

Contact Information:

Brian Myers, Producer/Director

Phone: 619-796-1134 (call/text)

Email: myersbam@gmail.com

Webpage: southerndocumentaryfund.org/dont-cross-our-picket-line/

Nonfiction filmmaker developing documentary film about 1950 strike at American Enka in Morristown/Lowland and seeks regional input, participation

March 21, 2023 - Morristown, TN - Independent nonfiction filmmaker Brian Myers of Knoxville is developing a documentary film about the 1950 strike at American Enka Corporation with support from labor scholars Jennifer E. Brooks, Danielle Phillips-Cunningham, Jon Shefner, and T.R.C. Hutton. The director seeks participants of the strike and/or their descendants for oral history recording and invites family members and community actors to perform textual affidavits to express participants' experiences. The project, *Don't Cross Our Picket Line*, is proposed for public media audiences.

The story: 73 years ago on March 28 workers at the American Enka Corporation at Lowland, Tennessee walked off the job. The next five months of the strike would catch the attention of newspapers across the country. Hostility at the picket line overwhelmed the local sheriff and he called in support from regional state troopers. News reports and testimony reveal the stationed state troopers violently detained striking workers and aggressively enforced racial inequality by targeting unaffiliated Black residents. Additional disturbances occurred when the company initiated a back to work movement and started replacing workers on strike.

Reports of violence moved Governor Gordon Browning to send the Tennessee National Guard. The state militia occupied company property for a week. They arrested striking workers for violation of local injunctions and allowed newly hired workers to safely replace workers on strike. The union and national press questioned the use of the Guard during the strike. Was it just peacekeeping or strategy to break the strike, they asked. US Senators on the Committee on Labor and Public Welfare speculated as well and formed a subcommittee to investigate. The senators held a hearing at Morristown High School and heard testimony from union and company officials, as well as striking and returning workers. Senator Huberty Humphrey called the turmoil of the strike a result of the recent federal labor law reform, the Taft-Hartley Act (Labor Management Relations Act of 1947). When the national representatives left town and it was clear there were no satisfactory solutions to end the strike, both returning workers and striking workers armed themselves for self-defense.

"The strike became notorious for its association with company retaliation and violence even at a time when federal support for organized labor was near its zenith. The Morristown area would later be the center-point for labor disputes in the electronics and meatpacking sectors, and a prime example of a town victimized by de-industrialization and globalism. Its story is a vital facet of American labor history."

-T.R.C. Hutton (Associate Professor of History and Appalachian Studies at Glenville State College)

Director's statement: The strike provides a unique entry of this time period to explore: following World War II with many veterans, after changes to federal labor law, during Jim Crow racial segregation with Black workers confined to the custodial department, at a workplace with a large percentage of women, as part of an ambitious southern labor organizing drive, and a regional shift from agrarian to industrial labor. It raises the questions: What did this new industry mean for workers of the area and why did the strike escalate how it did?