



Discussion questions to consider:

1. Why did Norma Rae work so hard to organize a union?
2. The moment Norma Rae holds up the "UNION" sign while standing on a piece of machinery in the factory is famous – and powerful. But it wasn't, in itself, what caused change. What made that moment possible?
3. Why are some workers opposed to the formation of a union where they work?
4. In this 1979 film, unions and union organizers are portrayed as heroes. Today, unions are often portrayed in a far worse light. Why is that? What changed?
5. Do you think a right to collective bargaining is important?
6. Where do your feelings about unions come from? Experience in a union? The media? Friends and family?
7. Are you encouraged by what the organizers accomplished or discouraged by how much time and work it took?
8. Do you think workers can have the same benefits without unions as they can with unions?
9. Do you think unions prioritize the needs of their women members?
10. How are unions today helping *all* workers, not just their members?
11. Norma Rae's gender and sexuality are focal points. Does that detract from her power? What would the film have been like without that theme?
12. Do you think management was portrayed fairly? Do all companies oppose unionization?
13. Do you make an effort to support union businesses when you shop?
14. During the union meeting at Norma Rae's house, workers shared their negative experiences working in the mill. As they did, it became clear their problem was collective, not individual. Is that important? Why or why not?

Crystal Lee Sutton, the real “Norma Rae” was a fighter to the end

By Bruce Raynor, President of Workers United
September 14, 2009



Our nation has lost a great hero and champion of working people. Crystal Lee Sutton was a courageous woman who stood up for herself and her co-workers under the most difficult circumstances. She was an inspiration to organizers in this union and beyond, particularly Southern women who went on to lead their own campaigns after learning from her example.

It's well-known that Crystal's story was the inspiration for the academy award-winning 1979 film *Norma Rae*, but I wish more people knew the real story of Crystal Lee Sutton and her co-workers, and the strength and honor they showed as they fought anti-worker companies.

For decades, JP Stevens called the shots in Roanoke Rapid, North Carolina, paying poverty wages and offering deplorably unsafe

working conditions. Workers routinely lost fingers, inhaled cotton dust, and lost hearing due to the deafening drone of machinery. JP Stevens was so vehemently anti-union that it systematically purchased small unionized textile mills in the south only to close them down. But as determined as JP Stevens was to keep its workers down, Crystal Lee Sutton was even more determined to lift them up and bring them a union.

Sutton knew that she and her co-workers deserved more out of their employer and in 1973, she found a way to bring that change when she agreed to help organize the plant with the assistance of the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU) and its lead organizer, Eli Zivkovich.

JP Stevens mounted one of the most vigorously hostile union-busting efforts ever seen in U.S. history, amounting in over 122 unfair labor practice findings. But Sutton could not be deterred and at the end of a 10-year boycott, the 3,000 workers at JP Stevens won their 17 year fight with a strong contract.

She fought her whole life for working people, and as she fought cancer, she continued to be an advocate for the needs of working people. Once again, Crystal's story is of both an extraordinary woman and of every woman. Like so many other working families, after a lifetime of paying premiums, her health insurance coverage failed her. She took her challenges head on, and never stopped fighting for what was right. While she fought cancer she spoke out about the struggle she had with the health care system and the toll it was taking on her family.

Crystal Lee Sutton is an inspiration to every worker who holds out hope and is prepared to fight for justice and respect at work. Our condolences go to her family, but they should know that we will not forget her, and she continues to inspire our union and workers throughout the world.

Reprinted from: <http://www.seiu.org/2009/09/crystal-lee-sutton-the-real-norma-rae-was-a-fighter-to-the-end.php>