired were entitled to back

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<sup>14</sup> Sito, *Drawing the Line*, 118.

<sup>15</sup> Sito, *Drawing the Line*, 121.

pay and reinstatement in their positions.<sup>16</sup> In 1941, it was clear that the Wagner Act was in fact constitutional, and Disney could not challenge it. Yet, in a brazen memo to Babbitt, Gunther Lessing clearly stated that the reason for the firings was union activity.<sup>17</sup>

Disney wanted the National Labor Relations Board to decide whether the guild or the American Society of Screen Cartoonists should be recognized.<sup>18</sup> The American Society of Screen Cartoonists had “the same officers and same mail address as its predecessor company union.”<sup>19</sup> On May 28<sup>th</sup>, Disney stated: “This studio will never make a bargain with anybody to bar employees because they do not join this or that organization. You are free to join whatever you wish and we will recognize the properly authenticated majority as the bargaining agent.”<sup>20</sup> This was hardly the case however. Disney was depending on the idea that his stature in the entertainment industry would lead the National Labor Relations Board to rule in favor of the American Society of Screen Cartoonists because this union was what Babbitt called “company dominated.”<sup>21</sup> If the American Society of Screen Cartoonists won the battle, Disney would not have to do any bargaining whatsoever and everything would remain the same. The workers would just have to accept the firings and any complaints that they may have had. The Screen Cartoonists’ Guild, in response, asserted that anyone who went to work would be fined once they gained control of the studio.

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<sup>16</sup> Eric Arnesen (ed), *National Labor Relations Board*, Encyclopedia of U.S. Labor and Working-Class History Volume 2 G-N, 966.

<sup>17</sup> Sito, *Drawing the Line*, 121.

<sup>18</sup> “Disney Says Studio to Stay Open Despite Strike Threat,” *Los Angeles Times*, 28 May 1941, 1A.

<sup>19</sup> Wade Sampson, “Another Look Back at the 1941 Disney Studio Strike” (an excerpt from “Strike At Disney”, *The Screen Actor Magazine*, June 1941)

<[http://jimhillmedia.com/blogs/wade\\_sampson/print/1204.aspx](http://jimhillmedia.com/blogs/wade_sampson/print/1204.aspx)> (8 August 2007).

<sup>20</sup> “Disney Says Studio to Stay Open Despite Strike Threat,” *Los Angeles Times*, 28 May 1941, 1A.

<sup>21</sup> “Walt Disney Cartoonists Strike in Bargaining Dispute,” *Los Angeles Times*, 29 May 1941, A1.

As of May 29<sup>th</sup>, the studio and the Screen Cartoonists' Guild officials compared numbers of workers in the bargaining unit and their numbers did not match. The studio officials asserted that out of one thousand two hundred and fourteen employees, only three hundred and nine were absent and they also emphasized that many of them stayed home out of fear of the strikers.<sup>22</sup> However, in a memo, Lessing stated that two-hundred and ninety four workers went on strike.<sup>23</sup> The Screen Cartoonists' Guild declared that five hundred and fifty people were involved and three hundred and fifty to four hundred did not go to work.<sup>24</sup> The studio hired photographers to take pictures of the strikers as a form of intimidation and the Screen Cartoonists' Guild distributed circulars that, yet again, warned those who did not strike that they would be fined. Cartoonists planned pickets for the theaters that exhibited Disney films and an effigy of one of the executives at the studio was hanged.<sup>25</sup>

The non-striking laborers petitioned the National Labor Relations Board to hold an election so that they could determine who they wanted to represent them.<sup>26</sup> On June 21<sup>st</sup>, 472 striking workers made claims that were heard by the Deputy Labor Commissioner.<sup>27</sup> The month of July began with an attempt to create difficulties for the strikers when Disney placed an ad in the Hollywood trade papers:

To my employees on strike: I believe you are entitled to know why you are not working today. I offered your leaders the following terms: All

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<sup>22</sup> "Walt Disney Cartoonists Strike in Bargaining Dispute," *Los Angeles Times*, 29 May 1941, 1A.

<sup>23</sup> Barrier, *The Animated Man*, 170.

<sup>24</sup> "Walt Disney Cartoonists Strike in Bargaining Dispute," *Los Angeles Times*, 29 May 1941, 1A.

<sup>25</sup> "Cartoonists Plan Pickets for Theaters," *Los Angeles Times*, 1 June 1941, 2. "Effigy Hanged at Disney Plant," *Los Angeles Times*, 6 June 1941, 16.

<sup>26</sup> "Disney Cartoonists Ask for Election," *Los Angeles Times*, 18 June 1941, A13.

<sup>27</sup> "Strikers Claims on Disney Heard," *Los Angeles Times*, 21 June, 1941, 2.

employees to be reinstated to former positions; No discrimination;  
Recognition of your union; Closed shop; 50% retroactive pay for the time  
on strike-something without precedent in the American labor movement;  
Increase in wages to make yours the highest salary scale in the cartoon  
industry; Two weeks' vacation with pay. I believe you have been misled  
and misinformed about the real issues underlying the strike at the studio. I  
am positively convinced that Communist agitation, leadership, and activities  
have brought about this strike, and has persuaded you to reject this fair and  
equitable settlement. I address you in this manner because I have no other  
means of reaching you.<sup>28</sup>

Disney was clearly trying to destroy the public image of the strikers and force them to  
make a settlement. This letter placed the blame on outsiders. Management was clearly  
unsettled by the fact that there was so much discontent among the workers and appeared  
to be looking for an excuse to blame the strike on. Perhaps the company thought that  
they would create disunity among the strikers by publishing the letter. In any case, they  
underestimated the will of the strikers and their sense of unity. The next day, the  
employees responded:

Dear Walt, If you meant what you said in your trade paper announcement  
yesterday, we believe this strike can be settled. You made an offer of  
settlement. As a basis for negotiations the offer sounds reasonable. Your  
letter in the trade papers was our first written notice of your offer. Prior to

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<sup>28</sup> Sito, *Drawing the Line*, 137.

that we were told by Willie Bioff that you would agree to certain terms. We cannot accept the intervention of a character like Bioff, who is now under indictment for extortion and who has been a disgrace to Organized Labor. We meet openly at 10AM every morning across the street from the Studio. You are invited to come over to speak to us at any time. The door is open for negotiations except at Willie Bioff's ranch. We address you in this manner because we have no other means of reaching you. Sincerely, Your Striking Employees.

The strikers were not at all jostled by Disney's actions and, if anything, this reaffirmed their beliefs that they were being manipulated and needed to change the way things were done within the corporation. Willie Bioff was a known organized crime figure that gained his reputation and prestige by using strong-armed tactics to control unions. He exercised control over a good number of unions and he extorted money from producers by threatening strikes if he did not get paid off. He attempted to intervene and extended invitations to work out a settlement to the guild leadership. Upon discovering (en route to the negotiations) that the address on these invitations was that of the Bioff ranch, the leaders all insisted that the drivers (Bioff's men) stop the car and they refused to go any further. Interestingly enough, he was federally indicted the next day on charges of extortion.<sup>29</sup> Disney continually asserted that he had nothing to do with this and that Bioff acted independently. The strikers refused to be manipulated any more and they refused to have their public image tainted.

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<sup>29</sup> Sito, *Drawing the Line*, 136.



On July 5<sup>th</sup>, the United States government officially recognized the strike and sent a conciliator to help work out the issues.<sup>30</sup> Four days later, nine of the AFL unions (who were experiencing various economic and social pressures) split from the strikers and went back to work for Disney. These unions included the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees, International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, Teamster's Union, Plasterer's Union, Alliance of Soundmen, Alliance Laboratory Men, Alliance Utility Workers, Alliance Projectionists, and Alliance Cameramen.<sup>31</sup> On July 15<sup>th</sup>, Lessing sent a telegram to Washington to blame the strike on Communism.<sup>32</sup> Mediations began a week and a half later, and the non-striking workers threatened to strike if they were not included in the negotiations and if they were "not given proper consideration".<sup>33</sup>

Disney employees wrote back and forth to the *Los Angeles Times*. R.F. Fredericks wrote on behalf of those employees who were still working. He stated that it was "the American way" to be anti-union and work out the differences within the company instead of through an outside agent.<sup>34</sup> Bob Gunther wrote on behalf of the strikers. He asserted that the only settlement that was brought to them was one that was negotiated by indicted racketeer, William Bioff. He said that the strikers refused to negotiate with dishonest men.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> "Conciliator Acts in Disney Strike," *Los Angeles Times*, 5 July 1941, A3.

<sup>31</sup> "Nine Unions End Strike at Disneys," *Los Angeles Times*, 9 July 1941, 10.

<sup>32</sup> "Disney Strike Tangle," *Los Angeles Times*, 15 July 1941, A2.

<sup>33</sup> "Mediation Planned in Disney Strike," *Los Angeles Times*, 25 July 1941, 2.

<sup>34</sup> "Letters to the Times – R.F. Fredericks," *Los Angeles Times*, 6 June 1941, A4.

<sup>35</sup> "Letters to the Times – Bob Gunther," *Los Angeles Times*, 16 July 1941, A4.

It was asserted that Willie Bioff was a henchman of Al Capone. Willie Bioff and George Browne made arrangements with various studio heads to gain control over the IATSE (The International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees). It was believed that the Disney Studio was working very closely with Bioff and Browne.

On July 29<sup>th</sup>, the strike ended on a much quieter note than when it began due to the involvement of the federal mediators and the defection of the AFL unions. Walt Disney was conveniently sent on a goodwill mission to South America by his brother Roy. It was felt that he would not help matters.<sup>36</sup> In the aftermath of the strike there were pay raises and those who were fired were rehired due to the resulting negotiations. However, this did not fix the greater underlying problems that the strikers had. Disney could never forgive them and eventually they were all weeded out of the company or left because of the antagonistic atmosphere. The situation in the world war escalated and, as the United States joined the war, the studio had to come together under army occupation to produce war films and propaganda. Although temporarily united, the tensions still ran underneath the surface and many long-time friendships were damaged beyond repair. There was a clear divide between those who went out on strike and those who crossed the picket line for years after. The familial atmosphere was long gone and the work atmosphere became more formal, cold, and corporate as time went on. The workers never forgot the “civil war of animation.”

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In addition to this, Babbitt was arrested on false charges of carrying a concealed weapon on the day that he was scheduled to go before the National Labor Relations Board to give his deposition about why they wanted recognition and “how the studio was thwarting [them]”. When he was released, Walt gave him a “fatherly lecture to the effect that if [he] lived right and thought right everything would be marvelous”. (Klaus Strzyz, *Art Babbit Interview* The Comics Journal #120, March 1988. Pg 77-87.)

<sup>36</sup> “1941:Disney Cartoonists’ Strike,” (1 November 2006) <<http://libcom.org/history/1941-disney-cartoonists-strike>> , 15 October 2007.

The Unheard Struggles for Control: Intellectual Property Rights, Screen Credit,  
Workplace Environment, and Differing Standards of Excellence

The Strike of 1941 was unlike any other strike during the time period. Strikes of the time period typically called for an eight hour work day, safe conditions, and a minimum wage. In 1941 alone, the six most prominent strikes occurred in the industries of street railways, shipbuilding, aircraft, steel, soft coal, and naval equipment. These primarily dealt with struggles over the amount of union control, struggles between the American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organizations, and wages.<sup>37</sup> Animation was a different type of industry and it experienced different dilemmas. Although animation had seen a few labor struggles, nothing compared to the bitterness and longevity seen during the Disney strike. Other animation labor struggles were displayed on a much smaller scale, affecting few workers, and were short-lived. These previous labor struggles in the animation industry were not nearly as complicated and the workers were not nearly as embittered. There are a few main threads of thought that explain why the Disney strike was different from other strikes of this time period. This strike was unique due to the nature of the product that was being produced, the sheer magnitude of the Disney Studio workforce, the tensions of an emerging profession (unclear expectations and differing standards of excellence), the hierarchy that developed within the studio, a lack of screen credit, and the growing disparity between management and the workers. A majority of these issues deal with struggles for control within the

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<sup>37</sup> Joel Sieidman, *Six Significant Strikes of 1941*, <<http://newdeal.feri.org/survey/sg41578.htm>> (15 March 2008).

workplace and issues of intellectual property. The problems were created largely as a result of Walt Disney's attitude towards his workers.

It is important to begin this story with the animator who knew Disney best in his earliest years as an entrepreneur, future animation pioneer Ub Iwerks. Iwerks met Disney in Kansas City. Both men were artists trying to make a living. They decided to go into business together and thus Iwerks-Disney Commercial Artists was born. The company went bankrupt and Iwerks were in search of steady employment while Disney continued with his entrepreneurial pursuits. The two men joined up for a few failed ventures usually involving a small work crew with Disney and Iwerks at the helm. Disney had the entrepreneurial skills and story ideas, and Iwerks had the technical skills. Eventually they reached success when the Disney Brothers Cartoon Studio was born. Iwerks became the highest paid artist on the staff and became top animator. In this setting, Walt Disney created the stories, Roy Disney handled financial difficulties, and Iwerks was the one with the talent to make the magic happen.<sup>38</sup>

Unfortunately, as Iwerks was busy developing the "smooth" and "flowing" style of animation that the Disney studio would later perfect, Disney was set on selling his own name. He typically took credit for all of the work. When writing to distributors, he would state "I will (animate/produce/etc something)" when it was really the rest of the staff who was doing all of the work. Meanwhile, as Disney was selling his own name, Charles Mintz (the new head of Winkler studio) was busy trying to steal away all of Disney's artists to improve his own studio in 1928. With Disney's best interests at heart,

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<sup>38</sup> Leslie Iwerks and John Kenworthy, *The Hand Behind the Mouse: An Intimate Biography of the Man Walt Disney Called "The Greatest Animator in the World"*, (Disney Editions, 2001), 1-46.

Iwerks tried to warn him about the problems they were about to face but to no avail.

Only Iwerks and two other apprentice artists refused to go to the Mintz studio.<sup>39</sup>

The few men left had to do something different to save the studio. They had had characters stolen from them by distributors in the past and were determined not to let this occur again. They needed a fresh new idea and a different direction. This led to the creation of Mickey Mouse. Contrary to popular belief, Mickey was not the sole creation of Disney. In fact, Iwerks was the one to create a model for Mickey and he was the only one to animate Mickey in the early stages. In addition to the creation of Mickey, they integrated sound into the cartoons. The films became an instant success.<sup>40</sup>

Very soon, Iwerks and Disney began to have artistic clashes. These were clashes that would seem typical within the studio atmosphere in later years. When the workers would go home for the night, Walt would retime the exposure sheets that Iwerks had drawn up that day. The timing of drawings (or exposure sheets) is critical in animation because it is the timing that suggests ideas and emotions and creates humor. If a particular scene is not timed correctly, the meaning of the sequence can be completely lost. When Iwerks would come back into work, “the rearrangement of his previous day’s work- -coupled with rather cold demands from Walt--began to sting.”<sup>41</sup> Responding with frustration, Iwerks went to Disney stating: “Don’t you ever touch my drawings! These are my drawings and this is how I solve the problems, keep your hands off them!”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Iwerks and Kenworthy, *The Hand Behind the Mouse*, 31-47.

<sup>40</sup> Iwerks and Kenworthy, *The Hand Behind the Mouse*, 47- 68.

<sup>41</sup> Iwerks and Kenworthy, *The Hand Behind the Mouse*, 77.

<sup>42</sup> Iwerks and Kenworthy, *The Hand Behind the Mouse*, 78.

As tensions mounted, Iwerks suddenly found himself in the spotlight with the creation of the loveable character of Mickey Mouse. He was hailed in the newspapers as a creative genius. This obviously strained his relationship with Disney. Iwerks had been granted full drawing credit in the title cards. As a result, he personally received offers to do things such as comic strips of Mickey. He responded in a professional manner by giving these requests to his boss. If Disney agreed to such a request, they were both given credit in a byline. All of this attention surrounding Iwerks began to divert the marketing focus away from the studio and Disney name. The two began to have even more quarrels over artistic issues and the gap between them grew. Disney wanted to push the films out faster and felt they should be focusing on speed. Iwerks pushed for a higher quality. Disney demanded that he “forget a lot of the fancy curves and pretty-looking drawings and devote [his] time to the ACTION....” Eventually, the Mickey cartoons were taken away from Iwerks and were given to Burt Gillet at Disney’s urging, so that the mouse would become “more civilized”.<sup>43</sup> The original Mickey was known to have a slight mean streak and a curiosity that would often get him into trouble; this was how Iwerks had imagined the character. Placing Mickey into the hands of another animator would ensure that Mickey belonged to the studio as a whole and that Iwerks would stop receiving individual attention. It also changed the original design of Mickey to be better suited with what Disney found to be acceptable. This was taken as a slap in the face to Iwerks, who worked very hard to make Mickey as successful as he was.

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<sup>43</sup> Iwerks and Kenworthy, *The Hand Behind the Mouse*, 80-83.

Iwerks did not respond well to this treatment and as Iwerks and Kenworthy state: “The public credit that Walt took, coupled with the criticism he gave, became all too insulting for Ub.” One evening at a Hollywood party, a young boy approached Disney and asked him to draw Mickey. Disney suggested that Iwerks draw the Mickey and he would sign it. In reply to this, he exploded angrily, “Draw your own Mickey!” It seems as though the point that Iwerks was trying to make was that he was aggravated with Walt’s lack of skill and even more annoyed with his imperious behavior. Clearly the relationship between the two men who had so much in common and had much affection for each other at the beginning of their business venture had been torn to pieces. They were no longer business partners or fellow artists, but they had taken the form of domineering boss and frustrated worker. This type of relationship was recreated countless times in the future between Disney and his workers. It was a sad end to a very promising friendship and business venture. On January 21, 1930, Iwerks told Walt’s brother Roy that he was leaving to form his own studio.<sup>44</sup>

The Disney and Iwerks story did not end here. Many left with Iwerks in fear that the Disney studio was nothing without him. His technical genius behind the scenes with regard to his drawing talent, his ability to create mechanical methods of speeding up the animation process, and his reputation as the father of Mickey were all factors that gained him the respect of his fellow workers. For many, Iwerks seemed to be the natural leader to follow. They were all very close however as one worker stated “Walt paid only half

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<sup>44</sup> Iwerks and Kenworthy, *The Hand Behind the Mouse*, 84-86.

the salary for a year or two and I had home expenses.”<sup>45</sup> It seems as though many of these problems that Iwerks had with Disney on a more personal level manifested themselves in later years on a more corporate level. Disney did not understand that his behavior would create a work environment where dissent and discontentment would run rampant. The desertion of Iwerks was the first of many at the Disney Studios.<sup>46</sup>

The Disney Studio managed to recover from the desertion of employees and grew by leaps and bounds with the addition of many novice art students. In 1931, the new addition to the studio on Hyperion Avenue was completed. It seemed as though the studio could do nothing wrong. They continued to perfect the animation process and improve the quality of their films. They stretched the boundaries of animation and continued to break records in entertainment.

The Disney Studio was a developing workplace. There was an influx of new artists into the Disney workforce (mainly to replace the workers that had left with Iwerks). Walt did not want to hire any more established animators because he felt they had poor working habits. He preferred the “kids right out of school” whom the studio could mold.<sup>47</sup> Many of the older and established animators of other studios left in search of the stability and prestige that a career at the Disney Studio would bring. After they defected to work for Disney, they found that they had to start out just like the younger

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<sup>45</sup> Iwerks and Kenworthy, *The Hand Behind the Mouse*, 87.

<sup>46</sup> Iwerks Studio closed in 1936 and Iwerks mainly engaged in commercial work-for-hire. In 1940, Disney asked some of his workers to approach Ub and bring him back. Walt and Ub got past their bitterness and were glad to be back together. They had a mutual respect for each other and they thrived off of the competition between each other. Many of the workers also respected Iwerks for his talent and his accomplishments. Ub had returned right before the strike began. He remained loyal to Disney, yet he was one of the few workers that were not heckled for his decision.

<sup>47</sup> Shamus Culhane, *Talking Animals and Other People: The Autobiography of a Legendary Animator* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 110.



inexperienced workers. Some of them had even greater struggles because their styles of animating were just unsatisfactory and inconsistent with what the studio was looking for.

Many workers were just glad to have a steady job. These workers were suffering during the difficult times of the depression. As the addition to the studio was being built, company lawyer Gunther Lessing gave the workers a speech about poor people during the Depression and how they were all lucky to have a job. Lessing then announced that they would all have to take a fifteen percent cut in their salaries. As sympathetic as the workers were to the economic pinch that the studio was in, they found the situation to be a bit hypocritical.<sup>48</sup> It seemed that the studio had enough money to build a very extravagant studio but did not have enough money to pay its workers.

Often times they all put in long hours with very little reward. Particularly when features were being pushed into production, they were working lots of overtime and they were only given forty cents for dinner in payment for their time.<sup>49</sup> They were promised big rewards but to no avail. Also, when rough pencil tests were shown, it would be during their lunch hour so that they would not be wasting “company time.” In addition to the draining long hours, many of the animators and their teams grew sick of each other.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup>Jack Kinney, *Walt Disney and Assorted Other Characters – An Unauthorized Account of the Early Years at Disney's*, (New York :Harmony Books, 1998), 9-19.

<sup>49</sup> A big-time animator (Fred Moore, Bill Tytla and Art Babbitt) typically made three hundred to four hundred dollars a week. Forty cents was not nearly enough payment for the amount of overtime they were putting in. Before the unions, some assistants were making only twenty five dollars a week while others made more. After the unions became established, typical animators made anywhere between two hundred and four hundred a week.

Steve Hulett, “From Humble Beginnings to the Making of Superstars”, (1 June 1997) <[http://mag.awn.com/?article\\_no=754&ltype=acrmag](http://mag.awn.com/?article_no=754&ltype=acrmag)> (8 May 2008).

<sup>50</sup> Kinney, *Walt Disney and Assorted Other Characters*, 113.

The pay checks that most of the workers received failed to provide for a decent standard of living. Animators Ed Smith passed out from mal-nutrition and his colleague Ben Sharpsteen asked Disney to give Smith a raise. Roy Disney discovered that Bill Herwig had been living in the studio because he could not afford a place of his own and Roy felt badly and gave him a raise. The studio relied heavily on the bonus system at this time. They could get paid as much as \$3.50 for a gag. Quite obviously, this system did not benefit the general workforce. Some became rich while others did not have enough to live on. The bonus system hurt more than the artists' bank accounts. It was put into place to create competition among the workers. The competition that resulted, however, was bitter and resentful. This system was particularly frustrating for those animators who just did not fit the Disney mold. They found themselves shunted to the side, working on projects that they knew would never be produced. This frustration and resentment helped to foster the bitterness seen during the strike.<sup>51</sup>

There was a system in place (which is still in place today) to create either a short or a feature: a film needed an animation team or several teams, which were comprised of the animator, the assistant animator, and the inbetweeners. The animators draw key scenes of action and envision how the entire story will go. They typically use pencil tests and get the general idea of the scene onto paper. Assistant animators have varying responsibilities but usually they add detail and improve the general idea of the scene. An inbetweeners fills in the scenes between the key scenes that the main animators drew. They work off of what the main animators and assistant animators have already created.

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<sup>51</sup> Kinney, *Walt Disney and Assorted Other Characters*, 20-30.

Each animation team had its own moviola<sup>52</sup> that allowed them to see pencil tests of rough drawings. Walt and the animator director met weekly to screen the footage for technical mistakes, errors in judgment (with regard to timing, physically depicting some type of action, or humor), and possible additional gags. Disney and the director had to give the scenes final approval. The approved scenes were cleaned up by the assistant and inbetweeners and sent on for inking and painting. The scenes could not move to the ink and paint department without being approved. Unfortunately many scenes were returned multiple times to the animators because they did not quite capture what Disney had envisioned. Sometimes Disney would even make changes if he was not satisfied with an audience's reaction during a sneak preview. This constant process of revision was a great source of annoyance for the animators who were unable to capture exactly what Disney had in mind.<sup>53</sup>

Animator Norm Ferguson created a system of rough drawing. This became the model for technically approaching animation within this studio during the late thirties and remained the norm for decades to come. These rough drawings were played in a moviola which helped the animators to get a sense of the direction of the action. This was the start of the "rough and loose style" of Disney animation. However, this was unfortunate for those animators who originally learned to draw cleanly (in other words, very detailed and perfected). These animators had their assistants rough up their drawings so that it looked as though they were using this preferred style of drawing when in actuality they

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<sup>52</sup> A moviola is a device that allows an animator and animation team to view film while editing.

<sup>53</sup> Culhane, *Talking Animals and Other People*, 113.

were not able to.<sup>54</sup> Disney instituted this technique for the sake of speed without any regard for how his animators were used to working and with little of understanding of how it worked in practice since he had long since stopped drawing. This actually made the process a lot slower for many animators because they had to relearn drawing technique. This forced adherence to the rough and loose style of drawing clashed tremendously with the artistic nature of their work. By roughing up the drawings, the animators found a way to continue with their own ways of drawing and evade the wrath of Disney. This tactic of avoidance demonstrates that workers could not speak to their employer and they had very little input with regard to the artistic process that they had to deal with on a day-to-day basis. These two factors embittered relations between the workers and management.

There were standards of professionalism set by Walt Disney with regards to the process of animation and the qualities of animators. The studio held art classes every night. This was the only studio that did this and they spent a great amount of money on this venture (\$100,000 a year).<sup>55</sup> In a letter to the studio's drawing teacher and art expert Don Graham<sup>56</sup>, Walt states that the studio's art classes should deal with practical problems, good life drawing, comedy, various expressions of the body, staging and planning, anticipation of action and what makes things move, a study of music, and a

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<sup>54</sup> Kinney, *Walt Disney and Assorted Other Characters*, 31-42.

<sup>55</sup> Neil Gabler, *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*, (New York: Random House, Inc., 2006), 176.

<sup>56</sup> Don Graham was hired by Walt Disney to teach night classes for Disney artists to improve their quality of drawing. He was sent on a talent search across the country and in 1934 was asked to review and judge the portfolios of potential new Disney artists. He personally reviewed over thirty five thousand portfolios.

*Donald W. Graham*, (2005) <<http://donaldwgraham.com/biography.html>> (15 March 2005).

study of dialogue.<sup>57</sup> This is strange because Disney did not leave the artistic standards to the artists but took it upon himself to create them even though he had not been drawing for years. Disney, to the annoyance of many animators, was struggling to control something that he no longer had any expertise in. Battles over control led to many outbursts from the staff. For example, animator Norm Ferguson (who created the system of rough drawing) exploded one day and demanded that Disney leave him alone. He was immediately fired.<sup>58</sup> These confrontations did not help relations between management and the workers.

The purpose of the studio art classes was to change the artist's conception of animation. Don Graham (a master of the fine arts) was "single-handedly attacking the traditional concept of animation as simply moving comic strips."<sup>59</sup> It is important to note that Graham had never worked in animation before he gave these art classes at the studio. Animation great Shamus Culhane states: "When he [Graham] succeeded in pointing the way to a more complex form of movement and acting, he created a schism between the Disney studio and the rest of the animation field."<sup>60</sup> This created cognitive dissonance within the worker. The worker was battling between what they already accepted as the norm of professionalism and what was being introduced to them.

Although they also wanted to push for greatness, they were sometimes at a loss for what Walt actually wanted. There was a communication barrier that was difficult if not sometimes impossible for these workers to overcome. Disney biographer Neil

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<sup>57</sup> Culhane, *Talking Animals and Other People*, 117-127.

<sup>58</sup> Kinney, *Walt Disney and Assorted Other Characters*, 158.

<sup>59</sup> Culhane, *Talking Animals and Other People*, 137.

<sup>60</sup> Culhane, *Talking Animals and Other People*, 137.

Gabler described it best: “Walt operated almost entirely by instinct--a problem compounded by the fact that he had a difficult time conveying what his instinct told him, especially since he no longer drew well enough to show the animators, and because he was so instinctive he changed his mind as often as he changed his moods.”<sup>61</sup>

Communication is the key to constructive relationships and the lack of communication between management and the workers left the workers feeling as though their only recourse was to strike.

Walt wanted the animators to keep specific questions in mind during and after the time they practiced their craft. Such questions included: “What was the idea to be presented? How was the idea presented? What result was achieved? After seeing the result, what could have been done to the picture from this point on to improve it?” Walt’s definition of a good animator was a person who exhibited “good draftsmanship, knowledge of caricature, of action as well as features, knowledge and appreciation of acting, ability to think up gags and put over gags knowledge of story construction and audience values, knowledge and understanding of all the mechanical and detailed routine involved in his work, in order that he may be able to apply his other abilities without becoming tied up in a knot by lack of technique along these lines.”<sup>62</sup> These were rather lofty ambitions, and it seems as though there was a disconnect between Disney’s theory of animation and the reality of producing the product. Walt never attended these classes himself and he was lacking the artistic skills that he required of his artists. He once said

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<sup>61</sup> Gabler, *Triumph of the American Imagination*, 207.

<sup>62</sup> Culhane, *Talking Animals and Other People*, 117-127.

that he “couldn’t hold down a job as an inbetweener in his own studio.”<sup>63</sup> This was a source of contention for the animators. It was difficult to communicate with regard to the technical aspects of animating to someone who had very little technical skill. However, management demanded that the bar be pushed a little higher with each picture so as to not lose momentum and lose the amazement of their audiences.

The sweatbox sessions were something that all animators feared. Nearly every animator who has ever discussed the Disney Studio has mentioned the sweatbox in some unflattering way. This was where the pencil tests were played for Walt so that Walt could give his final approval. Unfortunately, entire sequences were rejected because Walt did not like them or felt they lacked something. Many scenes were drawn several times and often the animators found their work to be guesswork because they had little idea for what Walt was looking.<sup>64</sup>

Some animators assert that there was no in-house style of animation at this time since none of the pictures looked the same. These animators also discuss the idea that an in-house style set in after the strike.<sup>65</sup> This is important because it seems as though all the animators who did not keep to the Disney mold were expelled from the creative process. The negotiations after the strike made it difficult to fire the vested animators. However, they were shunted to the side to work on projects that would never come to fruition, were embarrassed into leaving, or were fired.<sup>66</sup> It seems as though the strike was an

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<sup>63</sup> Culhane, *Talking Animals and Other People*, 136.

<sup>64</sup> Culhane, *Talking Animals and Other People*, 113, 149-150.

<sup>65</sup> Tom Sito, interview by the author, email, 4 September 2007.

<sup>66</sup> Culhane, *Talking Animals and Other People*, 236-240.

opportunity for the studio to clean house of all those who did not acquiesce to the conception of animation that Disney was striving for.

Disney animators had different conceptions of what great animation was. At the time there were three generations of animators at the studio: those who worked during the days of silent animation, the animators of the “Golden Age” (the 1930’s), and lastly the newer wave of artists that were “out of art school with portfolios”. Each of these groups experienced the creation of a different product and a different style of creating that product. This led to different factions of animators: those who lagged behind in the newer system but were respected for their skills and contributions to the field, those who were just barely keeping up, those who were pushing the envelope, and those who were being indoctrinated into the field. As the studio progressed with its animation, the management pushed for greater realism until, with the film *Bambi* (for example), the artists complained that the films looked too realistic. If the films were too realistic, there was no point to drawing it. Animators argued and continue to argue over what aspects of animation are the most important: photo-realism, stylization, or acquiescence to an in-house style.<sup>67</sup> Some animators were under the impression that the quintessential aspect of animation was speed.<sup>68</sup> Instead of making the most of all of his workers’ talents and beliefs about their profession, Disney picked the traits and philosophies that he liked the most and held these animators in a class above the rest, which created anger and resentment among them.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Tom Sito, interview by the author, email, 1 September 2007.

<sup>68</sup> Kinney, *Walt Disney and Assorted Other Characters*, 10.

<sup>69</sup> Culhane, *Talking Animals and Other People*, 127-131, 142, 151.



The studio encouraged a hierarchy of prestige. Walt made sure that certain animators were held in the highest standing. For example, when the staff traveled to a movie house to run a program of short subjects that the studio felt the workers should see, the studio created seating arrangements. The better animators and the higher ups got the more comfortable seats closer to the front while the other animators and staffers were left to scramble for any seat they could find<sup>70</sup>. Disney showed favoritism towards individuals for seemingly unimportant reasons (for example Perce Pearce because he smoked).<sup>71</sup> However, Disney did not stick to this hierarchy. Disney would put people in charge of a department, and then these people would find out that he had given part of their job to somebody else. It annoyed every department head that he had “no regard for protocol” and this was a protocol that he alone set up without any input from the workers who had to deal with it on a daily basis.<sup>72</sup>

Eventually this atmosphere led to the creation of the “Nine Old Men” (nine animators who Disney favored above all the others) which, created a lot of resentment among the animators. These men were Disney’s closest confidants and most highly valued workers. They got first preference in everything and they could do no wrong. It was “not good for morale” however, “This was Walt’s way, keeping everyone off balance and stirred up.”<sup>73</sup>

A common frustration expressed by animator Jack Kinney was that Disney always seemed preoccupied by the presentation of the material and not with the material

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<sup>70</sup> Culhane, *Talking Animals and Other People*, 142.

<sup>71</sup> Culhane, *Talking Animals and Other People*, 163.

<sup>72</sup> Barrier, *The Animated Man*, 137.

<sup>73</sup> Kinney, *Walt Disney and Assorted Other Characters*, 140-146.

quality. This caused the less aggressive people to be left in the dust. This happened with Bambi. Perce Pearce constantly took over meetings that Kinney was supposed to be directing which caused some professional tension between the two. Kinney asked to be moved back to short films.<sup>74</sup> Other animators also validated this feeling by stating that Disney would go against them in meetings, not based on what was good for the material, but just to put them in their place.<sup>75</sup> Unfortunately this problem allowed those with less skill to move up the ranks in the corporation more quickly while those who deserved a better position were stuck. Those with greater skills were left with their ideas and bitter feelings and this created a tense workplace.

Another atmospheric issue was Disney's habit of dropping in unexpectedly on his staff. Unfortunately, Jack Kinney was placed in an office right next to his office. Disney would use the back entrance to Kinney's office without warning. To solve this particular workplace dilemma, Kinney placed a moviola close to the door so that there would be a bang to warn him when the boss was coming in. This forced Disney to use the correct entrance which restored "peace of mind."<sup>76</sup>

Unfortunately, peace of mind was something that was hard to come by at the Disney Studio. Walt Disney was, at best, hard to get along with, and at worst, he bordered on paranoia. After each picture was completed, a screening was held for the staff. At the end of the screening, all of the staff was given a questionnaire with the following questions: "What is your evaluation of this picture? Excellent, good, fair, poor

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<sup>74</sup> Kinney, *Walt Disney and Assorted Other Characters*, 115-120.

<sup>75</sup> Michael Barrier, *The Animated Man: a Life of Walt Disney*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 158.

<sup>76</sup> Kinney, *Walt Disney and Assorted Other Characters*, 109.

What is the best sequence? What is the best gag? Which had the best animation? What was unsatisfactory in the picture? Remarks...” The staff refused to sign these questionnaires lest their comments be used against them.<sup>77</sup> In fact, Walt became angry over some of the comments he read in these questionnaires and from time to time, while yelling at a member of his staff, would accuse the staff member of making a particular comment.<sup>78</sup>

In Shamus Culhane’s mind, it was “Walt’s pursuit of perfection” that created a turbulent atmosphere within the studio. Those who made mistakes were not just reprimanded, they were humiliated. Animator Chuck Couch described the atmosphere as such: “You were always scared to death of him... You’d start telling a story to Walt, and first of all, you’d look to see the expression he had on his face when he sat down in the chair...” ... “You’d start telling the story, and you’d always keep watching him. For one thing, if you saw his eyes go way ahead of you, that was all right, it caught his attention. But if he sat there and started drumming his fingers, you were in trouble.”<sup>79</sup> Some animators were fired in an uncivil fashion and others quit out of embarrassment. This abusive attitude “supplied a climate for some unhealthy side-effects.”<sup>80</sup> The management also made an effort to create a feeling of isolation between the Disney Studio and the rest of an industry. This meant that when an animator quit or was fired, they would feel a sense of disgrace if they went to another studio because it would be sub par. Most of

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<sup>77</sup> Culhane, *Talking Animals and Other People*, 149.

<sup>78</sup> Sito, *Drawing the Line*, 111.

<sup>79</sup> Barrier, *The Animated Man*, 157.

<sup>80</sup> Culhane, *Talking Animals and Other People*, 144-145.

those who were ridiculed into quitting or were flat out fired just left the industry and their careers altogether.<sup>81</sup>

The creation of such a hostile work atmosphere was a huge contributing factor to the strike. Management may have been intentionally creating resentment between workers and a feeling of isolation from animators in other studios in an effort to keep their animators away from union activity, but it had the opposite effect. Eventually the animators found that they were sick of competing against each other and felt that they could accomplish more if they united.

It is true that Disney “set his goals high and expected everyone around him to do the same”. Sometimes this was too much for some workers. Norm Ferguson once asked Walt to just leave him alone and was fired.<sup>82</sup> It is clear that Disney viewed himself as a supreme commander and any dissent among his workers and any straying from the path of the “definition of a good animator” was deemed unacceptable.

The corporation also unofficially defined a “good animator” as one that was committed to selling the Disney name. Personal reputations were to be squashed. When hiring Ken Anderson, Disney informed him that his job was to sell the Disney name and, if he had a problem with that, he could leave.<sup>83</sup> Early on, Disney stopped referring to the studio’s work as “our products” and began to refer to them as “my pictures.”<sup>84</sup> This same transition occurred when the name of the studio changed from the Disney Brothers’ Studio (created in 1923) to the Walt Disney Studios (1926).

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<sup>81</sup> Culhane, *Talking Animals and Other People*, 141.

<sup>82</sup> Kinney, *Walt Disney and Assorted Other Characters*, 147-156.

<sup>83</sup> Sito, *Drawing the Line*, 111.

<sup>84</sup> Kinney, *Walt Disney and Assorted Other Characters*, 147-156.

The studio's animators had to learn the meaning of humility, but this did not mean that they did not harbor any resentment towards the company (which was exhibited more thoroughly after animators retired or were fired). Most of the second chapter of animator Jack Kinney's book, *Walt Disney and Other Assorted Characters*, is dedicated to recognizing the efforts his colleagues. Much of this credit has to do with creation and sustaining of Mickey Mouse and on numerous occasions he mentions the achievements of Ub Iwerks in particular. It seems as though Kinney is looking to give credit where credit is due with regards to intellectual property. Most animators had to wait decades to receive any screen credit. Some never received any credit at all.<sup>85</sup>

Kinney speaks ruefully about an award the studio received. Kinney was irritated with the fact that even though he directed the film, Disney was the one to pick it up. In rebellion, the animators would trick Disney and find ways to gain recognition or just to poke fun at management. This was seen more often in short pieces than in features. They would throw in outrageous quotes that Walt had said or would manage to fit their names into the drawings since they weren't given credit elsewhere.

Often times, animators were not even trusted to deal with the material themselves. Dave Hand was put in charge of the short films because Walt was busy with the features. However, it was pretty clear to everyone who worked on the short films that Walt would investigate their storyboards over the weekend. Disney had the annoying habit of leaving cigarette butts behind in the animators' ashtrays.<sup>86</sup> In story meetings on Monday, he

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<sup>85</sup> Floyd Norman, *Toon Tuesday: The Beatles were going to be " ... a flash in the pan"?! Or said Walt Disney*. (26 September 2006) [http://jimhillmedia.com/blogs/floyd\\_norman/archive/2006/09/25/5948.aspx](http://jimhillmedia.com/blogs/floyd_norman/archive/2006/09/25/5948.aspx) (30 September 2007).

<sup>86</sup> Kinney, *Walt Disney and Assorted Other Characters*, 72.

would be very quick to move things around. (It was easier to go through the storyboards and change things on shorts (in comparison to features) because there was not as much material as in a feature and the plot was based more on gags than on telling a story.) In addition to this, Disney would shoot down ideas in one meeting and then in the next meeting would come into the room “all full of enthusiasm, and he’d sell you back your own idea”.<sup>87</sup> This gave animators like Kinney the distinct impression that they could not properly defend their ideas or ever take credit for their own ideas. The only saving grace of the shorts was the bonus system, however that was soon scratched because it left out people who were working on the features.

As the studio focused more on features, the preexisting problems intensified under the pressure. The atmosphere intensified greatly with the creation of *Snow White*. Tensions were running high and some animation sequences that were far from perfect had to go through to meet production deadlines. There was an upsurge in rebellious actions, for example there was a sudden outburst of pornographic cartoons involving the Disney characters. Many felt awkward appearing at the premier for the film, particularly when everyone was just looking to see the famous Walt Disney. When surrounding press saw the animators, they asked “Who’s that?” and the reply that was heard by the animators was “Aaaah, that’s nobody!”<sup>88</sup>

Kinney states that in 1940 (as the studio moved on to more features), there were several attempts to unionize the studio. The motives for this were that the salaries for assistants and junior animators were low and screen credits on shorts only had Walt’s

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<sup>87</sup> Barrier, *The Animated Man*, 157.

<sup>88</sup> Culhane, *Talking Animals and Other People*, 183.

name. This issue dealing with screen credits that Kinney brings up is a major issue rarely discussed by any account of the strike. It was crucial to how the animators were perceived. The general public believed that Walt did everything and were ignorant to the idea that animators even existed. Kinney asserts that all other studios had been doing this for years.<sup>89</sup> However, the studio was only interested in selling the Disney name. They then made the move to a new studio in Burbank. Kinney states that this started a “new era” at the studio. He likens the studio to “a college campus with a country club atmosphere.”<sup>90</sup>

As the budget for the features grew, the money for the shorts was depleted. As people were fired, there were various means of resistance. John McLeish (the voice of Goofy) upon receiving the news of his dismissal, decided to sing outside Walt’s office in protest. The main complaint of Kinney and his staff, as well as other at the studio was that they wished for the freedom that other studios had. He described what they wanted as “uninhibited, fresh, not worked over too much.”<sup>91</sup>

In the months preceding the strike, there were several inconsistencies between the information being circulated by the unions and the studio. Management was also clearly fearful of the growing labor agitation within the animation industry. Trade papers stated that a specific and rather large amount of money was being made on the features. This forced Roy Disney to state that these figures were inflated, much to the disbelief of the workers. All of the animators tended to believe the trade papers as being the more

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<sup>89</sup> Kinney, *Walt Disney and Assorted Other Characters*, 114.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> Kinney, *Walt Disney and Assorted Other Characters*, 126 – 130.

accurate source. All of the animators also believed that there was a hidden scale for the bonus payments and they wished to know why this was in place.<sup>92</sup> The studio then began to conduct a series of seminars against industry-wide unionism which annoyed the staff.<sup>93</sup>

Just a couple months before the strike, Disney gave a speech, asking his workers not to unionize. He spoke of his twenty years of “hard work” and his sacrifices and his confidence in his abilities to “solve our problems.” Unfortunately, it is unlikely that he really understood what any animators’ frustrations were and by “our problems” he was probably just referencing their monetary situation. He stressed quality, efficiency, and production turnover as being their main priorities. The speech went on to discuss how young most of them were and how much they had to learn. He asked them to be strong and willing to sacrifice and then ended the speech by stating: “Don’t forget this – it’s the law of the universe that the strong shall survive and the weak must fall by the way, and I don’t give a damn what idealistic plan is cooked up, nothing can change that.” In other words, many of them would be fired and this was just the way of the world and those who would be fired (more than likely in a humiliating way) would deserve the treatment. This Darwinian approach did not please those workers who were struggling keep their sanity in the tumultuous atmosphere within the studio and the increased pressure brought them to a breaking point.<sup>94</sup>

Kinney was one of the workers who crossed the picket line. As a director, he was not part of the bargaining unit allowed to participate in the strike. He was asked to go to

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<sup>92</sup> Culhane, *Talking Animals and Other People*, 186.

<sup>93</sup> Culhane, *Talking Animals and Other People*, 187.

<sup>94</sup> Barrier, *The Animated Man*, 166-167.



Walt's office on the first day of the strike. Walt hired a photographer to take pictures of the strikers and blow them up so he could easily identify who turned against him. Kinney stated that it was mostly inbetweeners, assistants, inkers and painters; however, this story does not match with the tensions he cited earlier (mainly with regard to screen credits). He explained that many of the workers who were loyal to Walt were that way because he gave them a job during the Depression. Disney was required to bring a certain number of people back but he "eventually fired every single one". The most awkward part of the strike for Kinney was the fact that he had to work with Art Babbitt once the strike was over. Walt would constantly interrogate him trying to find something that Babbitt was doing wrong.<sup>95</sup>

After the strike

It is the common conception of later generations of animators, particularly those who worked for Disney, to assert that the atmosphere in the Disney Studio was a perfectly normal business atmosphere. Many of these same animators would assert that any non-traditional labor issues during the time period leading up to the strike either did not exist or were not worthy of attention. Most labor sources and biographical sources do not even mention the Disney Strike. Some sources go as far as recognizing the traditional issues such as the need for less overtime or a standard scale of pay. In interviews with former Disney animator, Tom Sito, it became apparent that he was trained in a way that made him very different from the strikers. He stated that "animators know as a part of their professional discipline that the only work of art that matters is the can of film at the

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<sup>95</sup> Kinney, *Walt Disney and Assorted Other Characters*, 137-138.

end.”<sup>96</sup> In addition to this he stated: “Most of the others considered what they were doing as factory work, and the art stuff was for watercoloring and photography clubs on the weekends.”<sup>97</sup> It is doubtful that this “factory work” was alluring enough to draw them into this profession where creativity is bursting and egos are always at the center of their games of competition. This is evidence of the fact that, after the strike, the definition of what it meant to be a professional in the field of animation had changed again. At the Disney Studios (as a result of the strike), the definition of a good animator became one who could separate themselves from their work.

In the words of Tom Sito “the artists loved Walt’s input”. Sito went on to say that Walt was “their all knowing Svengali-leader and no one wanted to be shunned by his gaze, even if the input stung.”<sup>98</sup> This is strange phrasing. Svengali is known to be a villainous, dominating hypnotist that would manipulate and control his subjects. This gives a clear indication of how the workers felt towards management: Disney was not a benevolent leader but a domineering control freak who demanded to have things his way or the workers would pay the price. If this is truly how animators viewed Walt before and decades later, it seems as though the happiest place on Earth was still far from happy and any untraditional tensions that existed before the strike clearly were not properly settled. This may be due to the fact that during that time period, it was only acceptable to deal with certain traditional issues and to push beyond them would be unacceptable.

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<sup>96</sup> Tom Sito, interview by the author, email, 4 September 2007

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

However, if that strike had taken place today, one can only wonder what may have resulted.

## The Historiography

The scholarship surrounding the Disney Corporation has largely focused on biographies of Walt Disney and general studies of animation techniques. Few scholars have studied animation labor history or the history of the corporation during the 1941 strike. *The Story of Walt Disney* by Diane Disney Miller is the oldest biography of Disney and it was written in 1956. *Walt Disney's Fantasia* by Deems Taylor is the oldest book studying and exhibiting the art of the corporation and it was written in 1940. This means that the historiography which deals with the Disney Corporation is roughly six or seven decades old and it still has not examined some very crucial aspects of the company's history or of animation in general.

After the death of Walt Disney in 1966, the number of books on the Disney Corporation skyrocketed. According to a listing of resources available at the Walt Disney Archives, four books appeared in the 1960s about either animation or Disney. According to this same listing, forty-eight books were written in the 1970's and sixty-nine more emerged throughout the 1980s.<sup>99</sup> With each decade, more books are produced, each promising to deliver more information than past books. However, this does not seem to be the reality.

The four books written in the 1960s are biographies of Disney, mostly written either during 1966 or after 1966. The books of the 1970s are mainly about animation since the profession of animation was about fifty years old by this time. There were a few notable biographies during this decade however: *Walt Disney: The Master of*

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<sup>99</sup>Kathy Merlock Jackson, *Walt Disney, a Bio-bibliography*, Westport, Conn. : Greenwood Press, 1993.

*Animation, Walt Disney: An American Original, Walt Disney: Master of Make-Believe, Walt Disney: An American Original, and Walt Disney.* Bob Thomas, who wrote *Walt Disney: An American Original*, did discuss the strike of 1941, but he discussed the strike from the point of view of Disney and sympathized with him. Although it recognized the growing workplace and financial burdens on the company, it also placed the blame for the strike on people other than Walt Disney. Walt Disney was applauded for being so frank and candid with his employees and for not signing his workers over to a Sorrell-led union. On this point, the author argues that he had no right to sign over to an outside union and he was merely keeping to his legal bounds. This book also includes a letter that Disney wrote to a newspaper before leaving for South America in which he blames all of his company's labor problems on Communism.<sup>100</sup> Thomas promotes this idea of a communist conspiracy as the reason for the strike.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> This theory of a communist conspiracy is repeated again before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1947 when Disney testified stating that the strike was entirely the work of Communists. This is a portion of the testimony:

SMITH: "Have you had at any time, in your opinion, in the past, have you at any time in the past had any communists employed at your studio?"

DISNEY: "Yes; in the past I had some people that I definitely feel were communists."

SMITH: "As a matter of fact, Mr. Disney, you experienced a strike at your studio, did you not?"

DISNEY: "Yes."

SMITH: "And is it your opinion that that strike was instituted by members of the Communist Party to serve their purposes?"

DISNEY: "Well, it proved itself so with time, and I definitely feel it was a communist group trying to take over my artists and they did take them over."

CHAIRMAN: "Do you say they did take them over?"

DISNEY: "They did take them over"... "I believed at that time that Mr. Sorrell was a communist because of all the things that I had heard, and having seen his name appearing on a number of commie front things. When he pulled the strike, the first people to smear me and put me on the unfair list were all of the commie front organizations. I can't remember them all, they change so often, but one that is clear in my mind is the League of Women Shoppers, The People's World, The Daily Worker, and the PM Magazine in New York. They smeared me. Nobody came near to find out what the true facts of the thing were. And I even went through the same smear in South America, through some commie periodicals in South America, and generally throughout the world all of the commie groups began smear campaigns against me and my pictures."

During the 1980s, authors generally focused on the Disney theme parks, encyclopedias of cartoons, and the development of animation technique. In 1986, Shamus Culhane wrote *Talking Animals and Other People*, which was one of the first books written by an animator about their daily life. Following closely in Culhane's footsteps, Jack Kinney wrote *Walt Disney and Assorted Other Characters: An Unauthorized of the Early Years at Disney's*. This book is also written by an animation legend and gives detail with regard to everyday life at the Disney studio (professional tension, tensions between the staff and management, and screen credit). A notable (revised) biography of this decade was *The Disney Version: The Life, Times, Art, and Commerce of Walt Disney*. It was originally rushed to the press after Disney's death and was revised and republished in 1985 with the promise of more detail and more material. It did not deliver. This book centered on the lasting influences of Walt Disney and his accomplishments throughout his lifetime. Some argue that the book tried to get beyond the fairy-tale of the company and of Disney himself but it failed to include any new information or any new analysis.

Another couple of interesting books were written in the 1990s. *Forbidden Animation: Censored Cartoons and Blacklisted Animators in America* is an interesting book because it takes an anti-Disney approach. It does delve into some of the non-traditional issues of the strike; however it does not develop these ideas to their full potential and they remain mere skeletons of arguments. *The Magic Kingdom: Walt*

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"Testimony of Walter E. Disney before HUAC," 24 October 1971, <<http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/cold.war/episodes/06/documents/huac/disney.html>> (9 September 2007).

<sup>101</sup> Bob Thomas, *Walt Disney: An American Original*, (New York: The Walt Disney Company, 1976), 165-170.

*Disney and the American Way of Life* gives a good impression of what Disney's idea of an animation utopia (particularly when building the new studio) was and how it clashed with the desires of the workers. Both of these books seem to usher in a new school of thought with regard to leaning towards an anti-Disney perspective. Many of the biographies of the 1990s still focused on the "dream" of Walt Disney and projected the image of Disney as a visionary. Other books focused on the making of films or the business tactics that were used to make of a world-wide corporation.

Recently, there has been a new outburst of scholarship on the Disney Corporation. As time goes on, it is the expectation of scholars that the historiography will progress by becoming more analytical and investigating new threads of thought. There appear to be indications that the historiography will follow a more critical trend by covering more topics (such as animation labor history) with a more analytical eye (by not automatically favoring the company and by not hero-worshipping Walt Disney). This paper will use two of these sources to establish the traditional and most recent narrative Walt Disney's life and of the strike itself.

Neal Gabler wrote one of the most recent biographies of Walt Disney, *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*. Gabler is hailed as being "the first writer to be given complete access to the Disney archives." Many who have studied Disney believed this book would be different due to the fact that it promises that Gabler "explores accusations that Disney was a red-baiter, an anti-Semite, and an embittered alcoholic."<sup>102</sup> However, Gabler's main purpose for writing this book is to prove that

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<sup>102</sup> Gabler, *Triumph of the American Imagination*, cover slip.

Walt Disney was a visionary who embodied the American spirit of creativity and entrepreneurship. This general purpose is very unimaginative and very similar to the rest of the historiography written about Disney.

Gabler's Disney was an ingenious American legend that overcame adversity with an insatiable entrepreneurial spirit. He begins the book by discussing Walt Disney's childhood up through his entrepreneurial pursuits, and other ventures in between. Gabler sticks closely to the traditional narrative established by biographers for past three decades before him and he continues to portray Disney as a visionary who kept fighting until he was at last a success. Once the studio was established, the animators viewed their leader with awe and considered him to be a father figure. The work atmosphere was friendly and familial. The animators maintained a spirit of camaraderie and were just thankful to be given a job during the Depression. The business was ever expanding and the techniques of animation and story-telling were always improving. The art school was developed and many new people were hired. Disney simply demanded the best from all of his workers and would accept nothing less. Unfortunately, Gabler appears to have missed the significance of the tension that this created between management and the workers which was very significant in bringing about the strike. He does not recognize that Disney's definition of success was different from his workers.

This story is the narrative of a man who was constantly striving for greatness. Gabler states: "Walt was always the final authority, the one whom everyone had to please." His studio created specific processes (pencil sketching) in creating the animation which helped in being able to test out a feature early in production. This



system created a lot of professional problems for animators who could not adjust, however, Gabler does not entirely recognize how frustrating this system could be. The book mentions the idea that some animators just could not accept the new methods of animation and did things their way and attempted to cover it up but does not delve into any great detail. Another train of thought that should have been further developed was the idea that the animators also had a hard time understanding what exactly management wanted on a particular project and this created much frustration among them. Gabler acknowledges that Disney's wrath would also make an appearance when he felt a director's/ animator's work was sub par. However the company did create a bonus system, which Gabler asserts created a deeper sense of loyalty among the workers. Disney was burdened by the stresses of his business; however, he released his tensions by engaging in various sports (and Gabler playfully points out that his workers always made sure he won for fear of provoking his anger).

The book then discusses the atmosphere right before the strike. In the late thirties, features progressed in quality and quantity and the expenses added up and the war had a devastating effect on their overseas market. Roy Disney advocated the idea that every worker take a pay cut. Walt Disney began to pick up the pace on some projects and drop some things entirely. The business had grown from three hundred employees to twelve hundred<sup>103</sup>. Despite the monetary dilemmas, they made plans for a new studio and then made the move. Disney's striving for greatness conflicted with the expectations of the staff as his workers demanded more money. He approached his workers and tried to

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<sup>103</sup> Gabler, *Triumph of the American Imagination*, 351.

explain to them the situation that they were facing, citing the fact that he took a seventy-five percent cut in his salary. He stated that they had three options: “cut salaries drastically, cut production and layoff workers, or sell the company to someone else who was interested only in profits”.<sup>104</sup> He denied the idea that there was a class system at the studio and invoked the spirit of camaraderie. This section appears to try to put the blame for the fiscal policy of the company on Roy Disney and asserts that Walt Disney tried to make the best out of an impossible situation.

The author then discusses the feelings of betrayal which haunted Disney through all of his later years. Although management came up with some plans for fixing the monetary issues and they continued to fight in the jurisdictional disputes, which just deepened the animosity. Gabler discusses how the numbers between the sides just did not add up and there were various stories for both sides. He dismisses the theory of Communist involvement as being a plausible one. This seems to be a point at which the book significantly diverges from the traditional historiography. Most authors do not directly state that this theory of communist infiltration is untrue and some authors even go as far as to agree with this particular theory.

Things became a little ugly and finally Gunther Lessing accepted a mediation offer from the Conciliation Service. The sides agreed to wage increases, one hundred hours of backpay for the strikers, reinstatement of the fired workers, and recognition of the Screen Cartoonists' Guild as the bargaining agent for “most of the studio's employees.” In addition to this, future layoffs were decided by a joint committee. While

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<sup>104</sup> Gabler, *Triumph of the American Imagination*, 359.

the rest of the agreement was being settled, Disney went on a good will trip to South America.<sup>105</sup> They then worked on war films and this helped to reunite them after they had experienced such a bitter fight. After the war, they worked on educational films in addition to features.<sup>106</sup> Eventually, he turned his attention from the studios to the theme parks since the animators were a source of frustration for him.<sup>107</sup> Gabler states: “He knew the level of talent was not as high as in its heyday and that the spirit had never recovered from the strike, much less from the drudgery of the war. He knew that the heady days of collaboration were long since gone and that, as far as the animations were concerned, they would never return. He knew that, and he missed those days, missed them terribly which may have been one reason why he drifted.”<sup>108</sup> The studio would never be the same.

In the acknowledgements section, Gabler states that he never submitted a manuscript of his book to the company. He attributes this to generosity of the vice-president for the studio communications, Howard Green. Green only requested that Gabler write “a serious book”. This may signal a change in the closed-door policy of the company, which will hopefully lead to a more critical approach to the historiography of the Disney Corporation.

*Drawing the Line: The Untold Story of the Animation Unions from Bosko to Bart Simpson* (written in 2006) is the first book of its kind to study animation labor history. The author, Tom Sito, is a former animator of the Disney Studios, former president of

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<sup>105</sup> Gabler, *Triumph of the American Imagination*, 371.

<sup>106</sup> Gabler, *Triumph of the American Imagination*, 447.

<sup>107</sup> Gabler, *Triumph of the American Imagination*, 453.

<sup>108</sup> Gabler, *Triumph of the American Imagination*, 492.

America's largest animation union, director, and adjunct professor in the television and cinema departments at the University of Southern California at Los Angeles. In this book, Sito refers to the Disney Studio strike as "The Civil War of Animation" because of its affect on a majority of the workers in the industry as well as its unprecedented intensity and bitterness. He states that this victory laid the foundations for "a reliable wage scale, standardized workplace rules of conduct, a place where the rank-and-file artist could take his grievance to his superiors without fear of retribution, the best benefits, and the best social safety nets – guaranteed in writing."<sup>109</sup> He discusses the strike as part of a larger movement (on the part of the Screen Cartoonists' Guild) to unionize all the animation studios in the industry. Taking on Disney meant taking animation labor struggles to another level. Smaller studios unionized previously bringing the Screen Cartoonists Guild membership to a total of one hundred and fifteen. The studio, at that time, employed more than eight hundred artists.<sup>110</sup> A victory over the Disney Studios would give this unionizing movement much more legitimacy and much more influence within Hollywood. Sito delves into the family atmosphere, the arbitrary pay scales, the short-lived profit sharing system, management's right to fire anyone, and discusses issues of anonymity (Walt Disney's name was the only one allowed on the credits). He is also able to aptly describe the discouragement felt on the part of the animators. *Snow White* gave the animators the sense that they were all gambling their careers on one big project that could turn out to be a flop. The staff was exhausted after putting in countless hours of overtime. This was particularly disconcerting because, once

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<sup>109</sup> Sito, *Drawing the Line*, 150.

<sup>110</sup> Sito, *Drawing the Line*, 106.

the budget ran out, “many worked without any salary at all.”<sup>111</sup> Disney promised his staff big bonuses from the profits that they would make but the company never delivered. Sito is able to tell this narrative with a personal knowledge of exactly how frustrating this kind of a situation could be.

The artists made the move to the expensive Burbank studio as the world markets began to close themselves to Disney product. Overseas revenue dried up which created a dire situation for the studio since this accounted for forty-five percent of the studio’s income. Workers were unceremoniously fired and the distance between the workers and Disney grew. Other studios began unionizing and tensions grew. Sorrell approached Babbitt who saw that the company union was not accomplishing anything. Disney approached his workers and tried to use the argument: “I want to be just another guy working in this plant-which I am.” and then insisted that he knew what was best for them. He then stated “If you boys sign with the union... I’ll... I’ll never let you swim in my pool again!” to which Al Dempster replied: “Walt, swimming in your pool doesn’t feed my kids or pay my rent!” Others have stated that Walt should have tried to be honest about the economic state of things instead of being patronizing. This just made the situation more tense. There were struggles between the corporation’s union and the Screen Cartoon Guild over who should represent the artists. There were angry meetings between sides. Disney fired Babbitt and sixteen other pro-union artists and the strike began. Sito does a great job of getting to the heart of the hypocrisy of Disney’s speech. Gabler did his best to shed the speech in the best light possible, however Sito makes no

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<sup>111</sup> Sito, *Drawing the Line*, 111.

qualms about the fact that he believed it to be a facade and it did not work because the animators did not buy into it.

Sito discussed the worries of the workers who went on strike and could possibly lose their jobs for good. Friendships were destroyed and people had to choose sides. At first the picket line was friendly, however things became nasty very quickly. Workers from other studios also came to help out the Disney strikers. The strikers picketed theaters. Babbitt appealed to both the AFL and CIO (who were rivals at the time) and unions on both sides helped with the cause. Other companies that were associated with the production of Disney films boycotted Disney.

Mobster Willie Bioff involved himself in the strike. He tried to negotiate on behalf of Disney, however the animators refused to deal with a mobster. Bioff went as far as trying to abduct Bill Littlejohn, Art Babbitt, Gerge Bodle, Herb Sorrell, and Dave Hilberman to bring them to his ranch to hammer out an agreement.<sup>112</sup>

Disney was angry and refused to negotiate. He rejected federal arbitration. The only solution was for the studio to get him out of town. He was invited by Nelson Rockefeller on a goodwill mission to Latin America and Roy Disney urged Walt to go. The studio was finally forced to accept the Screen Cartoonists Guild as the legitimate representative body.

Walt Disney and Babbitt continued to have problems after the strike. Many of those who went on strike and who returned found the atmosphere very unfriendly and chose to leave. Sito states that “many film critics agree the strike ended the experimental

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<sup>112</sup> Sito, *Drawing the Line*, 136.

period of Disney animation.”<sup>113</sup> Disney clung to the theory that Communism was behind the strike. He emphasizes the point that “studio-approved histories of the period downplay the strike’s importance and instead emphasize the trip to Latin America and the studio’s wartime contributions.”<sup>114</sup> He asserts that the strike gained “the foundation of a self-governing community of animation professionals.”<sup>115</sup> In summary, Sito states that what was gained was “respect.”<sup>116</sup>

The current biography written by Neil Gabler and the history of the strike by Tom Sito have come the closest that the historiography has ever come to delving into the tensions behind the strike. These authors do not deal with some critical concepts that need to be discussed for this history of the strike to be complete. The purpose of this paper is to challenge the current interpretations of the strike and push the boundary of what is discussed about the strike of 1941 a little bit farther to gain a more accurate and meaningful picture of what actually occurred.

This year, Michael Barrier has written the latest biography of Walt Disney: *The Animated Man : A Life of Walt Disney*. Barrier does establish a sense of rebellion within the industry, however he terms it as the animators’ attempts at “manipulating [Disney]” for “self-promotion.”<sup>117</sup> Although he tells vignettes of the workers, he automatically dismisses each of these stories by stating that the workers were money-hungry mongrels. He blames a majority of the tension on the creation of the new studio and the impersonal feeling that resulted from such a large corporation. In discussing the strike, Barrier

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<sup>113</sup> Sito, *Drawing the Line*, 145.

<sup>114</sup> Sito, *Drawing the Line*, 148.

<sup>115</sup> Sito, *Drawing the Line*, 150.

<sup>116</sup> Sito, *Drawing the Line*, 150.

<sup>117</sup> Barrier, *The Animated Man*, 156.

argues that it was mainly the men who did not know Disney “the assistant animators and inbetweeners” who created all of the problems.<sup>118</sup> These men contained no loyalty towards Disney or the company. He asserts that Disney merely asked his employees to accept responsibility for the future of their business.<sup>119</sup> Unfortunately, the idea was more that he was asking them to accept responsibility for some of his monetary mistakes, and this was a sacrifice few of them could afford. Barrier does not stray too far away from the biographies of the past, which is no surprise because he has been writing pro-Disney material since 1978 on the Disney Corporation. He does spend a lot of time on various vignettes concerning employees. Most of these stories center around their attempts to “manipulate” Disney and promote themselves.<sup>120</sup> He also touches on the fact that Disney did not follow protocol and would take various ideas from his animators and would disseminate them as his own.<sup>121</sup> These are not backed up with enough analysis with regards to how this affected the workplace environment and eventually helped to result in the strike itself. Unfortunately this book is a perfect example of how little the historiography has changed in the past three decades.

Although there are various indications that the historiography is progressing in a more analytical and interpretive manner, often times there seem to be setbacks (such as the Barrier book). While most of the authors seem to have enough material to build a case for a more critical view of the strike, most authors seem to be content with sticking to the company version of the strike or merely ignoring the strike altogether and focusing

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<sup>118</sup> Barrier, *The Animated Man*, 164.

<sup>119</sup> Barrier, *The Animated Man*, 166.

<sup>120</sup> Barrier, *The Animated Man*, 156.

<sup>121</sup> Barrier, *The Animated Man*, 137, 157.



on Disney's Latin American trip. Only Tom Sito and Neal Gabler seem to be reaching beyond the established narrative in a search of a more accurate portrayal of the history of the strike. Hopefully, the historiography will continue on this trend: first by recognizing the significance of animation labor history at the time, second by recognizing the importance of this particular strike within animation labor history, and thirdly by reaching beyond the established company-dominated narrative.

## Afterword

Every historical researcher encounters problems specific to their topic. Projects involving the Disney Corporation encounter a specific set of dilemmas. As with many world-wide conglomerates, secrecy seems to be a top priority. The Disney Corporation prides itself on its image and does everything within its power to maintain itself as a pristine, all-American, permanent fixture in American popular culture. Unfortunately, the maintenance of such an image often leads to the distortion of information and creates great difficulties for researchers.

The Disney Corporation has its own archives; however, it rarely grants authors permission to access them. The corporation does its best to portray its history in the best light possible. Anything that is even mildly controversial is generally ignored and repressed and a more flattering and triumphant story is advocated. The Disney Corporation, in particular, is concerned with cultivating a very conservative image (almost to the point of paranoia). It is imperative to remember that the company is very financially dependent on its public image. From the days of Walt Disney to later generations of CEOs, public image has been an integral part to keeping the company alive, successful, and economically sound. An injury to the corporation's image would mean an injury to the value of the company stock.

There is a critical distinction that must be made when investigating sources pertaining to the Disney Corporation. The first are authorized sources, which are those that the Corporation endorses. The second type is unauthorized, or sources that are published without the corporation's blessing. Peter Wosh, a writer and professor at New

York University, is an expert on the differences between authorized and unauthorized sources. He has published on the practices of archivists and archival records and also on a variety of topics (public history, American religion, and American institutional cultures, etc). In an interview with Wosh, he stated that the standards for getting a history or biography to be “authorized” varies greatly between institutions. Some institutions require “extensive review processes that exert considerable control over perspectives and interpretations” while others allow the author great amounts of freedom.<sup>122</sup>

According to Wosh, contract historians have an ethical responsibility to describe the processes they went through to get their book approved. It is unethical to present information without discussing the censoring of interpretations by a corporation or another organization. There is no sense of conformity with regard to how this ethical responsibility is carried out; the extent to which authors describe their “arrangements” varies greatly. The National Council of Public History states: “A public historian is obligated not to disclose information gained in a professional relationship when the client or employer has requested such information to be held confidential. Exceptions to the principle of non-disclosure must be made when required by process of law.”<sup>123</sup> Although most biographies and books about Disney are not public history, these ethical standards can be helpful in understanding the relationship that an author of the private sector would have with a client or employer, such as the Disney Corporation. If an author is looking to write an authorized Disney biography or history, they will be forced to exclude

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<sup>122</sup> Peter Wosh, interview by the author, email, 5 September 2007.

<sup>123</sup> “Bylaws and Ethics,” National Council on Public History 21 March 2006; <<http://www.ncph.org/AbouttheCouncil/BylawsandEthics/tabid/291/Default.aspx>> (10 September 2007).

information that the company asks them to exclude. This is a serious breach in the role of a historian, who is taught to always present information as accurately and as unbiased as possible. When information is purposefully left out, the truth of a situation is destroyed.

Another problem for those who research the Disney Strike and the Disney Corporation in general is that the corporation is extremely selective as to who they let into their archives. Archives exist for the purpose of accessing information about a certain topic, organization, or corporation. The material of corporate archives is the private property of the corporation and the corporation can use them for whatever purpose they desire: either their own personal usage or to open their records up to outsiders. According to the Society of American Archivists Code of Ethics, archivists must act within the bounds of “institutional policies” and they may “place restrictions on access for the protection of privacy or confidentiality of information in the records.”<sup>124</sup> These “institutional policies” are more than likely bent to portray the organization or company in the best light possible. This type of institutional policy begs the question: “What do they not want the public to know?” With regard to the Disney Strike, it is more than likely as simple as the idea that the corporation would rather pretend that it never occurred.

Also scholars struggle with determining simple facts because they were debatable at the time of the strike. Throughout the Disney strike, there were some obvious instances when information was misconstrued to benefit the image of the corporation. The initial dilemmas concerning the legitimacy of the Screen Cartoonists’ Guild allowed

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<sup>124</sup> The Society of American Archivists, *Code of Ethics for Archivists*, 5 February 2005, <[http://www.archivists.org/governance/handbook/app\\_ethics.asp](http://www.archivists.org/governance/handbook/app_ethics.asp)> (15 October 2007).

the company to claim different figures with regard to how many people were actually on strike. Their definition of who was eligible to go out on strike was different from the Screen Cartoonists' Guild. They could also manipulate the payroll and take a certain number of people off. This way, when the company submitted statements that discussed a number of people on the payroll who were absent from work or a number of people who were absent for work who were eligible to strike, they could alter their figures and make the strike seem less significant to the press. Somewhere in the number fiddling, the company appeared to lose track of fifty to one hundred people that the Guild counted as being "strikers".

Most of the primary resources pertaining to the strike are located in California, near the studios. Any resources that are outside of the Disney archives appear to be either personal collections of workers and fans or the collections of various union groups. Access to these sources, particularly for this project, was not a viable option.

Also, the issue of authorized versus unauthorized sources presents a problem for historians. Most historians would consider authorized sources to be a more valid source of information. However, the corporation is in a position to censor these book manuscripts before it gives its permission. Therefore, historians must turn to nontraditional sources or unauthorized sources to find more accurate information. This means that the historian must make many judgment calls as to what true validity is when dealing with sources in this particular area because the standard rules for validity do not apply.

There are not many sources that deal with animation labor history. As a whole, animation labor history is a severely underdeveloped genre within labor history and is left out of many general labor history sources. It appears to not be taken as seriously as the labor history of some of the other great American corporations and labor organizations (such as the steel unions, the automobile unions', the miners' unions, the railroad unions). Generally this appears to be due to the fact that animation does not require dangerous tasks as a part of their job. Also, the entertainment industry would not paralyze the American economy. This industry was different, and it was not taken seriously and still is not taken seriously by historians.

This kind of an industry helped to create a situation where different labor issues (such as intellectual property and professional tensions) were seen, perhaps before their time. The fact that these issues were seen before their time made it difficult for people at the time to recognize them for what they were. These issues went unacknowledged by writers at the time.

The authors of many of the books that were used for this project were animators. These animators had worked for Disney previously, but were no longer employed at the company by the time they wrote their books. Although these books are written by those who participated in the strike, their accounts of what occurred may have changed over time. Much of the bitterness that was felt before the strike and during the strike was lost as time went on. Memory is a constant problem that historians must deal with. These authors would have never published at the time of the strike due to a fear of being blacklisted. However, they chose to publish later on in life, generally as a way to

reminisce about the good-old-days and to give the general public a feel for what they did. Some of this was a way to give credit to the talented artists in the trade. As these authors wrote, their purpose was not to expose any labor struggles or any great professional problems that they encountered. Their purpose was mainly to document their careers and the careers of others. It is from these testimonies that historians must gauge what information is entirely relevant to labor struggles how to deal with such information. Although the authors all seem to acknowledge that there were significant problems within the company before the strike, none of them seem to completely grasp the significance of what these problems meant to labor history.

This project contributes to labor history as a whole by developing the period of labor history between the early 1930s and World War II. It has implications on animation labor history because it looks at this major labor struggle with a different perspective. Animation labor history is an extremely underdeveloped genre within labor history and it deserves more attention in the historiography.

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