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Teaching Note *Song of the Canary*

by Saul Slapikoff

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CLIMATE STRIKE BIRD BY BEC YOUNG

***Song of the Canary*. Directed by Josh Hanig and David Davis. Distributed by New Day Films, 58 minutes.**

S*ong of the Canary*, a film about occupational safety and health, is really two films in one. The first deals with the experiences and problems faced by workers in a California-based chemical company producing pesticides. As a result of their interviews with workers in the plant, the filmmakers discovered that all of the workers exposed to a particular pesticide, DBCP, were sterile. This discovery, the resulting national attention focused on it by the media, and the feelings of anger, anguish, and renewed determination of the workers and their union to deal with health and safety issues are vividly documented. Shown as well, interwoven with these responses, are glimpses of hopelessness and resignation among the affected workers regarding their own fates that are especially poignant.

The second half of the film depicts the struggle of a group of mainly older (some prematurely) North Carolina textile workers, disabled by brown lung disease, to gain compensation for their disabilities. Their organizing of the Carolina Brown Lung Association and their bouts with the state government and mill owners are touchingly drawn. Their strength and determination in the face of their terrible physical disabilities and powerful enemies are inspiring.

Both segments of the film clearly delineate the conflict between the workers' interests in effective occupational safety and health programs and the corporate owners' interests in maximizing profits and maintaining control of the process of production. Interviews with the corporate managers make clear the total lack of human concern in their pursuit of profit.

While I have used *Song of the Canary* in my Environmental Toxicology course at Tufts, it has also been used in courses on Community Health, Sociology, and Environmental Economics, and in a biology course for non-majors. Because of its sensitive portrayal of the lives and feelings of the workers involved, the film transcends its focus on occupational safety and health issues and should be a useful addition to any course that deals with the lives of workers and the meaning of work in modern corporate America.

Saul Slapikoff (1931 - 2022) taught biology at Tufts University and also directed its American Studies Department, which he helped establish. He published *Consider and Hear Me: Voices from Palestine and Israel* (Temple University Press, 1992) and later developed as a playwright, working with the Underground Railway Theater in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He served for over four decades on the Editorial Board of *Radical Teacher*.



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