

Salt of the Earth

Grounds Students in Hope

By S.J. CHILDS

HOW DO I TEACH SOCIAL STUDIES without depressing students with all those stories about injustice? How do I investigate the effects of colonialism and globalization but not perpetuate a view of victimization? How do I help students think critically about the suffering in the world without making it one long sad story?

Over the years I included in my curriculum at Portland, Ore., Franklin High School examples of resistance, set up simulations and activities where students challenged the system or took on the roles of change-makers. Still, I sent too many students into the world as cynical young adults when what I wanted was to empower students to become active citizens—thinking critically about society, identifying its problems and working toward solutions. I wanted to start this school year with one hopeful story we could return to repeatedly. I found it in *Salt of the Earth*, a compelling and dramatic film that demonstrates alliances, solidarity, and resistance.

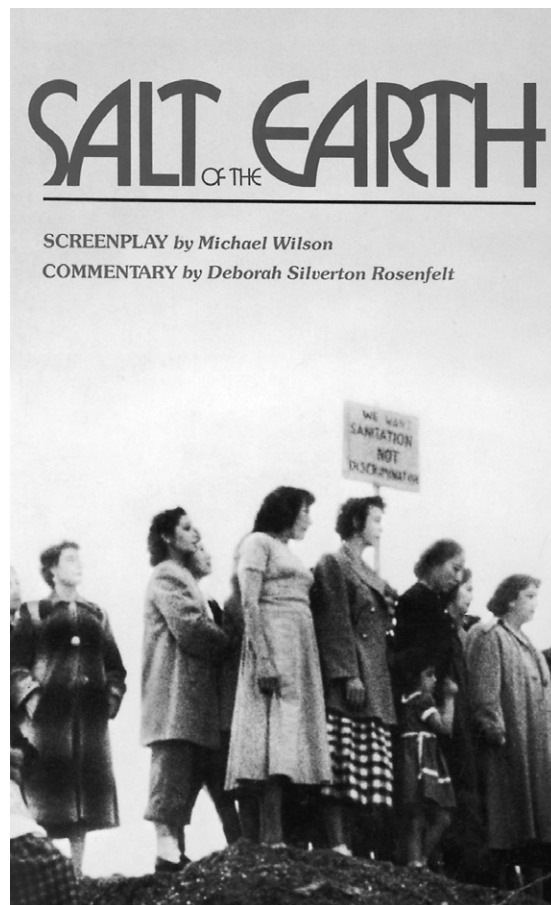
Salt of the Earth was made in 1953 about a miners' strike in New Mexico. It deals with the struggle for worker equality as well as the fight for racial and

gender equity. Many of the actual mine workers and their families played parts in the film. Because of its pro-labor sentiments, the U.S. government saw the film as Communist propaganda and blacklisted it. The lead actress in the film, Rosaura Revueitas, was even deported to Mexico before the film was finished. This redbaiting campaign is documented in a book from Feminist Press, also titled *Salt of the Earth*.

Collective Triumph

The film shows the collective triumph of a town over the mine owners. The heroine is Esperanza, the wife of one of the min-

ers. She and the other women in town not only give men their support, they provide them with leadership and sacrifice—inserting themselves into a union discussion, taking over the picket line when the men cannot, and going to jail. This film celebrates alliances—between the women and the mineworkers, the Anglo and the Mexican workers.



I first planned to show this video within the opening week of my Global Studies course in 2001, but Sept. 11 and “Operation Enduring Freedom” took over the country and my curriculum. Yet the discussion of the blacklisting of *Salt of the Earth* fit perfectly with a look at the U.S.A. Patriot Act’s expansion of police powers and then-White House Press Secretary Ari Fleischer’s warning to “watch what you say.” We examined who might be swept up in the government’s broad definition of “terrorist” (see “Whose Terrorism?” in the Rethinking Schools publication, *A People’s History for the Classroom*) and identified the similarities between the broad use of the term *terrorist* and the earlier use of the word *communist* to mean someone who is against U.S. policies.

Resistance—how people make change and challenge injustice—became the course’s central theme. Through their analysis of *Salt of the Earth*, students engaged in a close-up examination of how change happens and what is needed to create social movements.

Although *Salt of the Earth* is a black-and-white film, students quickly became engaged with the story and the characters. The students watched as Esperanza (whose name in Spanish means Hope) overcame her role as frustrated and isolated housewife to join other women on the picket line when their mining husbands could no longer do so. They clapped when Esperanza gave her husband a quick lesson in gender politics when he moans about taking care of the kids. He tells her, “If you think I’m gonna play nursemaid from now on, you’re crazy. I’ve had these kids all day.” She shouts back, “I’ve had them their whole lives!” Students cheered as the jailed women refuse to be cowed by the police, and when the whole town comes to their aid as they are evicted from their company-owned housing.

Acts of Resistance

During the film, I asked students to list the acts of resistance they saw (see box). I wanted them to be able to identify how often the characters worked for change and how even the littlest acts can add up to great change. Their list included Esperanza standing on the picket line when her husband Ramón told her not to, Ramón telling the company man he wanted his workers to be safe, women asking to vote at the union meeting, Ramón refusing to strike a police officer after being hit, townspeople

returning the furniture to a house after an eviction, women demanding food in jail, the son skipping school to stay with the picketers and forming a kid brigade. Students noticed that what most of the characters were doing was standing up for what they thought was right and speaking out. “They are fighters and do what they believe is right,” wrote Matt.

I wanted students to see themselves in these fighters, to recognize the strength they have to “do what they believe is right.” I wanted them to

recognize that change-makers aren’t always impressive heroic figures, but ordinary people like themselves, doing small things for a bigger cause. I asked them to explain what they had in common with any of the characters.

Some were unable to see any similarities, even as they articulated them. Rithy, a student leader, said, “I don’t see that they have anything in common with me, except some leadership skills and a will to change things.” Others found a lot to relate to in the film. “I am half Mexican, and sadly some still look down upon us, and believe we are all ‘dirty,’” wrote Nerissa, “Esperanza was 100 percent right and so was everyone else. They fought for a better life and to show that Mexicans are just as equal as everyone else and will go to any lengths for their cause. I would do the same.”

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Eric, a gay activist who started our Gay-Straight Alliance at Franklin, wrote, “As a homosexual, I feel as though my rights aren’t acknowledged. I feel a connection with Esperanza’s fuel and fire and her desire to organize and win. Her fight for equality is worthy. I am working for the same thing.”

Catey, who identifies herself as a conservative Christian, could see a common bond between herself and the miners’ wives. “I am like the group of women that wanted to participate in the strike. I have a hard time sitting back and letting others control things. I like to be involved in organizing, planning, and executing.”

Responding to the Film

I also asked students to respond to dialogue from the film. Many students reacted to a scene where Esperanza gives her defeated husband a talking to after he puts her down. “Why must you say to me, ‘Stay in your place’? Do you feel better having someone lower than you? ... I don’t want anything lower than I am. I am low enough already. I want to rise. And push everything up with me as I go.” Students appreciated Esperanza’s hopefulness and her inclusivity. “She doesn’t want others to suffer as she has,” Eric wrote. “She cares about other people in spite of the hard times she has gone through.”

The history of the film is as compelling as its story, because the making of the film itself stands as an example of resistance. Excerpts from the book *Salt of the Earth* could be a valuable supplement to showing the film. The book includes interviews and stories about the making of the film. That the government viewed the making of the movie as dangerous both amused and alarmed my students, who saw possible parallels



Rosaura Revueltas, who played Esperanza in the movie *Salt of the Earth*, in 1956.

Hector Garcia/Associated Press

in the post-9/11 political climate.

Anna noted the importance (and the danger) of casting actual mine workers and their families in key roles in the film. “Using real people in the film showed us who these ‘enemies of the state’ really were and that they were willing to stand up to anyone to get this film made. These ordinary people, these struggling people were making a difference.”

In our brainstorm after the film, students

identified several key elements of resistance:

- Time and patience.
- Determination and a willingness to struggle.
- Common beliefs and clear goals.
- Equity—a chance for all voices to be heard.
- A plan—arrived at together, divided into baby steps with lots of alternatives.
- Organization—divided responsibility, small groups.
- Courage—taking risks in spite of fear.
- Caution—using good judgment.
- Alliances—connection to larger causes/ connection to other groups.

I wrote this list on big poster paper and taped it on the wall, where it stayed the entire year. We often referred back to it and added on. For example, after we watched a documentary film on the black union struggle in apartheid South Africa, I asked students to discuss why union members were willing to take serious risks for this cause and what other elements

of resistance they would add to our list. They added:

- Leadership.
- Education about and for the cause.
- Music and song.
- Faith/inspiration/religion.
- Use of the media—incidents that catch media attention.

Just recently we discussed what the Native population of the Northwest Territories could do as their culture is threatened by “Western media influence” and Canada’s desire for oil. Catey gestured to the list and said, “What about alliances? The Canadian government isn’t going to back down easily. These folks need help. Aren’t there other groups who share the same goals?” We then discussed what kind of groups might be interested in working with the Inuit and Déné.

Being able to tie all our studies back to the theme of resistance helps us shift our focus from oppression and despair to organizing, determination, planning, solidarity, and hope. After viewing the film *Trinkets and Beads* about the fight of the Huaorani Indians in eastern Ecuador against oil companies’ drilling in the Amazon rainforest, I asked students whether they saw any similarities between this story and *Salt of the Earth*. Elizabeth said the Huaorani marching through the streets of Quito reminded her of the women taking over the picket line in *Salt of the Earth*. “You could tell that the people watching them thought they shouldn’t be there. But I was so glad to see it. They were doing exactly what needed to be done.” Jared said that Moi, a Huaorani leader, reminded him of Esperanza. “Moi is tough. He is fighting back when it seems hopeless. But he knows he has to win.” [See *Rethinking Globalization: Teaching for Justice in an Unjust World* for teaching activities on the Huaoranis’ struggle.]

What’s So Dangerous?

Before Sept. 11, I had not thought to emphasize the issue of what was so dangerous about *Salt of the Earth* and to whom. But I added this question in order to help students connect the film with current issues. They did much more than that. Students recognized that Esperanza and the women were challenging a gender hierarchy, while Mexicans and Anglos working together confronted expectations of racial division that benefited mine owners who depended on a divide-and-conquer strategy to maintain their power. And, they knew that striking workers challenged corporate power.

But the students also surprised me with their awareness of more subtle issues. In class discussion, one student said, “The film celebrates people working together and caring for one another in a way that makes it safer to take risks. Working miners from other communities supported the nonworking strikers. It showed to what lengths people go to help one another and that they share a common cause. Our society doesn’t want to celebrate this kind of caring. It likes to foster competition.” In class, Catey put it bluntly, “The very idea

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of resistance itself is what was so dangerous.” In writing she went further. “If a group of people got together and organized themselves, then they can change things. That concept was dangerous to the United States.” Her sentiments echo those of Juan Chacon, who played Ramón in the film, one of the actual mine workers and the union leader of Local 890. He says, “This picture isn’t against. It’s for! It shows what we can do when we organize and we and Anglo workers organize together. The companies around here have always been afraid of Anglo-Mexican unity. [They try to] separate us from our brothers.”

More than I could have hoped, using *Salt of the Earth* and coming back to it all year has

shifted the dialogue in our class and the focus for my students. This is not to say that sadness and frustration doesn't overtake us as we study the events of the day and the patterns of globalization, but now students have ideas and a vision to fight back with. ■

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Salt of the Earth and *Trinkets and Beads* are available from www.teachingforchange.org/. The book *Salt of the Earth* (1978) is available from Feminist Press, Old Westbury, NY. *Rethinking Globalization* and *A People's History for the Classroom* are available from Rethinking Schools, www.rethinkingschools.org/.



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Worksheet Questions

on *Salt of the Earth*

SALT OF THE EARTH was made in 1953 about a mining strike in New Mexico. It deals with the struggle for worker equality and for racial and gender equity. The film was made during the

McCarthy era, and it was blacklisted for containing “Communist propaganda.” Please view the film carefully, taking notes, so that you can answer the following questions thoroughly.

Questions:

1. List the various alliances you see throughout the film. When did people cross out of their comfort zones or groups to help others and when did they act in solidarity?
2. List the various instances of resistance during the film. When do you see people working for change, challenging authority or the status quo?
3. What are the necessary elements for successful resistance?
4. What do you have in common with any of the characters or any of the groups in the film?
5. Discuss one quote from the film.
6. This film, according to the U.S. government, contained dangerous propaganda. What ideas in this film were considered dangerous and to whom?
7. Tell a story, in as much detail as you can, that shows what you mean when you say “we.” In other words, tell about a time when you acted as an ally for someone or in solidarity with someone, or when someone acted in solidarity with or as an ally for you. Use the elements of narrative—dialogue, blocking, character development, setting description, etc. Show, don’t tell.