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important classic and contemporary films, presents

AMERICAN DREAM

Winner of the Best Documentary Feature Oscar, Barbara Kopple's *American Dream* details the tumultuous 1985–86 labor strike against Hormel Foods in Austin, Minnesota. Fed up with dangerous plant conditions and drastic wage cuts, Austin's Local P-9 went against the advice of its union and, aided by an activist campaign to damage the meat-packing giant's reputation, conducted a nearly yearlong walkout. But as the strike dragged on, some workers found themselves desperate enough to cross the picket line, dividing a community already roiled by blockades, riots, and the intervention of the National Guard. Following up her landmark documentary *Harlan County USA* with another uncompromising report from the trenches of working-class America, Kopple captures the human and political costs of one of the most significant setbacks to organized labor amid the unchecked corporatism of the Reagan era.

DIRECTOR-APPROVED BLU-RAY SPECIAL EDITION FEATURES

New 4K digital restoration, supervised and approved by director Barbara Kopple, with uncompressed monaural soundtrack • Interview from 1992 with Kopple • Trailer • English subtitles for the deaf and hard of hearing • PLUS: An essay by film programmer Thom Powers

A CABIN CREEK FILM PRODUCTION A FILM BY BARBARA KOPPLE "AMERICAN DREAM" EDITED BY CATHY CAPLAN TOM HANEKE LAWRENCE SILK
CINEMATHEATRE BY PETER GILBERT KEVIN KEATING HART PERRY MARK PETERSSON MATTHIEU ROBERTS MUSIC BY MICHAEL SMALL
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AMERICAN DREAM

A FILM BY
**BARBARA
KOPPLE**



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[Continued from reverse] members throughout the country.

Kopple's access to these men is extraordinary. She captures meetings thick with tension, where strategy collides with ego and adrenaline. Each figure is granted dimension, dignity, and contradiction. I couldn't help wondering whether she had held her own judgments about them or any of their strategies during filming. "No, I was drawn to all of them," she told me. "I felt so unbelievably lucky that I was able to tell their stories."

Time itself becomes a central character in the film, wearing down resolve and exposing fault lines. We see the majority of the P-9 membership vote to go on strike in August 1985, against the advice of the UCFW. As the strike drags on, Kopple shows us how the jubilation and camaraderie of the union members give way to the grinding realities of winter on the picket line and households that have to be sustained without a Hormel paycheck, along with doubts about whether they can outlast management. The company shifts production elsewhere, then eventually reopens the plant with replacement workers. One of the film's most poignant story lines follows two brothers, RJ and Ron Bergstrom, both Local P-9 members, who find themselves in different camps and, ultimately, on opposite sides of the picket line. RJ remains loyal to Local P-9, while Ron loses faith in Guyette's approach. Ron belongs to a splinter group of Hormel workers who wish Local P-9 had followed the advice of Anderson instead of Rogers. Kopple sits down with several of these members to hear their perspective. Late in the strike, one normally stoic man breaks into tears as he describes the shame he feels at not being able to provide for

his family. But emotions run high on both sides. At one point, RJ tells a TV reporter of Ron, "He won't be my brother if he crosses the line."

Peter Gilbert, Kopple's main cinematographer on *American Dream*, told me, "That was such an education, how Barbara treated everybody with this beautiful grace and dignity, no matter if she believed your side or not. I learned from her that the real importance of documentary is not which side you're on. It's more about presenting a gray area somewhere in the film, where people who are on opposing sides can connect and have a conversation."

Today I sense a growing curiosity from a younger generation about organized labor. Maybe it coincides with the popularity of Bernie Sanders. Maybe it's the strength in numbers that people feel in organizing movements such as #MeToo, Black Lives Matter, or Debt Collective. Maybe it's the inspiration of organizing Amazon workers, as captured in the 2024 documentary *Union*. Whatever the source, I wasn't feeling that same zeal among young liberals of my generation when *American Dream* came out. Unions felt parochial, unglamorous, even vaguely regressive. On college campuses in those days, you were more likely to find solidarity groups for distant causes—the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, revolutionary struggles in Central America—than for working-class communities closer to home.

When I recently shared that impression with Kopple, she disagreed. "Labor has always been out there," she told me. "Your father worked in a union, or your grandmother or somebody else. It's always of interest to people." I think Kopple is expressing a parallel truth. As we can clearly see in *American Dream*,



Thom Powers is the documentary programmer for the Toronto International Film Festival, a cofounder of the DOC NYC festival, the host of the podcast Pure Nonfiction, and the author of the book Mondo Documentary.

she was engaged with a full-fledged movement of demonstrations, news coverage, and high-profile advocates like Jesse Jackson. But perhaps none of that was reaching my generation, many of whom grew up taking middle-class gains for granted.

Kopple didn't approach the Hormel strike as an allegory or a case study. She went to middle America and stayed there. She filmed people whose politics were mixed, whose values were contradictory, whose grievances were rooted in economic survival rather than ideology. In doing so, she asked her audience to sit with individuals they might otherwise dismiss or overlook. In the decades since, she has continued to apply these filmmaking practices, rooted in her social consciousness and talent for patient observation, spanning topics that include transgender expression, the experiences of war refugees, and voter activation. Two highlights of her later work for me are *Shut Up & Sing* (2006), about the band formerly known as the Dixie Chicks as they mount a comeback from controversy, and *Miss Sharon Jones!* (2015), about the soul singer as she mounts a comeback from cancer.

It makes sense that one of the people who immediately grasped the importance of *American Dream* was Studs Terkel, the legendary Chicago oral historian and author of *Working*. Terkel devoted his career to amplifying the voices of ordinary Americans. He hosted Kopple on his radio show for the film's release. "It has Greek tragic aspects to it. Only it's not the gods that did it. Here it's a company and a union-busting climate," he said. "For me it's the film—feature or documentary—of the past ten years I've seen. And I'll remember this long after I've forgotten every extravaganza."

← essay text overflow

ABOUT THE MASTER

American Dream is presented in the aspect ratio of 1.33:1. Supervised and approved by director Barbara Kopple, this new 4K restoration was created from the 16 mm internegative. The original monaural soundtrack was remastered from the 35 mm DME magnetic track. All elements were provided by the Academy Film Archive. • Mastering supervisors: Lee Kline, Giles Sherwood • Colorist: Anthony Raffaele/Resillion, New York • Image restoration: Prasad Corporation, Burbank, CA • Audio restoration: The Criterion Collection

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Interview with Barbara Kopple from March 31, 1992, courtesy of Charlie Rose, Inc. • Disc mastering: NexSpec

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AMERICAN DREAM

A FILM BY
BARBARA KOPPLE

THE TIME IS RIGHT

BY THOM POWERS

"*American Dream* was the hardest film I ever made," Barbara Kopple recently told me. That's saying a lot for the pioneering documentarian's multidecade career, in which she's taken on such subjects as war reporters, mental illness, gun control, and, smost indelibly, labor struggles. Bear in mind, she had strikebreakers point guns at her while making her first film, *Harlan County, USA* (1976). For that documentary, Kopple, in her late twenties, chronicled Kentucky coal miners and their families in their 1973 strike against a power company. The miners held together through thirteen months of adversity and came out victorious. A decade later, when Kopple undertook *American Dream*, her second film, she was setting out to document a dispute whose stakes, along with the economic and political realities they played out against, were even more complex.

The film follows workers at a Hormel Foods meat-processing plant in Minnesota as they negotiate with management and then go on strike from 1985 to '86. As she had for *Harlan County*, Kopple lived in the community during the production, and she served as her own sound person in a two-person crew, working alongside a 16 mm cinematographer. They were continuously cash-strapped, relying on grants and donations that trickled in. The harsh winter on the picket line was agonizing, and so were the stories unfolding on camera. We witness union members turn on one another



as their convictions diverge, over whether to go on strike in the first place and, later, over whether to stay on strike or cross the picket line. Families and friendships are torn apart. While *Harlan County* is a case study in solidarity, *American Dream* captures the anguish and perils of disunity.

Like *Harlan County*, the film premiered at the New York Film Festival and went on to win the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature. But otherwise the two films had divergent trajectories. *Harlan County, USA* had played in theaters across the country, becoming a breakthrough success for documentaries at the time. *American Dream* saw a more limited release in 1992. In the decades since then, Kopple has noted, *Harlan County, USA* was more frequently sought for retrospective screenings. But as I write this in May 2026, *American Dream* has been restored and rereleased, and new audiences are experiencing it as a revelation. It lands amid fresh upheavals in the labor market against a backdrop of the gig economy, wholesale corporate embrace of AI technology, and ever-widening disparities in wealth.

I got to see *American Dream* during its theatrical release, just a couple of years before I would enter the documentary field myself, part of a mid-'90s generational wave beckoned by the alluring possibilities of new digital video technologies. In the same way that *All the President's Men* had brought about a rise of investigative journalists in the '70s, *Harlan County, USA* and *American Dream* were key inspirations for budding doc makers in the '90s. Kopple's approach, of embedding herself in a community mid-crisis and filming under conditions where nothing was guaranteed—not access, not safety, not narrative resolution—was bracing and aspirational. It

showed us how documentary film could capture history while it was being lived. I can point to countless films released in the late '90s and early aughts that were motivated by her example, including Oscar-nominated works such as *The Farm: Angola USA*, *On the Ropes*, *Capturing the Friedmans*, *Street Fight*, *Deliver Us From Evil*, and *Jesus Camp*. Especially for women who wanted to direct, Kopple stood out as a rare example. Hollywood's institutional barriers in that era were formidable, and they've barely improved.

Nonfiction filmmaking itself has undergone seismic transformations in the intervening decades. Distribution has moved from art-house cinemas to global streaming platforms. As documentaries have become more visible and commercially viable, they have also become more tightly managed, with predefined arcs, beats, and emotional payoffs. The experience of watching *American Dream* today is exhilarating partly because it is the antithesis of this way of thinking. It is part of a tradition of observational cinema that Kopple had learned when working on *Gimme Shelter* (1970) with Albert and David Maysles, two of the originators of Direct Cinema, and, as part of an antiwar film collective, on *Winter Soldier* (1972).

For me as a Midwesterner, Kopple's work on the Hormel strike hit especially close to home. During the mid-1980s, when the film takes place, I was coming of age in Detroit's suburbs and witnessing an economic crisis all around me. For much of the twentieth century, industrial labor had underwritten the American dream. At the height of union power, in the 1950s and 1960s, these jobs provided pathways for working-class people to the kind of stability



and prosperity associated with being middle class, including home ownership, health insurance, and the ability to send kids to college. You wouldn't have called the relationship between owners and workers equitable, but it at least felt reciprocal.

That equilibrium was unraveling by the 1970s. Inflation, globalization, automation, and financialization were eroding industrial employment. Executive compensation soared as wages stagnated. The election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 marked a tipping point. Despite his earlier leadership of the Screen Actors Guild, Reagan cast organized labor as an obstacle to growth. His decision to fire more than 11,000 striking air traffic controllers in 1981 sent a signal. CEOs grew even bolder about demanding concessions and punishing resistance.

The archipelago of industrial cities in the Northeast and Midwest once known as the Steel Belt was now dubbed the Rust Belt. Those of us living there witnessed the transformation, as factories closed and storefronts from urban downtown avenues to small town Main Streets were boarded up. Places ingrained in our families' histories were being shuttered at an alarming rate, accompanied by an existential dread that no one could stop the spiral. This was an experience I seldom saw evoked on a movie screen. One notable exception was *Roger & Me* (1989), the satirical documentary by Michael Moore, who grew up in Flint, Michigan. Three years later, *American Dream* was a different kind of validation. Kopple was an Oscar-winning New Yorker, and she was dedicating her talents to showing why this story mattered.

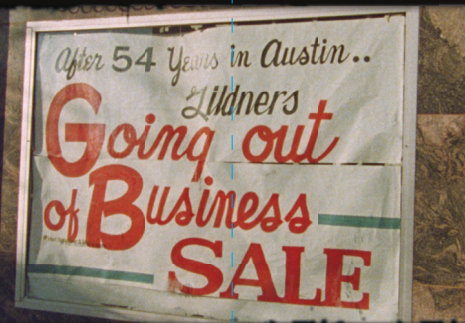
American Dream unfolds in Austin, Minnesota, a small city, surrounded by cornfields, whose civic

identity is inseparable from Hormel, which is headquartered there. In the 1930s, company founder Jay Hormel oversaw the creation of Spam, a low-cost canned meat that became a wartime staple and a symbol—perhaps ironic—of American industrial ingenuity. After his death in 1954, Hormel was remembered locally with nostalgia, as an employer who had honored an implicit social contract between labor and management.

By the early 1980s, that contract had begun to fracture. Hormel was no longer a family-run operation but a modern corporation increasingly beholden to its shareholders. In 1984, despite posting nearly \$30 million in profits, management announced a painful wage cut for meat-packers—from \$10.69 an hour to \$8.25. For workers whose bodies bore the marks of years spent inside the slaughterhouse, it felt like a betrayal.

Kopple's camera takes us inside the plant to show precisely what labor that wage buys. Hogs are stunned, hoisted, disassembled. Their carcasses are carved into portions that will later appear shrink-wrapped and cheerful in grocery aisles. The work is brutal, repetitive, and dangerous. We can see the physical toll and guess at the psychic cost. *Harlan County* had similarly shown the bodily impact of coal mining. Once you've seen it, you can't ignore it.

The first main figure we meet is Jim Guyette, president of Local P-9, the union representing Austin's meat-packers. He's a third-generation Hormel employee in his thirties. Local P-9's members voted him into leadership for his willingness to fight, in contrast to prior leaders who were more conciliatory with



management. The film begins as the calendar is running out on P-9's previous contract. Guyette feels he needs more leverage to face Hormel's hardball negotiators, so he recruits the New York-based labor consultant Ray Rogers, who earned a name for himself working on the late-'70s textile-workers campaign dramatized in the film *Norma Rae*. Rogers uses confrontational tactics and media events in an effort to win popular support for unions. He devises a strategy for union supporters to hold demonstrations outside the headquarters of a key Hormel stockholder, First Bank of Minnesota.

Throughout this process, Kopple captures the mood swings within the community of P-9 workers. Hormel workers hadn't been on strike since 1933. During meetings at the union hall, we witness diverging opinions. Some members are fired up. Others are skeptical about whether Rogers's approach is working. The film skillfully interweaves a range of community voices that foreshadows greater tensions ahead.

The dynamics grow more fraught when the film reveals that Guyette and Rogers face another source of friction from within the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union—Local P-9's parent organization. We meet Lewie Anderson, the chain-smoking UFCW negotiator who represents tens of thousands of meat-packers nationwide, including members at plants making far less than Hormel's workers. Anderson believes it's the wrong time for hardball tactics. He's convinced that Local P-9's tactics are counterproductive and will further weaken the already fragile position of the union's [Continued on reverse]

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AMERICAN DREAM

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