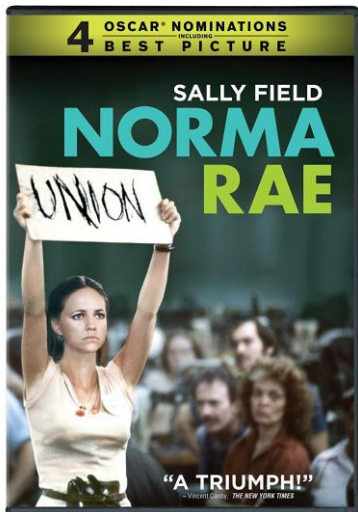


Movie Kit



American
Spaces



Norma Rae

Year of Release: 1979

Rating: PG

Length: 1h 54 min

Director: Martin Ritt

Starring: Sally Field, Ron Liebman, Beau Bridges

English level: Medium

Themes: Women's Empowerment, Human Rights, Racial Equality

Warning/General Advisory

Includes some profane language and mild sex/nudity.

Norma Rae is an inspirational story of one woman's courage to confront authority. Based on a true story, Norma Rae (played by Sally Field) is a young woman who works long hard hours in a cotton mill. The pay is terrible, the bosses are oppressive and the working conditions are damaging the mill workers' health. But as a single mother with two children to feed, she can't afford to quit. In what turns out to be a life-changing event, Norma Rae hears a powerful speech by a union organizer, Reuben Warshowsky (played by Ron Liebman). The speech emboldens her to try to convince her co-workers to form a union to seek better working conditions. The mill's management is prepared to take whatever steps necessary to stop her. Norma Rae is determined that her efforts will not fail... Sally Field won the Academy Award for Best Actress for her portrayal of *Norma Rae*.

Context

The fictitious textile mill seen in *Norma Rae* was based on an actual mill in the southern U.S. state of North Carolina. Many of the events portrayed in the movie actually occurred. The character Norma Rae is drawn from a real person named Crystal Lee Sutton who tried to unionize mill workers in the 1970s. It was a time when union representation was especially weak in the southern United States. As depicted in the film, working conditions in these cotton mills were harsh and the pay was low. The incident in the film where Norma Rae holds up a sign with the word "UNION" written on it really happened after the real-life Norma Rae was fired by the mill for trying to unionize employees.

Today, textile mills look very different than they did in Norma Rae's time. Although there are now fewer workers, they are making higher wages, and working in cleaner, safer and largely automated mills. Many of these mills remain non-unionized today.

Key Vocabulary/Places

- **Textile mill** – a factory that manufactures fabric and other woven items
- **Labor union** – a collective group of workers who join together to protect their rights and interests, such as on pay and working conditions
- **Strike** - a refusal to work organized by a group of employees as a form of protest
- **Picket line** – a boundary established by workers on strike, especially at the entrance to the place of work, that others are asked not to cross
- **Spot-checkin'** - a close look at a few items in a group
- **Contempt citation** – issued to someone if they violate a court order
- **Character assassination** – an attack on an individual's reputation
- **“Fish out of water”** – when a person does not feel comfortable in a new environment

Discussion Questions

- Why are so many of the workers at the textile mill hesitant on forming a union?
- What were the working conditions like at the mill?
- What steps did management take to prevent the union from organizing?
- What responsibilities does an employer have to its employees? What systems or regulations are in place to ensure that employers follow through on their commitments?
- How would you describe Norma Rae?
- Who are some women who have shaped our communities and our world?
- Who are some women role models in your lives? These role models do not have to be people you know personally. What do you admire about these women?
- Today, people in the work force often have to balance many competing demands of their time – particularly managing families and their jobs, as we also saw in the movie. What are both women and men doing to achieve a “work-life balance”?