

**Restructuring the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, 1927-  
1933: Power, Producers and the Promise of Unity**

Sophie Vannan

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

The University of Sydney

December 2025

*A thesis submitted to fulfil the requirements of the degree of Master of Arts (Research)*

This is to certify that the content of this thesis is my own work. This thesis has not been submitted for any other degree or purpose.

I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work, and that all assistance received in preparing this thesis and all sources have been acknowledged.

Sophie Vannan

This research was supported by an Australian Government Research Training Program (RTP) Scholarship.

No content produced by generative AI tools has been used in the preparation of this thesis.

## **Acknowledgements**

Thank you to my lead supervisor, Associate Professor Sarah Gleeson-White for your extraordinary assistance on this project. Thank you for your encouragement, generosity and providing invaluable insight and guidance as I completed this thesis. Thank you to my supervisors Dr Aaron Nyerges and Dr Nienke Boer for your thought-provoking and encouraging feedback. Thank you to my friends and family, for your constant support and giving me all the confidence I needed to finish this thesis.

I would like to acknowledge the professional editing assistance provided by Justine McNamara. Her editing services were conducted in accordance with Part 2 of the University of Sydney Thesis and Examination of Higher Degrees by Research Procedures, 2020 guidelines, as well as Parts D and E of the Australian Standards for Editing Practice.

## **Abstract**

This thesis examines two distinctive historical accounts of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, particularly connected to its foundation and its activity relating to worker unionisation in the 1920s and 1930s. The official version, offered by the Academy, begins with its foundation and adoption of a non-profit label in 1927. The account continues to outline its support for film preservation and its celebration of filmmakers through its annual awards show. However, if we turn to archival material – correspondence, newspaper items, and original Academy documentation – we discover an unofficial history. This material reveals that the Academy, from the very beginning, was controlled by producer interests, and that those interests worked to thwart worker unionisation efforts. This thesis argues that the Academy structured itself in specific ways to ensure that power was concentrated at the top of the organisation, with the board of directors. This structure enabled the board to drive the Academy to intervene in matters relating to unionisation. Between 1927 and 1933, the Academy always ensured that the status quo was respected, and real change never occurred. However, I also discover that the Academy needed to structure itself in this tiered system to succeed. At a time of great technological change, when external groups were probing industry morality, the Academy's structure facilitated collaboration between fragmented motion-picture studios. Reconsidering the Academy's foundation and paying particular attention to its structure, reveals a contradiction between the Academy's rhetoric and its actions. I argue that it is out of this contradiction, that we gain a more rigorous understanding of why the Academy needed to centralise its power. Finally, I discover that many of the key elements integral to the early Academy's tiered power structure, endure into the modern structure of the Academy today.

## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	6
Chapter 1 – Structural Foundations: Establishing the Academy, 1927.....	23
Chapter 2 – Structural Success: The Academy’s First Victory, June 1927.....	51
Chapter 3 – Structural Decline: The Academy on the Brink of Collapse, 1933.....	69
Conclusion.....	95
Bibliography.....	102

## Introduction

On July 13, 2023, the president of the Screen Actors Guild–American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA), Fran Drescher, announced that the union, representing one hundred and six thousand performers, would be going on strike.<sup>1</sup> SAG-AFTRA joined the Writers Guild of America (the WGA), for the first dual strike in sixty-three years.<sup>2</sup> Both groups were united against the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (the AMPTP); during multiple failed attempts at negotiation the AMPTP placed “persistent downward pressure on wages and working conditions.”<sup>3</sup> On October 9, 2023, one hundred and forty-eight days after the WGA’s strike began, the union ratified a deal.<sup>4</sup> The following month on November 9, 2023, SAG-AFTRA also reached a tentative deal.<sup>5</sup>

Four months later, during the 96<sup>th</sup> Academy Awards (colloquially known as the Oscars), held on March 10, 2024 at the Dolby Theatre in Los Angeles, during his opening monologue, host Jimmy Kimmel acknowledged the significance of the strikes. Kimmel described the agreements as “historic,” and went on to say, “we can be proud of the fact that this long and difficult work stoppage taught us that this very strange town of ours...at its heart is a union town.”<sup>6</sup> Most significantly, Kimmel concluded, “the reason we were able to make a deal is because of the people who rallied beside us...let’s have a very well deserved round of

---

<sup>1</sup> Katie Kilkenny, “Would You Do It Again? A Year After the Strikes, Hollywood Reckons with the Aftermath,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, July 19, 2024, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/business/business-news/actors-writers-strikes-one-year-later-1235950418/>

<sup>2</sup> Natalie Jarvey, “The Year That Broke Hollywood,” *Vanity Fair*, December 20, 2023, <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/the-year-that-broke-hollywood>

<sup>3</sup> Kilkenny, “Would You Do It Again?”

<sup>4</sup> Wendy Lee and Stacy Perman, “WGA Members Easily Ratify New Contract to End 148-Day Strike as Anxieties Loom,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 9, 2023, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/business/story/2023-10-09/wga-members-easily-approve-contract-to-end-148-day-strike>

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Dalton and Krysta Fauria, “Hollywood’s Strikes are Both Now Over as Actors Reach Deal with Studios and Return to Work with Writers,” *The Associated Press*, November 10, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/actors-strike-ends-hollywood-5769ab584bca99fe708c67d00d2ec241>

<sup>6</sup> Jimmy Kimmel, “Jimmy Kimmel’s Oscars Monologue 2024,” monologue, March 10, 2024, posted March 11, 2024, by Jimmy Kimmel Live, YouTube, at 11:21, 11:58-12:09, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IYuS3XEJsbY>

applause for the people who work behind the scenes...all the people who refused to cross the picket lines.”<sup>7</sup> At this moment people working behind the stage at the ceremony appeared, with attendees applauding. This juxtaposition of the glamour of an award ceremony against the rhetoric of hard work and determination, transformed the self-congratulatory ceremony, for a moment, into a celebration of unionism.<sup>8</sup>

According to *The Associated Press*, more than nineteen million people across the United States watched the 96<sup>th</sup> Academy Awards ceremony.<sup>9</sup> The broadcast, held by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (the Academy), whose members also make up the ceremony’s voting body, remains one of the most watched live events annually. By having a moment that honoured unionism, the 2024 version of the Academy organisation endorsed and celebrated the movement. It is curious then, when turning towards the organisation itself, that its own history connected to labour relations is absent from official sources. In what follows, I look back into the history of the Academy to reconsider and recontextualise the organisation and its role in the motion-picture industry in the early twentieth century. I reveal the organisation’s structure to emphasise the level of control the Academy’s board held, and to highlight how the board influenced and impacted the motion-picture industry between 1927 and 1933, especially in labour matters. It becomes evident that the Academy has, since its inception, curated an organisational narrative that limits the acknowledgement of the organisation’s anti-union origins. When evaluating the accuracy of the Academy’s own historical account, it becomes clear that the modern Academy is concealing elements of its past because they do not align with the current Academy ethos.

---

<sup>7</sup> Kimmel, “Jimmy Kimmel’s Oscars Monologue 2024,” at 12:34-54.

<sup>8</sup> I use the term “unionism” as it relates to unions and unionisation. That is, the collective and coordinated efforts of workers to address their grievances with their employer.

<sup>9</sup> Andrew Dalton, “Oscars Get Audience Bump from ‘Barbie’ and ‘Oppenheimer,’ but Ratings Aren’t Quite a Blockbuster,” *The Associated Press*, March 12, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/oscars-2024-ratings-barbie-oppenheimer-7ced9e47263fee4f5c17cb111fe38638>

With a particular focus on the Academy's structure, I will show that, from its foundation in 1927, the Academy structured itself to concentrate power at the top of the organisation, with its board of directors. There are several elements to this structure. The Academy is a hierarchical organisation, which is shaped like a pyramid. The board of directors sit at the top, with committees and officers in the second tier, and general members below. The Academy's membership in 1927 was composed of five branches – producers, directors, writers, actors and technicians.<sup>10</sup> Board membership, committee assignment and the designation to an officer position were dependant on an individual's membership category. This pyramid will be detailed further in Chapter One.

Curation is an essential element of both the 1927 Academy and the Academy of 2025. The Academy was, and remains, a selective organisation. It only extends invitations to those the board has determined have made an extraordinary contribution to the motion-picture industry. In 1927, this limited the organisation's membership to those the original thirty-six founders (then known as sponsors) believed could bolster the level of power the organisation had.<sup>11</sup> This suggests that inherent to the Academy's design is the isolation and separation of its membership from the general motion-picture industry. In this way, it is an organisation composed of the elite that operates to serve them. I am using the term "elite" here to refer to

---

<sup>10</sup> In the early American motion-picture industry, a producer was "in charge of production." While some directors such as "Frank Capra at Columbia...[and] King Vidor at MGM...enjoyed ample preparation time," it was rare for a director to have a comparable degree of control over a production. See Tino Balio, *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930-1939* (University of California Press, 1995) 77, 79.

<sup>11</sup> The original thirty-six Academy sponsors were Douglas Fairbanks, Fred Niblo, Cecil B. DeMille, Conrad Nagel, Richard Barthelmess, Jesse Lasky, Harry Rapf, Charles Christie, Jeanie Macpherson, Irving Thalberg, Joseph M. Farnham, Bess Meredith, Mary Pickford, Joseph M. Schenck, Milton Sills, Frank Lloyd, M.C. Levee, Raoul Walsh, Fred Beetsen, Edwin Loeb, Milton Hoffman, Jack Warner, Henry King, Benjamin Glazer, Louis. B. Mayer, Harold Lloyd, Jack Holt, Carey Wilson, Cedric Gibbons, Roy Pomeroy, Sid Grauman, J.A. Ball, Harry Warner, John Stahl, George Cohen and Frank Woods, from Organization Banquet, invitation, 1927, invitation to Mr. Sidney Alcott to the Academy Organization Banquet, AMPAS Reference Collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Los Angeles, CA, 2, <https://digitalcollections.oscars.org/digital/collection/p15759coll4/id/5826/rec/3>.

members of the American motion-picture industry who had achieved professional success or had a professional or personal connection to someone on the Academy's board. For example, Fred Niblo, one of the Academy's original sponsors, was handpicked by Louis B. Mayer - who was, as we shall see, the man who had the idea to form the Academy - to complete MGM's *Ben Hur* in 1924.<sup>12</sup> Niblo was trusted with an expensive international production, and in this way, Niblo's inclusion as an original Academy sponsor is explained through his professional working relationship with Mayer.

The Academy is only as powerful as its membership. The Academy's membership structure separated members into tiers, these tiers determined who could and could not vote on matters, or receive committee assignments. In 1927, the tiered membership system elevated original Academy sponsors into the most powerful positions, which allowed those with a shared vision of the Academy to control the organisation. Members invited to join the Academy after the Academy's official launch on May 11, 1927, had significantly less influence over organisational decisions. This is not to say that the first invited members of the Academy had no purpose; in fact, the Academy's structure relied on their power. While the Academy's board controlled who was and was not invited to join the organisation, in addition to who received committee assignments, the fifteen original board members needed the appearance of a strong and robust organisation. Therefore, the Academy's board was strategic in terms of whom they invited. As Chapter One will show, in response to studio executives using the producers association to issue industry-wide salary cuts in June 1927, the Academy's board issued a resolution that leveraged the power of the Academy's producers branch against the established producers association. The Academy's board issued a directive to the producers branch which requested that they ignore their association, it also called for their loyalty and

---

<sup>12</sup> Jon Whitcomb, "Ben-Hur Rides Again," *Cosmopolitan*, December 1959, vol. 147, issue 6, 27.

asked them to pause the proposed salary cuts. The Academy's resolution, which was signed by the individual members of the board, used the power of its producers branch to force the producers association into negotiations. Without the powerful leverage of its producers branch, it is unclear whether the Academy's resolution would have been successful.

After demonstrating how the efficacy of the Academy's board hinged on the power of its members, I conclude my thesis with an exploration of the malfunctioning of its structure. In Chapter Three, I argue that by 1933 the Academy was fracturing from the inside. This occurred as a result of many external pressures, including accusations that the Academy was prioritising the producers' position over the opinions of its other members, as well as the effects of the Great Depression. The combination of these factors caused most Academy members to become alienated with the organisation. Additionally, six years into the Academy's involvement in labour matters, it was also evident that the board was the only element of the organisation that had the ability to enforce decisions. This meant that the committees the Academy had created to mediate labour disputes could issue rulings and directives but had no way of ensuring that studios complied. I look particularly at how this affected writers, as plagiarism was a growing issue. As a result of these issues, members from multiple branches, most notably the writers, abandoned the Academy. Without their members to bolster the board, with the conclusion of 1933, the organisation was on the brink of collapse.

The Academy's own account of its history, structure and overall purpose reaches back to its foundation in May 1927. Through the language used in its constitution and by-laws, as well as in comments made by members at the first Academy banquet on May 11, 1927; the Academy represented its aims as including advocacy for filmmakers. These documents also

include an organisational desire to preserve film and film history. While the organisational narrative of its origins is not an entirely false one, it has skewed the Academy's history to these areas. Consequently, the modern Academy only acknowledges the history connected to its awards, film archive and library, film museum, and its educational programs. As I will show, the Academy of 2025 has selected which pieces of its history to keep and which to ignore. The general public's understanding of the Academy's foundational history is largely determined by the organisation's official website and its media releases, especially those issued as part of promotional material connected to the Academy Awards. These histories are consistent in terms of how much they withhold. They only encompass the organisation's current activities, with its origins summed up in two sentences: "the Academy was organized in May 1927 as a nonprofit corporation. Its original 36 members included production executives and film luminaries of the time."<sup>13</sup> This website, it should be noted, is not "Academy dot com," or any abbreviation of the full Academy name but rather, "Oscars dot org," which itself reveals the modern Academy's priorities. The Academy's purposes at the time of foundation, the historical context it was created in, and an explanation of why there was a need for an Academy is completely absent from official Academy histories.

---

<sup>13</sup> This description appears verbatim in the press releases that coincided with the 87<sup>th</sup>, 88<sup>th</sup>, 89<sup>th</sup>, 91<sup>st</sup>, 92<sup>nd</sup>, 93<sup>rd</sup> and 94<sup>th</sup> Academy Awards ceremonies that are available on the Academy's website; "The History and Structure of The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences," media release, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, 2015, [https://www.oscars.org/sites/oscars/files/87aa\\_academy\\_history.pdf](https://www.oscars.org/sites/oscars/files/87aa_academy_history.pdf); "The History and Structure of The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences," media release, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, 2016, [https://www.oscars.org/sites/oscars/files/88aa\\_academy\\_history.pdf](https://www.oscars.org/sites/oscars/files/88aa_academy_history.pdf); "The History and Structure of The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences," media release, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, 2017, [https://www.oscars.org/sites/oscars/files/89aa\\_academy\\_history.pdf](https://www.oscars.org/sites/oscars/files/89aa_academy_history.pdf); "The History and Structure of The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences," media release, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, 2019, [https://www.oscars.org/sites/oscars/files/91aa\\_academy\\_history.pdf](https://www.oscars.org/sites/oscars/files/91aa_academy_history.pdf); "The History and Structure of The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences," media release, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, 2020, [https://www.oscars.org/sites/oscars/files/92aa\\_academy\\_history.pdf](https://www.oscars.org/sites/oscars/files/92aa_academy_history.pdf); "History of the Oscars Presentation," media release, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, 2021, [https://www.oscars.org/sites/oscars/files/93aa\\_presentation\\_history.pdf](https://www.oscars.org/sites/oscars/files/93aa_presentation_history.pdf); and "The History and Structure of The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences," media release, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, 2022, [https://www.oscars.org/sites/oscars/files/94aa\\_academy\\_history.pdf](https://www.oscars.org/sites/oscars/files/94aa_academy_history.pdf). It also must be noted that although these press releases contain the same language, they are not the same press release as there are changes made year-on-year, including the adjustment of Academy membership size.

The Academy's original purpose, as set out in its first constitution (ratified on May 5, 1927), was to create unity across the various branches of the motion-picture industry. However, the Academy was also founded with the belief that motion-picture workers – which included directors, writers, technicians and actors – should not have the ability to unionise. Most film scholars only acknowledge in passing that the Academy had this interest.<sup>14</sup> Most present this element of the Academy's history by labelling the organisation a company union, referring to a kind of management system “established within individual companies in which committees of workers and managers would discuss complaints about pay and working conditions and attempt to settle them internally.”<sup>15</sup> However, very rarely is this label examined in detail, and scholars have made little effort to investigate the accusation.

Unionisation was a means through which workers could advocate for themselves, with the aim of improving their working conditions, pay structures and safety. I argue that the Academy deliberately and strategically structured itself to create the illusion of advocacy and cooperation. That is, it concentrated power at the top of the organisation, with the board of directors, who had the ability to direct the organisation towards their own interests.

Simultaneously, the Academy promised those working in the motion-picture industry that the organisation was operating for the betterment of the entire industry. Curiously, even though film scholars' accounts of Academy history differ extensively from official Academy sources, scholars have yet to address the incongruity in the different histories. By broadening the scope of materials used in film histories, including items from the organisation's archive, to

---

<sup>14</sup> Scholarship about the early Academy's interests in labour matters include Allen J. Scott, *On Hollywood: The Place, the Industry* (Princeton University Press, 2018), 31; Harvey G. Cohen, “The Struggle to Fashion the NRA Code: The Triumph of Studio Power in 1933 Hollywood,” *Journal of American Studies* 50, no. 4 (2016): 1046-47; and Douglas Gomery, “Film and Business History: The Development of an American Mass Entertainment Industry,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 19, no. 1 (1984): 51.

<sup>15</sup> Bruce Davis, *The Academy and the Award: The Coming of Age of Oscar and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences* (Brandeis University Press, 2022), 7.

examine the Academy's early history, it becomes clear that the modern Academy of 2025 continues to conceal the origins of the organisation. This includes how the structure facilitated the organisation's intervention into labour matters.

In May 1927, the Academy became an officially chartered non-profit organisation in California. On May 5, 1927, the Academy adopted a constitution and set of by-laws that outlined its goals and the system under which it would operate. Its "purpose" included operating as a uniting force for an increasingly fractured motion-picture industry. The industry was facing an identity crisis amid a myriad of public scandals and technological advancements. Its original constitution reveals its tiered organisational structure that ensured the power was concentrated at the top, with the board of directors. The board was comprised of three members from each Academy branch, resulting in a total of fifteen board members.<sup>16</sup> Scholars who have written about the Academy's early history have never focused on its structure and how that structure shaped Academy actions; rather, they have focused on the organisation's Academy Awards. Likewise, no one has explored how its early structure impacted or influenced the organisation's decision-making. My approach recontextualises the Academy's foundational years and reveals how the Academy was deliberately structured to ensure it controlled outcomes that influenced and impacted the motion-picture industry more broadly.

Rarely has anyone dived into the early organisation or its functions. By adding the Academy's structure into the scholarly conversation, the entire discussion becomes more

---

<sup>16</sup> Douglas Fairbanks, Conrad Nagel, Milton Sills, Roy Pomeroy, Cedric Gibbons, J.A. Ball, Fred Niblo, Frank Lloyd, John Stahl, Jeanie Macpherson, Carey Wilson, Joseph Farnham, Mary Pickford, Louis B. Mayer and Joseph M. Schenck were the fifteen members of the original Academy Board of Directors. See *Bulletin No. 1*, June 1, 1927, AMPAS Reference Collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Los Angeles, CA, 2, <https://digitalcollections.oscars.org/digital/collection/p15759coll4/id/32/rec/1>

complex. It is important to ask why the organisation itself appears to conceal its very early history. I argue this erasure is connected to the exact activities in which the early Academy was involved. The Academy's structure meant power was concentrated with the board and this influenced Academy actions, especially in relation to the increasing efforts of motion-picture workers to unionise. By limiting the discussion to the period between the Academy's establishment in 1927 and the organisation's near collapse in 1933, we gain a complete understanding of how the Academy's structure was both its greatest success and then facilitated its demise, as members fled the organisation.

It is evident that the Academy today wants to be viewed as a champion of film and the filmmaker. The early Academy's attempts to stop the organisation of motion-picture workers clashes directly with the image the Academy wishes to project in 2025. As was seen during the opening of the 96<sup>th</sup> Academy Awards, the modern Academy wishes to appear to be the champion of the motion-picture worker, even if its awards do not extend to all off-camera contributors. Additionally, the original structure – the tiered system of power – remains in place today. While the modern board of directors (now known as governors) has expanded over decades to incorporate additional branches, the board retains the same level of control over the organisation as it had in 1927.<sup>17</sup> An examination of the Academy's structure is of enormous value because it clarifies the original purposes and aims of the Academy. My work exposes a contradiction that is at the heart of the early Academy: it publicly presented itself as an independent, not-for-profit organisation that advocated for a united industry, whilst

---

<sup>17</sup> Although a member of the Board of Governors is now term-limited, and there are rules concerning how many terms an individual may serve, the board still approve every Academy invitation, see *BYLAWS of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences*, revised June 28, 2020, AMPAS Reference Collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Los Angeles, CA, 1, 4, <https://digitalcollections.oscars.org/digital/collection/p15759coll4/id/19668/rec/27>; The Board of Governors also have ultimate approval over eligibility and rules concerning the Academy Awards, see Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Board of Governors, *98<sup>th</sup> Academy Awards of Merit*, approved April 10, 2025, [https://www.oscars.org/sites/oscars/files/2025-04/98th\\_aa\\_complete\\_rules.pdf?VersionId=KHfTeEBPx9GJx9jvW\\_Ki.1YJgUzDheAU](https://www.oscars.org/sites/oscars/files/2025-04/98th_aa_complete_rules.pdf?VersionId=KHfTeEBPx9GJx9jvW_Ki.1YJgUzDheAU)

privately structuring itself to further the interests of those on its board. Additionally, it reveals how the Academy's structure influenced its actions during labour negotiations in its early years, and how this structure endures within the modern Academy. My work begins a conversation concerning the influence of the Academy's board over the actions of the organisation that should be further extended into the modern Academy by other scholars.

By far the bulk of scholarship about the Academy is concerned with the Academy Awards and the popularity of the awards may explain why this is so. Additionally, given that the ceremony honours films produced every calendar year, each year brings a new crop of films that compete for nominations and wins. Therefore, each ceremony brings new information and contributes additional insights, narratives and discoveries to the ever-unfolding mythology related to the Academy Awards. Thus, much of the awards-focused scholarship is concentrated around revelation, including but not limited to providing the reader with a new piece of information, whether real or speculative, that contributed to an Academy Awards ceremony, or about winners and losers in years past. Such scholarship includes Damien Bona, Gail MacColl and Mason Wiley's 1996 book, *Inside Oscar: The Unofficial History of the Academy Awards*, Peter H Brown and Jim Pinkston's 1987 book *Oscar Dearest: Six Decades of Scandal, Politics, and Greed Behind Hollywood's Academy Awards, 1927-1986*, and John Dorney, Jessica Regan, and Tom Salinsky's 2022 book, *Best Pick: A Journey Through Film History and The Academy*.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Damien Bona, Gail MacColl and Mason Wiley, *Inside Oscar: The Unofficial History of the Academy Awards* (Ballantine Books, 1996); Peter H. Brown and Jim Pinkston, *Oscar Dearest: Six Decades of Scandal, Politics, and Greed Behind Hollywood's Academy Awards, 1927-1986* (Perennial Library, 1987); John Dorney, Jessica Regan, and Tom Salinsky, *Best Pick: A Journey through Film History and the Academy Awards* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2022).

Most scholarship focused on the Academy Awards contains little or no discussion of the Academy organisation. However, there are some exceptions, including Michael Schulman's 2023 book *Oscar Wars: A History of Hollywood in Gold, Sweat and Tears*, which is entirely dedicated to examining specific Academy Award races.<sup>19</sup> Schulman provides insights into the various political behind-the-scenes factors that contributed to many Academy Award wins or losses. Schulman addresses the Academy and its awards decisions in a broader context, opening up a vigorous discussion about how the Academy continues to impact and influence the wider motion-picture industry. Schulman highlights that the Academy is not an island, and that events occurring within the industry and across the world impact the decisions it makes. While anchored in the awards conversation, Schulman's work engages with broader perspectives and highlights the complex relationship between the Academy and the broader industry.

A second category of Academy scholarship, which is no less robust, centres on the Academy as an organisation. At the centre of this kind of scholarship is Pierre Norman Sands' 1966 PhD dissertation, *A Historical Study of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (1927-1947)*.<sup>20</sup> Sands offers a first-of-its-kind history of the Academy, and his work is thus an essential resource. Especially since its publication in 1973, before the Academy began to digitise its original documents from 1927, Sands' dissertation has been the pre-eminent source for understanding the Academy's founding and early years. This is because it includes the names of its original founders, and the dates, times and locations of several key Academy meetings. His dissertation remains invaluable, and is still referred to across scholarship,

---

<sup>19</sup> Michael Schulman, *Oscar Wars: A History of Hollywood in Gold, Sweat and Tears* (HarperCollins, 2023).

<sup>20</sup> I am using here the published version of this dissertation, Pierre Norman Sands, *A Historical Study of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (1927-1947)* (Arno Press, 1973).

cementing it as an extremely valuable resource for details about the organisation's early years.

Bruce Davis' 2022 book, *The Academy and The Award: The Coming of Age of Oscar and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences*, is the most recent work centred on the Academy's early workings and the one which I draw from most in the chapters that follow.<sup>21</sup> Davis uses the development of the Academy Awards as a framing device to understand the inner workings of the Academy, especially in its first two decades. Davis is specifically interested in how the Academy's organisational actions contributed to the development of the awards. Davis argues that the Academy's actions in other areas, namely labour negotiation, contributed to the award show becoming central to the organisation's identity. As the former executive director of the organisation, Davis, like Sands, was given access to documents, including the original ballots for the first Academy Awards, not previously available to researchers. Therefore, Davis's work is significant for this thesis, particularly because the original documentation he was given access to offers new insights into what was occurring internally at the Academy during its first two decades.

Of course, the Academy does not exist in isolation, and so I also draw on scholarship concerned with labour relations across the motion-picture industry in the early part of the twentieth century.<sup>22</sup> Murray Ross' 1941 book, *Stars and Strikes: Unionization of Hollywood*, reveals the extent of the Academy's involvement with labour negotiations and activities as well as how unions attempted to combat its influence.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Louis B. Perry and Richard

---

<sup>21</sup> Davis, *The Academy and the Award*.

<sup>22</sup> For more on the structure of the motion-picture industry in 1927, see Balio, *Grand Design*, and Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System* (McGraw-Hill, 1981). For more on the economic structure of the motion-picture industry in the early twentieth century see Gomery, "Film and Business History," 47-52.

<sup>23</sup> Murray Ross, *Stars and Strikes: Unionization of Hollywood* (Columbia University Press, 1941).

S. Perry's 1963 book, *A History of the Los Angeles Labor Movement, 1911-1941*, while not specifically interested in motion pictures, nevertheless contains essential observations about the early motion-picture industry and about the early Academy.<sup>24</sup> Above all, Perry and Perry examine everything that was occurring around the establishment of the Academy, including the jurisdictional disputes that arose between different union groups, something which is discussed in this thesis in Chapter One.

In addition to scholarship about the Academy's history, I also rely on archival materials from the 1920s and 1930s. Newspapers and the trade press have been essential when trying to understand the Academy's public relations strategy. For example, the Academy relied on *The Hollywood Reporter* and other pro-industry periodicals to deliver its perspective on labour disputes.<sup>25</sup> These press materials also assisted in gauging how the media was presenting other groups, including unions, to the public. For example, on June 22, 1927, in the middle of a producer-led attempt to cut salaries, an anonymous producer told *Variety*, another trade paper, that disgruntled actors did not need to join a union for protection, since "actors can have protection...through membership in the newly organized Academy."<sup>26</sup> Quotations such as this one raise important questions about the relationship between the Academy and producers, a relationship that was one factor that led to Academy members leaving the organisation in 1933. This relationship will be explored further in Chapter Three.

---

<sup>24</sup> Louis B. Perry and Richard S. Perry, *A History of the Los Angeles Labor Movement, 1911-1941* (University of California Press, 1963).

<sup>25</sup> Davis, *The Academy and the Award*, 181.

<sup>26</sup> As it provides a direct quote and opinion from a producer, this 1927 *Variety* article is just one example of the usefulness of the 1920s and 1930s trade press to my project. "Film Actors and Equity Again Up on Coast," *Variety*, June 22, 1927, 5.

Additional archival materials held at the Academy's Margaret Herrick Library reveal the original motives and goals of the organisation, including its efforts to thwart unionisation.<sup>27</sup> While the Academy's founding constitution and by-laws reveal its original structure, they make no mention of the importance labour negotiation would have in the function of the organisation. In conjunction with other archival materials, such as the transcript from the Academy's first banquet in May 1927, which highlights how the founders wished to distinguish the Academy from any other existing industry organisation, a clear picture is formed of how the original sponsors wanted to publicly position the organisation. From original documents held in the Margaret Herrick Library pertaining to the organisation's origins, we learn that the Academy positioned itself as a necessary intervention into the motion-picture industry to facilitate the industry's survival in a period of immense change. This strategy and the Academy were carefully designed to fill a void that already-established organisations like the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (the MPPDA) could not fill. While archival materials offer significant insight into how the Academy structured itself at its founding, what is absent from these documents is equally revealing. As previously mentioned, because the Academy's original constitution and by-laws cement the structure of the organisation, it can be inferred that the Academy's structure was a deliberate and strategic decision. However, the aim of concentrating power with the board of directors is never explicitly stated. My work thus creates a bridge between original documentation, other primary materials and scholarship.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> All material from the Margaret Herrick Library's AMPAS Reference Collection was accessed through its online digital collections portal, see <https://digitalcollections.oscars.org/>.

<sup>28</sup> Other archival materials, from outside the Margaret Herrick Library, was also used across this thesis. These include letters and other documents such as drafts of the Academy constitution held in the Will H. Hays Collection, made available online by the Indiana State Library, see <https://indianamemory.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p16066coll64>. The transcript from the Academy's first banquet on May 11, 1927, is produced in full in Erika J. Fischer, *The Inauguration of 'Oscar': Sketches and Documents from the Early Years of the Hollywood Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and the Academy Awards, 1927-1930* (K.G. Saur, 1988), 295-317.

This thesis is structured chronologically from 1927 to 1933 because historical events had a direct impact on the way the Academy structured and represented itself. Chapter One, “Structural Foundations: Establishing the Academy, 1927,” argues that the Academy structured itself in a pyramid with the controlling power of the organisation at the top with the board of directors. The chapter argues that the Academy’s selective membership policy was specifically designed to increase the level of organisational power, which in turn increased the power wielded by the board. Chapter Two, “Structural Success: The Academy’s First Victory, June 1927,” examines the Academy’s structure in action. It contains an account of studio executives’ proposed salary cuts from June 1927 and how, during which, the Academy intervened to ensure it could control labour negotiation across the motion-picture industry. I argue that the Academy board’s resolution, which called for a pause to the cuts so negotiation could occur, leveraged the power of the Academy membership to facilitate the personal interests of individual board members.

Finally in Chapter Three, “Structural Decline: The Academy on the Brink of Collapse, 1933,” I move to the Academy’s structural failures and the near collapse of the organisation in 1933. With external crises like the Great Depression fundamentally altering once-presumed established relationships across the motion-picture industry, I argue the Academy’s structure could not withstand the changing nature of the industry. As employers and workers shifted priorities, the Academy’s function as labour negotiator ceased to have value. Frustrations among Academy members were increasing and their ire was directed at both the studios and the Academy. I argue that because of the Academy’s structure and its concentration of power, none of the mechanisms the Academy had implemented, including its committees, were able to enforce decisions. This lack of enforcement power left Academy branches, like the writers, deciding that the Academy was no longer of use. Writers and other members leaving the

Academy removed the power that the board was able to previously leverage, so rendering the entire organisation powerless. I conclude, then, that because the structure of the Academy allowed the board to influence organisational decisions, Academy members – who were separate from the board – became increasingly disillusioned with the foundational idea of unity embedded within the Academy organisation. Thus, the Academy’s structure directly contributed to the failure of the organisation in 1933.

By focusing on the Academy’s structure between 1927 and 1933, we can account for the missing historical narrative around the Academy’s foundation, especially as it pertains to labour organisation. Expanding our knowledge of the Academy’s history transforms our understanding of the entire organisation. This knowledge reveals more about the organisation, and the Academy no longer primarily exists as a body that annually hands out awards or preserves films. Instead, it becomes a complex system whose decisions can be analysed as a byproduct of its structure. While there was a genuine interest in, and need for, an organisation to unite a fractured industry in 1927, there was also an underlying intent to hold the industry in stasis. The Academy’s structuring of itself in a tiered system and the funnelling of its elite members’ power to the top of the organisation, while simultaneously claiming publicly that it represented all members of the motion-picture industry, suggests that it can be understood as a more complicated institution. The board of director’s resolution that ended the salary crisis in June 1927 demonstrated that the amount of power wielded by the Academy had value and purpose. However, by 1933 this power was scattering, with Academy members fleeing and creating their own organisations that would reflect their own interests more completely.

Ultimately, the Academy had ceased all involvement in labour activities by the end of the 1930s. For a nearly one hundred year old institution, the Academy’s involvement in labour

for almost a decade can perhaps be considered a blip in the totality of its organisational history. However, considering that its attempts to impede progress in areas such as improving pay and conditions for workers were, for a time, successful, the Academy's ultimate failure led to the establishment of labour unions in the 1930s. This highlights the important role the Academy played in the creation of Los Angeles as the union town it is today. This period of history is something the organisation should acknowledge, for it shows that progress is possible. Despite the Academy's structure enduring, the organisation itself has changed, grown and transformed.

## **Chapter 1. Structural Foundations: Establishing the Academy, 1927**

In this chapter, I argue that the Academy structured itself as a pyramid wherein power was concentrated in the hands of a few at the top of the organisation. Every member of the Academy in 1927 worked in the Californian motion-picture industry and was selected and invited by the Academy's board of directors. The Academy's invitation-only policy meant that even the bottom tier of this pyramid, housing the broader membership, was separated from the wider industry. The Academy deliberately and specifically structured itself in this way so it could utilise the fame and power of its membership to bolster the concentration of power at the top. As per the Academy's constitution, the board had great latitude with whom it deemed acceptable to be invited into its ranks. As a result, the board had the ability to direct the organisation towards causes in which board members had a vested interest. This included labour matters, which will be the subject of Chapter Two. I argue that the Academy structured itself in this way because its purpose was always to reinforce existing power structures during a time of great change in the motion-picture industry. Created by the elite for the elite, the Academy's rhetoric, designed to appeal to potential invitees, reinforced the notion that the motion-picture elite were stronger together. The Academy's creation was a reaction to existing tensions and divisions across the motion-picture industry; its formation was a pre-emptive measure by MGM producer Louis B. Mayer, to prevent further fracturing within the motion-picture industry and control ongoing disputes. It was a mechanism created for, and used by, powerful producers, directors, writers, actors and technicians to regulate existing tensions across the industry. In this way it would also protect these elite industry members and ensure that no radical change occurred in the industry.

Part of the environment that the Academy's creation was reacting against was unionism. The growing union movement was a key element in the Academy's creation. In 1927, the year of

the Academy's official foundation, the motion-picture industry did not have an organisation or association that could negotiate or regulate labour disputes. I argue that this was one of the Academy's prime functions and was built into its ethos. The unionisation of studio employees had the potential to significantly destabilise industry power structures. Through unions, workers could gain the ability to collectively organise, advocate for minimum standards and improve their working conditions. If unions had taken hold in the motion-picture industry, the established power dynamic would have become fundamentally disrupted. Primarily, this would have decreased the power wielded by studios over their employees. Having a unionised workforce would have also reduced the economic benefits studios reaped from using non-union labour. Additionally, unions had the potential to fundamentally alter the identity of motion-picture workers. The industry ecosystem thus far had encouraged hierarchical structures within every profession. From the scholarship of Danae Clark and Denise McKenna, we learn, as we shall see later this chapter, that within the acting profession there were segmented groups. For instance, film stars were aligned with other stars and felt fundamentally separate from the extra. This is because the extra was perceived as the entry point to acting and the star, who had ascended, was detached from the extras' needs, and vice versa. These identities had been shaped by the studio system and fed into the culture of the motion-picture industry. Studio employees working collaboratively in a union had the potential to reshape all relationships across the industry; and if this was to occur, it would have reduced the level of power studios held over their workers.

Therefore, to avert such collaborations, the Academy's creation was a pre-emptive action by the elite to concentrate their collective power and to reinforce the existing power structure. Key to this pre-emptive action was the language of unity used by the Academy. Publicly, the Academy asserted it was an advocacy group for the thousands of motion-picture workers.

However, as I have said, it was structured only to serve the elite of the industry. This is apparent when looking at original Academy documentation. The original 1927 Academy constitution outlines that only those who had “accomplished distinguished work or acquired distinguished standing in or made a valuable contribution to” the motion-picture industry were invited to be an “active” member of the Academy.<sup>29</sup> Prior to the Academy’s official launch on May 11, 1927, there were only thirty-six members (then known as sponsors). Just six months later, in November 1927, there were three hundred and sixty-seven.<sup>30</sup> While this may appear to be a dramatic increase in the Academy’s membership, it fell far short of the thousands of motion-picture workers who made up the general motion-picture population the Academy claimed to represent. This raises questions as to whom the Academy was interested in truly representing. Additionally, because Academy members, at least in theory, were meant to have accomplished distinguished work, we can conclude that members already had some level of longevity and power in the industry. Therefore, Academy members already inherently benefited from the industry status quo. This means that, because of the strategic structure the original sponsors implemented, the Academy was designed not to be internally driven by its members to advocate for change.

Before I turn to a closer examination of the power structures and dynamics within the motion-picture industry in the 1920s, it is important to highlight how similar dynamics emerged in other creative industries, prior to the founding of the Academy, around the turn of the twentieth century. This is because power dynamics and structures that developed prior to the emergence of the motion-picture industry in the 1910s flowed down and informed how

---

<sup>29</sup> *Constitution and By-Laws*, adopted May 5, 1927, AMPAS Reference Collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Los Angeles, CA, 2, <https://digitalcollections.oscars.org/digital/collection/p15759coll4/id/4280/rec/1>

<sup>30</sup> “Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Membership List,” *Motion Picture Arts and Sciences* 1, no. 1, November 1927, AMPAS Reference Collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Los Angeles, CA, 16, <https://digitalcollections.oscars.org/digital/collection/p15759coll4/id/114/rec/3>

motion pictures operated. For example, the way the motion-picture industry approached unionisation in the 1920s begins in 1890s New York with the rise of the theatre actors' union, Actors Equity (Equity). Equity consistently attempted, and ultimately failed, to unionise motion-picture actors between the 1910s and the 1920s. As we shall see, the division between theatrical producers and actors created distrust and disillusion in early twentieth century theatre. This fostered a desire amongst theatre actors to unionise. Distrust also emerged in the motion-picture industry in the 1920s, and this will be explored later in this chapter, with particular emphasis on Equity's lack of success in understanding the unique working conditions of the motion-picture actor.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the American theatre was the intersection of art, culture and the commodification of creative labour. As Alfred L. Bernheim wrote in *The New York Times*, the theatre's transition to a new system of management during the 1890s "changed the character of the theatre...as completely as the advent of power machinery...had changed the character of manufacture."<sup>31</sup> Up until the late 1800s, the American theatre was largely composed of actors who were attached to specific theatres. Known as "a continuous producing unit," they had creative freedom and financial control of the theatre in which they performed.<sup>32</sup> The new system transformed companies into "temporary producing units" organised for a single play, which would perform in one location for as long as it was profitable, after which the same company would then tour the same production across the country.<sup>33</sup> Such a change gave rise to the "centralization and systemization" of the theatre; it

---

<sup>31</sup> Alfred L. Bernheim, "The Evolution of the Legitimate Theatre in America," *The New York Times*, March 25, 1928, 120.

<sup>32</sup> Bernheim, "The Evolution," 120.

<sup>33</sup> Bernheim, "The Evolution," 120.

separated theatre ownership and management, created booking agents, and gave rise to the star system.<sup>34</sup>

Academic Sean Holmes acknowledges the financial benefits of such a system. In his book about the history of unionisation in twentieth-century American theatre, Holmes recognises that this system allowed for some actors to become elevated, transforming them into stars. However, he also highlights that “many actors resented the growing power imbalance that had come to characterize their relationships with their employers.”<sup>35</sup> As Holmes writes, specific grievances related to working conditions including the length of unpaid rehearsal time, combined with broader concerns that the theatre was losing its cultural value, created an environment that, by 1913, had driven a group of actors to organise. Unlike other unions that formed across the United States during this period, Actors Equity, according to Holmes, was established with a “spirit of voluntarism,” in part because it appeared its members’ grievance list was relatively small.<sup>36</sup> In a statement to *The New York Times* on March 5, 1913, actor Wilton Lackaye was clear that “this is not a revolution, but a renaissance.”<sup>37</sup> Lackaye wished “to return to the spirit that existed prior to about five years ago, when the relation between actor and manager was more one of co-operation.”<sup>38</sup> Lackaye signals multiple times throughout his statement that Equity hoped to address managers “in a spirit of perfect friendliness” and expected issues to resolve quickly.<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> Bernheim, “The Evolution,” 120.

<sup>35</sup> Sean P. Holmes, *Weavers of Dreams, Unite! Actor's Unionism in Early Twentieth-Century America* (University of Illinois Press, 2013), 25.

<sup>36</sup> Holmes, *Weavers of Dreams, Unite!*, 34.

<sup>37</sup> “Actors Organize For ‘Just’ Contract,” *The New York Times*, March 5, 1913, 17.

<sup>38</sup> “Actors Organize,” 17.

<sup>39</sup> “Actors Organize,” 17.

Equity's origins highlight the role, position and belief system of the theatre actor prior to the dominance of narrative film. Holmes makes clear that what Equity embraced was "a peculiarly theatrical brand of occupational unionism that emphasized the occupational identity of the actor, as opposed to bread-and-butter issues like wages and hours."<sup>40</sup> This spirit remained until the end of the 1910s, when Equity became "an affiliate of the American Federation of Labor" (AFL), due to the ongoing "obdurate refusal" of producing managers "to countenance anything that threatened to undermine their near-absolute authority."<sup>41</sup> Theatrical actors viewed their work as art and were concerned, in part, that they were no longer contributing unique artifacts to culture.<sup>42</sup> According to Holmes, one of the unifying factors in Equity's creation was "a collective sense of subservience to a group of theatrical entrepreneurs whose business practices they [actors] saw as incompatible with the creation of great art."<sup>43</sup> This showcases the complexities surrounding the acknowledgement of value for an individual in a creative position. The theatrical actor believed their value lay beyond the economic. Equity's creation, then, can be regarded as theatre actors collaborating with each other to negotiate for this value. For motion pictures, this argument for value partly manifests not in the creation of a union, but in the creation of the Academy, and is particularly evident in the Academy's membership structure. This is because the structure separated and elevated individuals based on their perceived level of value to the motion-picture industry, both through their admittance to the Academy, as well as through their assignment to a committee. As I will discuss in Chapter Three, value would also be a factor in 1933 when the writers branch of the Academy elected to sever itself from the organisation. This decision was due in part to writers not feeling valued and their writing not being treated as a serious creative pursuit by the Academy or studios.

---

<sup>40</sup> Holmes, *Weavers of Dreams, Unite!*, 8.

<sup>41</sup> Holmes, *Weavers of Dreams, Unite!*, 34.

<sup>42</sup> Holmes, *Weavers of Dreams, Unite!*, 28.

<sup>43</sup> Holmes, *Weavers of Dreams, Unite!*, 28.

In the 1920s, Los Angeles and the motion-picture industry were an “open shop”; city officials and studio heads collaborated to promote the open shop movement. According to Allen M. Wakstein, “the meaning of ‘open shop’ is dependent upon the time and circumstance of its use.”<sup>44</sup> In practice, broadly, it meant that the employer “did not recognize the trade unions.”<sup>45</sup> Since the motion-picture industry’s establishment in Los Angeles as early as 1910, its open-shop policy did not have a mechanism for paying overtime, and it required very long hours and permitted low wages.<sup>46</sup> With workers spread across multiple studios, the mode of employment was so varied across disciplines and crafts that unionising this open shop industry was extremely difficult. The motion-picture industry’s open shop policy was also facilitated by the city of Los Angeles, and this was just one of many industries in the town that were open during the early twentieth century.<sup>47</sup> Los Angeles’ anti-union infrastructure was spearheaded by Harrison Gray Otis, who was the publisher of the *Los Angeles Times* at the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>48</sup> Not only did he rouse the paper’s anti-union views, but he was also instrumental in the creation of the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce, which, as Nielsen writes, “undertook [measures] to hold down wages” to “encourage new business to move to the area.”<sup>49</sup> Therefore, the motion-picture industry existed in an environment that encouraged and facilitated the use of non-union labour.

---

<sup>44</sup> Allen M. Wakstein, “The Origins of the Open-Shop Movement, 1919-1920,” *The Journal of American History* 51, no. 3 (1964): 460.

<sup>45</sup> Wakstein, “The Origins of the Open-Shop Movement,” 460.

<sup>46</sup> Laurie Pinter, “Behind the Scenes: Bronco Billy and the Realities of Work in Open Shop Hollywood,” in *Metropolis in the Making: Los Angeles in the 1920s*, ed. Tom Sitton (University of California Press, 2019), 2, 4; Michael C. Nielsen, “Labor Power and Organization in the Early U.S. Motion Picture Industry,” *Film History* 2, no. 2 (1988): 126.

<sup>47</sup> Nielsen, “Labor Power and Organization,” 125.

<sup>48</sup> Nielsen, “Labor Power and Organization,” 125.

<sup>49</sup> Nielsen, “Labor Power and Organization,” 125.

To complicate things, prior to the mid-1920s, existing unions could not get a definitive foothold in the motion-picture industry. As Perry and Perry make clear, motion-picture workers generally had little or no desire to unionise. Central to this unwillingness was what they describe as a lack of connection between workers in the motion-picture industry and those in other industries. Perry and Perry outline that “the characteristics of the [motion-picture] industry...were such that most of the work in studios...had little connection with the activities of unions elsewhere in Los Angeles, even those in the same craft.”<sup>50</sup> This meant that motion-picture workers were unable to relate to the frustrations felt by outside groups, even those who possessed a similar skill set. This reflected a fundamental difference in the environment and tasks undertaken in the film industry compared with other industries, including theatre. A similar disconnection also existed within the motion-picture industry itself. According to Perry and Perry, “the movie moguls employed heterogeneous groups of workers who were faced with dissimilar problems,” which created an environment in which groups of workers were detached from one another.<sup>51</sup> This resulted in a lack of collective unity within the industry. When we combine the works of Wakstein and Holmes, we understand unions as often emerging from a collective frustration shared by workers, based on issues specific to a particular locale or industry. With the inherent separation between groups of workers within and outside of the motion-picture industry, workers lacked the sense of solidarity that is a key element in the creation of a union.

This lack of solidarity manifested itself in the film actor’s sense of individualism. This was a factor in Equity’s inability to unionise film actors in the early 1920s. In his book about unionisation in Hollywood, Murray Ross highlights that Equity was in Los Angeles as early

---

<sup>50</sup> Perry and Perry, *A History of The Los Angeles Labor Movement*, 318.

<sup>51</sup> Perry and Perry, *A History of The Los Angeles Labor Movement*, 318.

as 1920, attempting to persuade motion-picture actors to join its ranks. However, Ross acknowledges that “the screen actors did not share its [Equity’s] enthusiasm,” in part because “the abuses which had impelled the dramatic actors to unionize were not prevalent in the motion picture industry.”<sup>52</sup> Film actors’ enthusiasm for Equity was so low at this time that the union concluded that “the majority of motion picture actors were not yet ready to be organized,” so officials left Los Angeles.<sup>53</sup> According to Danae Clark, “Equity also threatened the screen actors’ professional autonomy.”<sup>54</sup> Actors’ sense of autonomy relates to Perry and Perry’s observation that the motion-picture industry was uniquely isolated and workers did not acknowledge their connection to similar crafts outside the industry. The motion-picture system aided in this sense of alienation. Perry and Perry highlight that “the speculative nature of the [motion-picture] industry...a flexible cost structure, rapid technological and economic change, and casual employment” isolated it from the theatrical industry.<sup>55</sup> This separation generated different identities in the two industries. Through Clark, the film actor can be understood as having the view that they were an individual.<sup>56</sup> While using Holmes we discover that the theatrical actor perceived themselves as part of a collective.<sup>57</sup> Therefore, even though theatrical acting and film acting may appear to be similar creative endeavours, motion-picture actors felt ideologically separated from their theatrical counterparts. These elements, combined with the physical distance between Los Angeles and the New York-based Equity, created a sense of alienation between acting groups. This led to motion-picture actors rejecting the theatrical union.

---

<sup>52</sup> Ross, *Stars and Strikes*, 24.

<sup>53</sup> Ross, *Stars and Strikes*, 24.

<sup>54</sup> Danae Clark, *Negotiating Hollywood: The Cultural Politics of Actors' Labor* (University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 30.

<sup>55</sup> Perry and Perry, *A History of The Los Angeles Labor Movement*, 318.

<sup>56</sup> Clark, *Negotiating Hollywood*, 23.

<sup>57</sup> Holmes, *Weavers of Dreams, Unite!*, 28.

Film actors' individuality affected the sense of community within the discipline of film acting. Actors were divided into similar, but separate classifications, which determined their treatment, economic value and their perception by the public. If the motion-picture industry is viewed as a tiered system, film stars were at the peak, followed by character actors and featured players, leaving extras at the bottom.<sup>58</sup> All three groups acted, but their functions within the film industry were distinct. This made it difficult to generate a sense of cohesion within the broader acting branch. When describing the exploitation of the early twentieth-century extra, Denise McKenna explains that extras work was transitory and considered to be unskilled labour and therefore resulted in low wages. What McKenna makes clear is that there was an entirely separate system operating for extras than for any other kind of acting job. She notes that "selection was based on appearance," and that appearance would determine "type," which would in turn decide someone's "screen-value."<sup>59</sup> In her discussion of character actors, supporting players and stars, Clark notes that, broadly, film stars were valued for "their personalities or photogenic qualities," and it was character actors and supporting players who were valued for their talent.<sup>60</sup> McKenna makes a similar point: in popular film culture in the early twentieth century, "numerous cartoons poked fun at what was really required of Photoplayers [motion-picture actors] – not talent, but a fearless disregard for personal safety."<sup>61</sup> These popular perceptions, McKenna argues, fed into a larger narrative that presented an avenue for the unskilled extra to transition into a star if they were daring enough, or were discovered by a visionary director.<sup>62</sup> Therefore, while there was a sense in popular culture that a film actor could move upwards in acting prestige, there remained a distinct separation between groups within the profession. An extra may have

---

<sup>58</sup> Clark, *Negotiating Hollywood*, 19.

<sup>59</sup> Denise McKenna, "The Photoplay or the Pickaxe: Extras, Gender, and Labour in Early Hollywood," *Film History* 23, no. 1 (2011): 8.

<sup>60</sup> Clark, *Negotiating Hollywood*, 25.

<sup>61</sup> McKenna, "The Photoplay or the Pickaxe," 8.

<sup>62</sup> McKenna, "The Photoplay or the Pickaxe," 9.

wanted to be a star, but a star did not want to regress and become an extra. This prejudice contributed to the absence of collective unity across the acting profession.

In a similar way to Holmes, Clark also illuminates the tension between film acting as a creative profession, whilst also being non-traditional labour. Clark attributes this tension as being an additional factor in the delay of actor unionisation. Clark observes that film stars, because they were known for their personalities, were stripped of the traditional label of a “laborer” that typically existed for an employee in the “realist economy of representation.”<sup>63</sup> The fact that stars were packaged as personalities effectively rendered them separate from other types of labour. This connects to Catherine L. Fisk’s observation in her chapter about unionisation, where she highlights the association between unionisation and the blue-collar worker. Fisk notes that motion-picture screenwriters were hesitant to unionise in the early twentieth century because of the belief that “unions were for blue-collar workers, not autonomous creative professionals.”<sup>64</sup> Although Fisk is interested in screenwriters, because film stars’ labour was differentiated from the average American worker, the principle is the same. This association between blue-collar workers and unions is also echoed in scholarship about the open shop and unionisation. Wakstein, for example, uses the steel strike of 1919 to demonstrate the effectiveness of collective bargaining.<sup>65</sup> The connection of unions with blue-collar work is also seen in Holmes’ account of Equity’s formation in 1913. He notes that Equity deliberately differentiated itself from traditional labour unions by creating “an occupational identity that reflected their [Equity’s] view of themselves as artists and professionals.”<sup>66</sup> Using Fisk, then, workers in creative, non-blue-collar professions can be

---

<sup>63</sup> Clark, *Negotiating Hollywood*, 25.

<sup>64</sup> Catherine L. Fisk, “The Different American Legal Structures for Unionization of Writers for Stage and Screen,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Screenwriting Studies*, ed. Rosamund Davies, Paolo Russo and Claus Tieber (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 529.

<sup>65</sup> Wakstein, “The Origins of the Open-Shop Movement,” 466.

<sup>66</sup> Holmes, *Weavers of Dreams, Unite!*, 34.

understood as having considered themselves unique. This belief, combined with the other divisions across the motion-picture industry – including the lack of collective identity, especially within the acting profession – delayed the onset of unionisation.

Following Fisk’s observation that unions were aligned with blue-collar workers, it is clear why the first groups connected to the motion-picture industry that embraced unionisation were crafts-based. Specifically, the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers were recognised by the AFL from the early 1910s.<sup>67</sup> In 1918, the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees and Moving Picture Machine Operators (IATSE) launched an initiative “to form one big union of all studio crafts.”<sup>68</sup> However, this push to unite the crafts of the motion-picture industry only further exacerbated existing divisions within these groups. The individuality, autonomy and divisions discussed in relation to actors were encouraged by the system of motion-picture employment. Therefore, these same elements also extended to the crafts and technical branches of the industry.

By 1914, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers had switched from the AFL to IATSE, after the AFL relinquished its jurisdiction over motion-picture projectionists.<sup>69</sup> According to Ross, this victory was a factor in IATSE’s 1918 push to unionise all crafts under its umbrella.<sup>70</sup> This push led to a protracted jurisdictional and legal battle between IATSE and the AFL, which effectively stalled the collective effort to unionise the motion-picture industry for the next decade.<sup>71</sup> As Ross explains, these disputes generated extreme confusion across

---

<sup>67</sup> Pintar, “Behind the Scenes,” 5.

<sup>68</sup> Ross, *Stars and Strikes*, 8.

<sup>69</sup> Ross, *Stars and Strikes*, 8.

<sup>70</sup> Ross, *Stars and Strikes*, 8.

<sup>71</sup> Ross, *Stars and Strikes*, 10-11.

the industry, and he notes that “even seasoned trade unionists did not know which way to turn.”<sup>72</sup> As can be seen here, the very nature of the motion-picture industry was so fractured that attempts at collective unity simultaneously underscored the underlying divide. By February 1925, the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners had joined IATSE, and by September 1926 the AFL and IATSE had reached an agreement that the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers would also remain under IATSE’s control.<sup>73</sup> This resolution restructured union relationships within the industry and enabled IATSE to hold the jurisdiction for all film-craft unions. IATSE could then refocus its efforts towards advocacy for its union members.

IATSE gaining jurisdiction over the industry’s craft unions became a distinct marker in the history of labour unionisation in the motion-picture industry. It not only signalled that unions in the industry were possible, but it also led to IATSE winning its first labour agreement with motion-picture studios in November 1926. This was the Studio Basic Agreement, a landmark agreement recognising that improving labour conditions and pay was possible. The agreement was also a sign that workers, driven by their collective frustrations, could spearhead reforms in the industry. The agreement “established an arrangement” that “five union representatives” would “meet with an equal number of producer representatives,” to arbitrate a wide range of disputes.<sup>74</sup> According to Ross, “the agreement [was] very flexible and contain[ed] no restrictions on the functions of the joint committee,” meaning that industry workers now had a forum to debate grievances, including wages, hours worked and conditions of labour.<sup>75</sup> The studios that were signatories included “Universal Pictures, MGM, First National Pictures, Famous Players–Lasky, FBO Studios, Producers’ Distributing Corp.,

---

<sup>72</sup> Ross, *Stars and Strikes*, 9.

<sup>73</sup> Ross, *Stars and Strikes*, 12.

<sup>74</sup> Ross, *Stars and Strikes*, 14.

<sup>75</sup> Ross, *Stars and Strikes*, 14.

Warner Brothers, Educational Film Exchanges, and Fox Film Corporation.”<sup>76</sup> The unions that signed were “International Alliance of Theatrical and Stage Employees, the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, the International Brotherhood of Painters and Paperhangers, and the American Federation of Musicians.”<sup>77</sup> The signing of the Studio Basic Agreement created an environment that worried the heads of studios. There was a looming question: what mechanisms did the industry at large have in place to stop other groups from advocating for similar conditions? Therefore, a need emerged for an organisation that could mediate these disputes without the involvement, or formation, of other unions. As I argue throughout this dissertation, the Academy was founded as a reactionary effort on the part of producers, to prevent the unionisation of the non-crafts-based branches of the industry, I begin my discussion of the Academy with the Studio Basic Agreement. So, like scholars such as Bruce Davis and Monica Sandler, I acknowledge the importance of the agreement in the Academy’s foundational history.<sup>78</sup>

In October 1929, the *Los Angeles Times* ran a series of articles that detailed the history of “Los Angeles’ war for the open-shop.”<sup>79</sup> As part of this series, the *Los Angeles Times* published “Story of Long Fight to Control Film Industry” on October 31, 1929, which detailed the drafting process of the Studio Basic Agreement. This account of the agreement criticised motion-picture producers’ lack of pre-emptive action to stop some crafts from unionising. As established previously, the *Los Angeles Times* was a critical supporter of the open shop system in Los Angeles, and such critiques reveal how the anti-union enthusiasts

---

<sup>76</sup> Scott, *On Hollywood*, Footnote 4, 31.

<sup>77</sup> Scott, *On Hollywood*, Footnote 4 31.

<sup>78</sup> Davis, *The Academy and the Award*, 6; Monica Sandler, “PR and Politics at Hollywood’s Biggest Night: The Academy Awards and Unionization (1929-1939),” *Media Industries Journal* 2, no. 2 (2015): 4.

<sup>79</sup> “Story of Forty-Year War for a Free City,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 1, 1929, 1.

felt about the Basic Agreement. Despite its anti-unionist lean, the *Los Angeles Times* article situates the lead-up to the signing of Studio Basic Agreement in the correct historical context. It acknowledges that, for unionists, the appeal of attempting to unionise the motion-picture industry lay in its big payroll and large number of employees.<sup>80</sup> Nevertheless, the article is primarily concerned with critiquing the actions of producers, concluding that the signing of the Studio Basic Agreement was only “made possible by the laxity of the producers in guarding their own interests.”<sup>81</sup> The author follows this by commenting that “unionizing of most [of]...the employees was made easy by the conditions which gave the organizers complete control.”<sup>82</sup> This article undoubtedly blames the producers for unionisation, accusing them of being unable to control their employees and thus allowing unionists to infiltrate their industry. The article concludes with a warning that “the craftsmen are so strongly unionized that sympathetic strikes by them in support of Equity would produce serious trouble for the film business.”<sup>83</sup> The article is thus explicit in the view that non-unionised actors were critical to the open shop crusade. In addition, it highlights that there was a sense of unease among those who were anti-union about the possibility of collaboration between unions. It is therefore understandable that producers wanted to continue to stoke division across the motion-picture industry and among specific professions, such as acting. Leaning into these divisions and exploiting them became essential to keeping the open shop alive.

The Studio Basic Agreement, then, can be considered an instigating factor in the Academy’s establishment. Conventionally, film scholars consider it to be the sole reason for the Academy’s establishment.<sup>84</sup> However, by expanding the historical context surrounding the

---

<sup>80</sup> “Story of Long Fight to Control Film Industry,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 31, 1929, 1.

<sup>81</sup> “Story of Long Fight,” 2.

<sup>82</sup> “Story of Long Fight,” 2.

<sup>83</sup> “Story of Long Fight,” 2.

<sup>84</sup> Scott, *On Hollywood*, 31; Holmes, *Weavers of Dreams, Unite!*, 158-159 and Dorney, Regan, and Salinsky, *Best Pick*, 2.

Academy's foundation in early 1927, it becomes clear that unionisation was not the only element that threatened to destabilise the operation of the motion-picture industry. Another element – censorship – was a growing concern, despite the fact that for as long as there have been motion pictures, there have been attempts to censor them. In her article about film censorship during the silent-film era, Carmen Guiralt highlights that “the first municipal censorship ordinance” was passed in Chicago in 1907.<sup>85</sup> This was the beginning of sustained conflict between the motion-picture industry, various levels of government and local censorship boards. This early phase of censorship would culminate in 1922 with the industry volunteering to adopt “self-regulation as a means of avoiding federal censorship” through the MPPDA.<sup>86</sup> The MPPDA and its leader, Will H. Hays, were essential during the Academy's early development between January and May 1927, prior to the Academy's official launch on May 11, 1927. In their book about trade associations during the studio system, Kia Afra explains that the MPPDA was founded by a coalition of producers from major studios. They hired Hays, who was the former postmaster general, to oversee the organisation and “marshal political, institutional, and civic resources” to serve producer interests.<sup>87</sup> The MPPDA was key in the Academy's foundation because, while it was not interested in unionisation, its formation is a clear example of producers collaborating to facilitate the preservation of their own collective interests. In one of the original drafts of the Academy's constitution and by-laws, sent to Will Hays on January 29, 1927, the MPPDA was specifically listed as a collaborator of the Academy. The document explicitly and simply states that “the Academy shall be affiliated” with the MPPDA.<sup>88</sup> It is clear from this draft of the Academy's

---

<sup>85</sup> Carmen Guiralt, “Self-Censorship in Hollywood During the Silent Era: *A Woman of Affairs* (1928) by Clarence Brown,” *Film History* 28, no. 2 (2016): 108.

<sup>86</sup> Guiralt, “Self-Censorship,” 81.

<sup>87</sup> Kia Afra, *The Hollywood Trust: Trade Associations and the Rise of the Studio System* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 159.

<sup>88</sup> Constitution and By-Laws of Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, included in letter from Edwin J. Loeb to Will H. Hays, January 29, 1927, Will H. Hays Papers, Indiana State Library, Indianapolis, IN. <https://indianamemory.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p16066coll64/id/46374/rec/398>

constitution, that the original thirty-six sponsors of the Academy viewed the MPPDA as an ally and believed that they and the Academy shared similar goals.

Identifying the MPPDA's interests and understanding how it operated at that time illuminates the Academy's values. Afra argues that the MPPDA "functioned as an organization designed for protecting oligopoly."<sup>89</sup> In this way, although Will Hays was not a studio producer or executive, through his position as the head of the MPPDA he functioned in a similar way. Specifically he was tasked with protecting the status quo of the motion-picture industry, he facilitated the producers' agenda and reinforced their control. According to Afra, Hays provided "the producer-distributors a direct link to the White House"; in addition, "he bestowed credibility on the industry among reform organizations" and had the "ability to reconcile corporate interests with Progressive reform demands."<sup>90</sup> Hays' power was immense, and not just because of his relationships within the United States federal government, but also because of the way the MPPDA's structure facilitated his ability to exercise control over the motion-picture industry. Unlike other organisations that preceded the MPPDA, such as the Motion Picture Board of Trade and the National Association of the Motion Picture Industry (NAMPI), as president of the MPPDA, Hays had full veto power.<sup>91</sup> While the MPPDA technically had a board of directors and various committees, every decision ultimately rested with Hays alone.<sup>92</sup> Hays' affiliation with the Academy, then, must be scrutinised, not only because of his established connections to producers, but also because of the role he played during the organisation's development. In addition to receiving drafts of the Academy's constitution and by-laws, Hays also received letters detailing the organisation's progress and the minutes of meetings. It is essential to stress that Hays was not an original Academy

---

<sup>89</sup> Afra, *The Hollywood Trust*, 235.

<sup>90</sup> Afra, *The Hollywood Trust*, 160.

<sup>91</sup> Afra, *The Hollywood Trust*, 167.

<sup>92</sup> Afra, *The Hollywood Trust*, 167.

sponsor, nor was he ever a member of the Academy, making his involvement in the organisation's affairs unusual.

What is clear is that Hays had an intimate knowledge of affairs within the Academy and was kept up to date with its progress over several months. One notable letter, from March 9, 1927, concerned the appointment of Mary Pickford to the producing branch of the Academy rather than the acting branch.<sup>93</sup> Fred Beetson, the secretary and treasurer of the Association of Motion Picture Producers, Inc. (AMPP), the "Pacific Coast association maintained by producing members of the MPPDA," expressed his concern about this appointment to Hays.<sup>94</sup> This concern was also shared by MGM producer Louis B. Mayer.<sup>95</sup> Both Beetson and Mayer felt that the appointment of Pickford to the producers branch would "offer embarrassment due to the fact that Mary Pickford is an actress."<sup>96</sup> The fact that Hays was getting updates from Beetson, an original Academy sponsor, highlights how important Hays' role was, at least in the early stages of the Academy's development. Beetson's letter makes it clear that although not an official Academy member, Hays' opinion had value and he had the ability or potential to shape outcomes. However, because only the correspondence that Hays received is available, his position on Academy affairs is unknown. It is also unclear if Hays intervened to change the composition or direction of the Academy because, despite Beetson and Mayer's objections, Pickford remained in the Academy's producers branch.<sup>97</sup> Nevertheless, Hays', and by extension the MPPDA's, cooperation with the Academy prior to its official incorporation

---

<sup>93</sup> Fred Beetson To Will H. Hays, March 9, 1927, Will H. Hays Papers, Indiana State Library, Indianapolis, IN, 1, <https://indianamemory.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p16066coll64/id/51080/rec/347>

<sup>94</sup> "Fred W. Beetson," MPPDA Digital Archive, Flinders University, Adelaide, SA, [https://flinders.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/discovery/fulldisplay?docid=alma997362229701771&context=L&vid=61FUL\\_INST:FUL&lang=en&adaptor=Local%20Search%20Engine](https://flinders.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/discovery/fulldisplay?docid=alma997362229701771&context=L&vid=61FUL_INST:FUL&lang=en&adaptor=Local%20Search%20Engine)

<sup>95</sup> Beetson To Hays, March 9, 1927, 1.

<sup>96</sup> Beetson To Hays, March 9, 1927, 1.

<sup>97</sup> *Bulletin No. 1*, June 1, 1927, AMPAS Reference Collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Los Angeles, CA, 2, <https://digitalcollections.oscars.org/digital/collection/p15759coll4/id/32/rec/1>

begins to shed light on the types of relationships the Academy sponsors wanted to cultivate. If the MPPDA was created by producers to protect their oligopoly, the Academy's endorsement of the organisation raises questions as to its own motivations and purposes.

To begin with, we need to examine who the Academy invited into its organisation; that is, who its original sponsors believed would support their vision. The language of the May 5, 1927, constitution, released to coincide with the Academy's official launch on May 11, underscores what kind of individuals the Academy wanted as members. The 1927 constitution separates Academy membership into four tiers. The first of these was an "active" member. Anyone who had "accomplished distinguished work or acquired distinguished standing in or made valuable contribution to the production branches of the motion picture industry, directly or indirectly, and who is of good moral and personal standing" could, at the discretion of the board of directors, be invited to become an active member.<sup>98</sup> The second tier was an "associate member," described as "any person who is engaged in any of those production branches of the motion picture industry... who is of good moral and personal standing."<sup>99</sup> The third category was an "honorary member," defined as "any person distinguished for public service or eminence in the motion picture industry, or by reason of any contribution made thereto."<sup>100</sup> Finally, there were "special members"; these could be "any person not included in any of the classes or branches hereinafter specified... but actively engaged or connected with the motion picture industry."<sup>101</sup> Only active and associate members were separated into the Academy's five branches: producers, directors, actors, writers and technicians. Honorary members could hold office but were not allowed to vote. Special members were not permitted to hold office or vote.

---

<sup>98</sup> *Constitution and By-Laws*, 1927, 2.

<sup>99</sup> *Constitution and By-Laws*, 1927, 2.

<sup>100</sup> *Constitution and By-Laws*, 1927, 2.

<sup>101</sup> *Constitution and By-Laws*, 1927, 3.

I argue that the original sponsors, who developed the constitution, deliberately left the categories of membership vague. Every member, regardless of their tier, had to be approved by the Academy's board of directors. This system allowed for the cultivation of what the board of directors imagined to be the ideal composition of members. What is clear in the constitution is that merely engaging in a production branch was enough to gain entry. Yet, because of the board's broad powers of approval, despite the existence of thousands of motion-picture workers, the Academy remained for decades an organisation of hundreds. Personal belief in one's contribution meant nothing. An individual could not apply to the Academy. It was the board's opinion that resulted in an invitation being extended.

The level of control the Academy's board of directors possessed, especially during May and June 1927 – before official elections took place in October 1927 – becomes particularly clear if we consider the committee assignments given to members. As per the 1927 constitution, elections were to be held annually “on the third Saturday in October.”<sup>102</sup> Therefore, looking at who was appointed into positions of power within the Academy prior to the first elections, illuminates the original intentions of the organisation. This is because these appointments occurred without any formal mechanism in place. Comparing the original thirty-six sponsors of the Academy to the list of officers, board of directors and committee members provided in the Academy's first two official bulletins from June 1 and June 17, 1927, it is obvious that the original sponsors appointed themselves to powerful positions. Most sponsors had multiple appointments, some as many as three.<sup>103</sup> The most powerful positions were Academy officers

---

<sup>102</sup> *Constitution and By-Laws*, 1927, 5.

<sup>103</sup> Members with three appointments were Douglas Fairbanks, Fred Niblo, Carey Wilson, Milton Sills, Roy Pomeroy, J.A. Ball, Joseph M. Farnham, Conrad Nagel and Louis B. Mayer, from *Bulletin No. 2*, June 17, 1927, AMPAS Reference Collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Los Angeles, CA, 2, <https://digitalcollections.oscars.org/digital/collection/p15759coll14/id/12/rec/2>

and members of the board, all of whom were among the original thirty-six sponsors.<sup>104</sup> Below that were general committees, and most of those positions were also held by sponsors. The original general committees were Academy Building and Finance, Benefit Motion Picture, College Affairs, Public Relations, Information, Awards of Merit, and Conciliation and Membership.<sup>105</sup> The least significant appointment was to the branch executive committees, which were appointed sometime between June 1 and June 17, 1927.

By June 17, 1927, after branch executive committee appointments and the addition of two extra positions on the Information general committee, there was a total of ninety-eight individual positions across Academy committees, the board and officer positions. Through newspaper reports from the first Academy banquet on May 11, we know that there were at least two hundred and seventy-five new Academy members.<sup>106</sup> With the addition of the original thirty-six sponsors, this means that in filling positions, there were at least three hundred and eleven members to choose from. However, if we compare the lists of the Academy's committees from June 17, 1927 with the list of its original sponsors, a pattern emerges. Of the ninety-eight slots available across committees and the board, on June 17, thirty original sponsors held sixty-four positions; thirty-three other members, who were not Academy sponsors, held just thirty-four positions. This means, that thirty individuals (all original sponsors) controlled sixty-five per cent of the Academy. Put another way, if Academy membership was three hundred and eleven on May 11, nine percent of total Academy membership controlled the organisation. It is clear, then, that the original sponsors

---

<sup>104</sup> The original Academy officers were Douglas Fairbanks, president; Fred Niblo, vice president; Frank Wood, secretary and M.C. Levee, treasurer. The members of the first Academy board were Douglas Fairbanks, Conrad Nagel, Milton Sills, Roy Pomeroy, Cedric Gibbons, J.A. Ball, Fred Niblo, Frank Lloyd, John Stahl, Jeanie Macpherson, Carey Wilson, Joseph Farnham, Mary Pickford, Louis B. Mayer and Joseph M. Schenck; *Bulletin No. 1*, 2.

<sup>105</sup> *Bulletin No. 1*, 2.

<sup>106</sup> "Mary Pickford on A.M.P.A.S.," *Variety*, May 18, 1927, 9.

of the Academy were rewarded with positions of power in the early months of the organisation. This meant that the Academy could, from the beginning, be steered by those who held the original vision. Therefore, when the organisation intervened in labour matters, as will be discussed in Chapter Two, this occurred entirely under the direction of the original sponsors.

In addition to its tiered membership system, the Academy was also structured internally like a pyramid, with the board of directors at the top. While all official Academy documentation, including bulletins and annual reports, list the officers before mentioning the board, if we review the constitution, it becomes clear that the board held all the power in the Academy. In 1927, officer positions were the Academy president, vice president, secretary and treasurer, while the board consisted of three members from each branch, totalling fifteen members. By listing officers ahead of the board, the Academy's documentation created the façade that a single president, supported by a group of officers, presided over the organisation. However, the original constitution reveals that half of the president's actions were predicated on the approval of the board. The signing of any documentation and appointing members to committees were technically under the president's purview, but these actions were all subject to approval by the board. Moreover, the "supervision and control" of all "officers, agents and employees" was also technically the responsibility of the president but likewise was also "subject to the control of the board of directors."<sup>107</sup> This left the president of the Academy only permitted to "preside at all meetings," "call special meetings," "generally...supervise the affairs of the Academy" and "make a report for the preceding year" without prior board approval.<sup>108</sup> This rendered the president's role ineffective and completely beholden to the

---

<sup>107</sup> *Constitution and By-Laws*, 1927, 11.

<sup>108</sup> *Constitution and By-Laws*, 1927, 11.

board. The Academy represented, through the president's title and the listed hierarchy on paper, that the president was at the helm of the organisation. However though close examination of the written description of the president's actions and responsibilities set out in the constitution, it becomes clear that the president was beholden to the board. This meant that the board, not the president or their officers, were in control of the organisation.

It is therefore curious, that anyone would be interested in becoming an Academy member, given that the board of directors effectively controlled the organisation. Looking at the remarks made at the Academy's inaugural banquet on May 11, 1927, the language used by the speakers proposes the Academy as the solution to growing division within the motion-picture industry. As I have established, there were divisions between and within professions, as well as divisions between the motion-picture industry and those outside it. At the banquet, there were thirteen speakers; twelve of whom were original Academy sponsors and the thirteenth was Will Hays.<sup>109</sup> The speakers argued that these divides were harming the motion-picture industry's ability to protect itself. According to inaugural Academy president, Douglas Fairbanks, the Academy's purposes were "to promote harmonius [*sic*] relations, to conciliate differences, and to reconcile diverse aims, to encourage the development of the arts and sciences" in the motion-picture industry.<sup>110</sup> Fairbanks acknowledged that "in the past...we have lacked strength...that comes from unity, from organization," and argued that the Academy would be the industry's great unifying force.<sup>111</sup> While this reflects some of the language in the constitution, notably the organisation's "aims", it does not align with the organisation's structure. With a high percentage of original sponsors controlling the key

---

<sup>109</sup> Speakers at the May 11, 1927 banquet were Douglas Fairbanks, Fred Niblo (who doubled as the Toastmaster), Conrad Nagel, Joseph M. Schenck, Cecil B. DeMille, Frank Lloyd, Roy Pomeroy, Milton Sills, Carey Wilson, Mary Pickford, Will Hays, Louis B. Mayer and M.C. Levee, from Fisher, *The Inauguration of 'Oscar'*, '295-317; "Mary Pickford on A.M.P.A.S.," 9, 17-18.

<sup>110</sup> Douglas Fairbanks quoted in Fisher, *The Inauguration of 'Oscar'*, '295.

<sup>111</sup> Fairbanks quoted in Fisher, *The Inauguration of 'Oscar'*, '295.

positions of power, and the board of directors controlling the whole organisation, the Academy succeeded at uniting its original thirty-six founders but had no mechanism to unite an entire industry. What Fairbanks really means is that the Academy would be a uniting force, not for the entire industry, but for those who made it into the banquet; that is, the motion-picture elite. It was the differences among this elite group that needed to be conciliated and resolved so the motion-picture industry could present a public façade of unity.

My argument here – that the Academy was structured to exploit the motion-picture elite’s power – is reinforced by Mary Pickford’s comments at the same banquet. She echoed Fairbanks’ sentiments saying, “I do not think that we here tonight realize the tremendous importance of it all; the power that has gone to waste through lack of organization.”<sup>112</sup> The wasted power was the individuals in the room, it was this power that she hoped the Academy could harness. For example, she proposed in the same speech that the Academy could use the “hundreds of thousands -- in fact the millions of fan letters,” by enrolling their authors; “these sympathetic individuals...these interested individuals into one great group of ‘lay’ or ‘correspondent’ members of the Academy.”<sup>113</sup> Such a move would have exploited the fame of Academy members which, in turn, would have further reinforced and consolidated the organisation’s power. The Academy would have had “millions” of fan-members who would have supported its elite-members and, therefore, supported the organisation and its decisions. It must be noted that I have found no evidence that such a plan ever materialised.

Pickford also promoted the Academy as a means through which the industry elite could gain protection from the media. She suggested a bulletin, “making our power and influence world

---

<sup>112</sup> Mary Pickford quoted in Fisher, *The Inauguration of 'Oscar,'* 315.

<sup>113</sup> Pickford quoted in Fisher, *The Inauguration of 'Oscar,'* 315.

wide,” which would be sent to these proposed lay/correspondent members, extending the Academy’s power outside the industry.<sup>114</sup> She went on to suggest that the bulletin would provide “authentic and constructive information...to offset the damage done by destructive influences that have sought to destroy us through their own selfish ambitions; through sensationalism, through exaggeration, untruth and misinformation.”<sup>115</sup> Pickford, then, wanted to use the Academy as the motion-picture industry’s public relations arm, creating stories to offset unfavourable journalism. It must be noted here that between 1918 and 1920 Pickford herself was the subject of an intense media frenzy. She and Douglas Fairbanks were accused of an extramarital affair, which resulted in them both divorcing their respective spouses and marrying.<sup>116</sup> Although the press coverage and speculation about their affair was intense, Pickford managed to manipulate the media to her advantage, gaining reader sympathy. This manipulation was especially evident during her divorce proceedings, when she claimed to have been abandoned, turning the scandal into sympathy.<sup>117</sup> Pickford’s personal interest in the media, and its coverage of stars, personally motivated her desire to deploy the Academy as a mechanism for public relations. Had the board agreed with Pickford’s personal desires the Academy would have turned from a place of unity, discussion and negotiation into an organisation that had the ability to exploit and manipulate public trust. Combining this proposal with her ideas about weaponising fan support, Pickford’s view of the Academy and its purposes come into view. For Pickford, the Academy was a place where anything was possible. It was a powerful organisation that she, and her fellow members of the elite, could use to improve their own public image and increase their power. This then causes one to

---

<sup>114</sup> Pickford quoted in Fisher, *The Inauguration of 'Oscar,'* 316.

<sup>115</sup> Pickford quoted in Fisher, *The Inauguration of 'Oscar,'* 316.

<sup>116</sup> For additional information see Anne Helen Petersen, *Scandals of Classic Hollywood: Sex, Deviance and Drama from the Golden Age of American Cinema* (PLUME, 2014).

<sup>117</sup> “Mary Pickford Wins Divorce in Nevada,” *The New York Times*, March 4, 1920, 9.

question the motivations of the other thirty-five founders, especially because these proposed functions of the organisation were not mentioned in its constitution.

The Academy's selective membership model – which, as I have demonstrated, capitalised on existing divisions in the motion-picture industry – may also have appealed to those at the banquet. In her history of fashion at the Academy Awards, Elizabeth Castaldo Lundén compares the Academy's selective membership model to society clubs that emerged during the 1920s. According to Lundén, these clubs “allowed the elite to gather under a shared interest,” and they operated as “a way of conveying status and a sense of belonging.”<sup>118</sup> Society clubs used curation to generate a selective membership body. Lundén connects this practice to the Academy's manner of membership selection, arguing that the Academy was a means through which motion-picture industry members gained “a sense of community, control and prestige.”<sup>119</sup> This sense of exclusivity also differentiated the Academy from a union. Even though Fairbanks had spoken in his banquet speech of the Academy's unifying objectives, the Academy was never intended to operate as a union. However, one aim of a union – to unite industry members – was present in the Academy ethos. However, as I have established, this sense of unity manifested in the exclusivity of the Academy and was only available to the motion-picture elite. The selective nature of the Academy's membership structure circumvents a key aspect of a union: the fact that anyone working in the profession that the union represents can join. This suggests that the Academy is more comparable to a social club than a union.

---

<sup>118</sup> Elizabeth Castaldo Lundén, *Fashion on the Red Carpet: A History of the Oscars, Fashion and Globalisation*, (Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 54.

<sup>119</sup> Lundén, *Fashion on the Red Carpet*, 54.

The comparison one speaker made at the May banquet, however, was not with social clubs but with other, similar organisations. Actor Conrad Nagel asked, “will the Academy conflict with organizations already in existence? Decidedly, No! [*sic*].”<sup>120</sup> He expanded on this saying that no members of the Writers Guild or Actors Equity had “felt that this proposed Academy will in any way infringe or encroach on the place occupied by their respective associations.”<sup>121</sup> In other words, Nagel promoted the Academy as an entirely distinct organisation because, unlike other organisations, including the Writers Guild and Equity, the Academy was selective in its membership. Only the elite industry directors, producers, actors, writers and technicians were invited to join. It was the collective power of the elite that could, allegedly, save the industry from threats. As Pickford had declared in her speech that evening, those in attendance “are capable of self-government, of self-defence,” and the Academy was an “active” step in protecting the industry.<sup>122</sup> Therefore, while the Academy’s rhetoric – in the speeches of its original sponsors, in its constitution and across official documentation – appeared to promote a united industry more broadly, it is clear, from an examination of contextual divisions and the Academy’s membership criteria, that the organisation was only interested in prioritising and uniting the elite.

Most importantly however, it was not structured in a way designed to fulfil the goal of unity. In reality, the Academy functioned only to serve those who controlled the organisation; that is, the original sponsors who sat on the board of directors. The Academy’s membership structure used the power of the industry elite not to unite, but to bolster the organisation. It was the active and associate Academy members who should have controlled the organisation, because without their power the Academy would have remained as thirty-six sponsors.

---

<sup>120</sup> Conrad Nagel quoted in Fisher, *The Inauguration of 'Oscar,'* 300.

<sup>121</sup> Nagel quoted in Fisher, *The Inauguration of 'Oscar,'* 300.

<sup>122</sup> Pickford quoted in Fisher, *The Inauguration of 'Oscar,'* 316.

However, because the Academy's structure inherently created a division within a division, it was the board, at the top of the pyramid who benefited the most. The remarks made at the inaugural banquet make clear that the Academy wanted to appeal to all the elite invitees with promises of unity and protection, but the Academy's structure inherently rendered this impossible. Therefore, the Academy's membership only served the Academy's public image. The non-sponsor individual held no real power. This allowed members of the board like Mary Pickford, who had specific interests, to direct Academy actions. In Chapter Two, I argue that this power manifested in June 1927, when the Academy first intervened in labour matters.

## Chapter 2. Structural Success: The Academy's First Victory, June 1927

It was *Variety*, on June 15, 1927, that first reported the studios' decision to cut salaries across the industry. It reported that studio executives, or "representatives of the largest picture firms," secretly met in New York to orchestrate a coordinated attack on the salaries of all branches of motion-picture labour.<sup>123</sup> It was a collective effort to reduce industry spending that targeted the lowest paid workers. The executives agreed to cut salaries by 25 percent for all "players, writers and directors" whose weekly income exceeded fifty dollars.<sup>124</sup> They also pledged to stop bidding on open market talent, because this increased talent prices and some studios planned to fire people earning more than four figures.<sup>125</sup> To maintain the appearance that these cuts were necessary, East Coast executives agreed to cut between 10 and 25 percent of their own income. However, due to their large annual salaries, a reduction in executive income was not proportional to the incomes of the "ninety per cent" of actors, directors and writers who earned less than one thousand dollars a week.<sup>126</sup>

The Academy's intervention was swift. By June 27, 1927, the Academy's board had issued a resolution calling for the cuts to be paused; in addition, the board wanted the Academy to become the centre for negotiation.<sup>127</sup> By June 30, 1927, the Academy was being credited with pausing the cuts and by July 30 the Academy's work had resulted in a "calm" settling back over the industry.<sup>128</sup> This chapter examines the Academy's structure in action. I argue that the

---

<sup>123</sup> "Regulating Hollywood," *Variety*, June 15, 1927, 8.

<sup>124</sup> "Regulating Hollywood," 8; "Paramount Cuts Movie Salaries 10 Per Cent.; Entire Industry Is Expected to Follow Suit," *The New York Times*, June 23, 1927, 1

<sup>125</sup> "Regulating Hollywood," 8.

<sup>126</sup> "25% Salary Reduction Asked of P-F-L N.Y. Executive Staff by Zukor," *Variety*, June 15, 1927, 4; "Regulating Hollywood," 8.

<sup>127</sup> *Bulletin No. 3*, July 2, 1927, AMPAS Reference Collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Los Angeles, CA, 1-2,

<https://digitalcollections.oscars.org/digital/collection/p15759coll4/id/24/rec/3>

<sup>128</sup> Tom Waller, "Think Producers Rescind Salary Cut at Meeting," *Motion Picture World*, July 2, 1927, 33; Tom Waller, "Calm Settles Over Hollywood as Economy Conferences End," *Motion Picture World*, July 30, 1927, 313.

Academy's structure afforded it the ability to leverage power in ways no other organisation could. The Academy injected itself into discussions around the salary cuts because, despite its public presentation, labour matters were one of the organisation's primary interests. The Academy's involvement in June 1927 is evidence of its board directing organisational actions.

There is a lack of consensus across film scholarship as to the executives' motivations for the cuts. Murray Ross describes them as "an economy drive," while Bruce Davis describes them as "a bold, if not absolutely well-thought-out, measure."<sup>129</sup> Other scholars, like Kia Afra and Sean Holmes, take a more sceptical approach. Afra argues that the Academy's foundation was tied to the cuts, describing the creation of the organisation as a "coordinated...preliminary measure to secure cooperation ahead of studio salary cuts planned for the summer."<sup>130</sup> In a similar argument, Holmes explains the cuts as "the studio heads" collaborating to test the Academy's "efficacy."<sup>131</sup> The focus of this chapter is the Academy's reaction to the cuts. While this does not necessitate a discussion of the studio executives' motivations, I nevertheless must negotiate with these different perspectives. This is especially necessary because scholars like Afra and Holmes have accused the Academy of being a pawn used by producers, while others, like Davis, argue that the Academy's involvement stemmed from a desire to unite the motion-picture industry.

Broadly, however, there is little written about the Academy's involvement in the June 1927 salary cuts. Therefore, most of the research for this chapter was drawn from archive-based material. This includes newspapers and original Academy documentation sourced from the

---

<sup>129</sup> Ross, *Stars and Strikes*, 27; Davis, *The Academy and the Award*, 34.

<sup>130</sup> Afra, *The Hollywood Trust*, 240.

<sup>131</sup> Holmes, *Weavers of Dreams, Unite!*, 159.

Margaret Herrick Library. This chapter provides a unique perspective that considers how the Academy's elitist membership and structure contributed to the resolution of the crisis. This leads to the conclusion that the Academy's strength lay in its ability to leverage the power of its board to achieve its goals.

As highlighted in Chapter One, a multitude of divisions existed across the motion-picture industry at the time of the Academy's creation. The proposed June salary cuts exposed the power imbalance between studio executives and their employees, especially regarding the executives' access to the media. As previously stated, Davis argues that the salary cuts were "a bold" and a "well-thought-out, measure," suggesting that there was an element of planning on the executive's behalf.<sup>132</sup> Planning is evident in how the East Coast executives used the media, as well as in the performative nature of cutting their own salaries, and their exploitation of existing divisions to pit workers against each other.

To begin with, the executives used the media to deliver their message. Davis questions how the alleged 'secret' meeting made its way into the pages of *Variety*, noting that "the conclave was not so secret that the trade paper couldn't give its readers detailed accounts of what had transpired."<sup>133</sup> This manipulation by executives is also evident in the way executives cut their own salaries by 25 percent. Paramount's Adolph Zukor and Jesse L. Lasky, for example, were the highest paid executives at the time, each earning two hundred and fifty thousand dollars annually.<sup>134</sup> If they each took a 25 percent cut, as *Variety* reported they planned to do, this would have meant a total reduction of only sixty-two thousand five hundred dollars annually.<sup>135</sup> Their salaries would thus be reduced to one hundred and eighty-seven thousand

---

<sup>132</sup> Davis, *The Academy and the Award*, 34.

<sup>133</sup> Davis, *The Academy and the Award*, 33.

<sup>134</sup> "25% Salary Reduction..." 4.

<sup>135</sup> Figures calculated by the author of this thesis using figures from, "25% Salary Reduction..." 4.

five hundred dollars each year. As previously mentioned, ninety percent of actors, directors and writers made around one thousand dollars a week. It is evident that a 25 percent reduction in pay was different depending on one's starting income. Executives cutting their own salaries was not comparable to the significant wage reduction that they were imposing on employees with significantly lower incomes than their own. These actions highlight that studio executives were aware of the divide between themselves and their employees. Therefore, reducing executive income by the same percentage as their workers was a performative exercise. The cuts would have had little impact on the executive but would have affected the quality of life for low-paid employees, especially considering the proposed cuts would have affected all employees who earned more than fifty dollars a week. Cutting their own salaries was a tool executives used to present themselves in the media as morally upstanding.

Also established in Chapter One were the divisions that were inherent within the acting profession. These proposed cuts capitalised on and exploited those divisions. In the same June 15 story, *Variety* identified that an exception to the cuts would be made for people deemed as "outstanding money getters" – that is, movie stars.<sup>136</sup> Their high salaries were commensurate with their ability to bring in high box-office numbers and therefore they gained further reward through being exempt from the cuts. The lack of collective identity within the acting branch facilitated this. From *Variety*'s reporting, it is evident that the cuts targeted low-income workers. Using McKenna's work on the extra, we know that these employees were already considered disposable and faced exploitation. Through Clark, we know that character actors and supporting players were also ideologically separated from stars and therefore would have had their salaries cut significantly. This implies that, by

---

<sup>136</sup> "Regulating Hollywood," 8.

exempting stars, studio executives had the knowledge that stars were the only class of actor who possessed any real power. Additionally, as seen through Mary Pickford's manipulation of the media in the late 1910s, stars had the ability to gain public favour by harnessing the media. In the context of the salary cuts, these divisions benefited executives and stars alike because they rewarded the powerful by saving them from significant salary reductions. Nevertheless, this does raise questions regarding the necessity of the cuts. How could the cuts be considered necessary, if the highest paid executives and the highest paid stars had little to no meaningful reduction in their incomes?

Before I turn more closely to this question, it is important to note that these proposed cuts were not entirely without merit. The invention of sound and the race to perfect it meant that motion pictures were more expensive to produce in 1927 than ever before. Every studio was suffering. However, studios experiencing economic hardship was not new. Economic data collected in 1922 by the American Federal Trade Commission (the FTC) and released in 1926 depicts an unbalanced film economy.<sup>137</sup> The data relates to the motion-picture industry's investments, profits and standing against other American businesses. In June 1927, this was the most recent data collected about the motion-picture economy. The FTC's data reveals that the motion-picture industry had collectively invested two and a half billion dollars across the 1922 financial year but only turned a forty-five million dollar profit.<sup>138</sup> The FTC figures show that the motion-picture industry's internal economy had been declining for years. To remain competitive as America's sixth largest industry, it clearly needed to improve upon its 1.9 percent return on investment.<sup>139</sup> To understand how low this return is, the fifth largest industry, "lumber and wood products," also had a two and a half billion dollar investment but

---

<sup>137</sup> "Big Business' Net Returns," *Variety*, May 18, 1927, 3.

<sup>138</sup> "Industry's Net \$45,000,000," *Variety*, May 18, 1927, 3.

<sup>139</sup> "Big Business' Net Returns," 3.

achieved a 7.1 percent return.<sup>140</sup> Therefore, it is evident that the motion-picture industry was struggling in 1922. With the added costs of emerging sound technology, it can be deduced that investment had increased, and with profits already so low, the return on investment was unlikely to have improved dramatically by 1927. This is not to say, however, that cutting salaries in the manner executives proposed would have been effective; it is quite the opposite. With the entire industry only returning forty-five million dollars, the motion-picture industry was in dire straits financially. Studios needed a more robust economic management plan to increase their economic position, a plan that did not hinge on salary cuts alone.

Considering this, it is understandable that alternative theories explaining the rationale for the salary cuts have emerged. Sean Holmes presents the idea that the salary cuts were a means through which executives could test the new Academy. To begin with, it must be made clear that Holmes was not interested in the minute detail of the salary cut situation, or the specifics of the Academy's involvement. Instead, as with the rest of his book, he was interested in how the salary cuts impacted Actors Equity. In particular, his interest was in exploring Equity's development, or lack thereof, in the motion-picture industry in the aftermath of the cut announcement. Holmes introduces the Academy as a competitor to Equity and views the situation in this context. He recounts how "Equity officials dismissed" the Academy as a "glorified company union."<sup>141</sup> He goes on to identify that, unlike Equity, "from its very inception the Academy was dominated by the Hollywood elite."<sup>142</sup> It is from this perspective that Holmes forms the view that in June 1927, a month after the Academy's official welcome banquet, a collaboration occurred between executives and the Academy and "the studio heads set about testing its [the Academy's] efficacy."<sup>143</sup>

---

<sup>140</sup> "Big Business' Net Returns," 3.

<sup>141</sup> Holmes, *Weavers of Dreams, Unite!*, 159.

<sup>142</sup> Holmes, *Weavers of Dreams, Unite!*, 159.

<sup>143</sup> Holmes, *Weavers of Dreams, Unite!*, 159.

In other words, Holmes presents the salary cuts as a coordinated effort on behalf of the studio executives to test the new organisation. While I do not agree with the totality of this analysis, as it is not supported by the language used in the Academy's resolution, it is nevertheless understandable how Holmes reached this conclusion. The elitist membership of the Academy, combined with the executives' decision to provide exemptions for powerful talent, allow for the conclusion that there was collusion between the Academy and executives. This interpretation is especially plausible because most, if not all Academy members, would have fallen into the "outstanding money getter" category. Therefore, Holmes argues that the Academy's drive to intervene was pre-determined and this argument contributes to his conclusion that the Academy benefited from the proposed salary cuts. It was the organisation that successfully paused the cuts and then successfully negotiated with executives to stop them altogether. Holmes' conclusion is that the cuts were an engineered scheme, not to genuinely cut salaries, but to showcase the benefits of the Academy to the industry and the public. What Holmes does not acknowledge is that cost-cutting was genuinely necessary. Additionally, while it is accurate, with hindsight, to conclude that the Academy ultimately benefited from the failed attempt to cut salaries, by looking at the daily reporting from the time, it becomes clear that it was a tense and rapidly changing situation that had no guaranteed outcome, especially when the cuts were first announced.

While Holmes offers the perspective that the cuts were a collaboration between the Academy and executives, other scholars, namely Bruce Davis, offer an alternative view. Davis argues that the Academy was driven to intervene, by way of a resolution calling for a pause to the cuts, due to its belief in collective unity. In Chapter One, I established that the Academy's public rhetoric portrayed it as an organisation focused on the industry. It presented itself as a

mechanism that could unite the entire industry. Davis accepts this aim at face value. Where Holmes argues that there was collaboration between executives and the Academy, Davis argues that the cuts were unexpected. From an industry perspective, Davis writes, “the announcement of the impending salary cuts... was received with [a] mixture of surprise and rancor.”<sup>144</sup> He expands on this, arguing that the AMPP, the producer’s organisation that was tasked by the MPPDA with implementing the cuts, “made no effort to bring the issue to the Academy’s attention.”<sup>145</sup> The Academy’s involvement, then, becomes something else; in Davis’ argument, the Academy was not a collaborator but was equally as shocked by the cuts as employees. This interpretation suggests that the Academy’s desire to pause the cuts and negotiate is the action of an industry protector and represents an attempt to resolve tension in a fracturing industry.

If the cuts exploited the divisions that existed across the motion-picture industry then, as the self-declared organisation of unity, the Academy’s insertion into the situation, through its resolution, becomes less trivial. This follows Davis’ argument that the Academy became involved to drive unity across the industry. However, I disagree with Davis that it was a noble effort from the Academy. Instead, the Academy was forced to interject. The cuts divided and angered workers so swiftly that the Academy was faced with a challenge to its message. I argue that the Academy involved itself in the salary cuts in order to control labour negotiations. What neither scholar has considered, however, is the importance of the Academy’s resolution and what it reveals about the organisation’s stance in labour matters. I argue that the Academy was motivated not out of obligation or nobility, but by a desire to take control. It wanted to be at the centre of negotiation.

---

<sup>144</sup> Davis, *The Academy and the Award*, 35.

<sup>145</sup> Davis, *The Academy and the Award*, 34, 35.

On June 27, 1927, twelve days after *Variety*'s first report about the salary cuts, the Academy became the first motion-picture organisation to respond directly to the proposed cuts. The Academy's board sent a resolution to the AMPP declaring that the board was "not in sympathy with the movement" to cut salaries.<sup>146</sup> The Academy resolved "that the producer members of the Academy be, and they hereby are, requested to recommend, through their executive committee, to those producers who have instituted, or are instituting the proposed general cut in salaries, that they suspend the taking of effect thereof until at least August 1, 1927."<sup>147</sup> The resolution continued, with the board declaring that during the suspension period negotiations would take place, "with the proper cooperation of the members of all branches of the industry which will accomplish even greater results than the method proposed, thus eliminating entirely the necessity for any uniform reduction."<sup>148</sup> The resolution concluded with a call for collaboration and cooperation: "the Board of Directors recommend to all members of the Academy and to all members of the industry as well, that they cooperate with each other and particularly with the producers, to the end that the desired results may be attained."<sup>149</sup> All but one of the Academy's fifteen-member board of directors signed the resolution on June 27, 1927.<sup>150</sup>

Like members' banquet speeches, the board's resolution uses the language of unification. Yet, the direct call to producers to defy their association and call upon each other to pause the cuts put the Academy's board in direct opposition to the AMPP and executives. The open disagreement is not the board being contrary. Instead, this defiance was driven, as Davis

---

<sup>146</sup> *Bulletin No. 3, 1.*

<sup>147</sup> *Bulletin No. 3, 2.*

<sup>148</sup> *Bulletin No. 3, 2.*

<sup>149</sup> *Bulletin No. 3, 2.*

<sup>150</sup> Milton Sills was the exception, the reason for his absence is unknown, *Bulletin No. 3, 2.*

highlighted, by executives and the AMPP not informing the Academy of the cuts. Less than a month before announcing the cuts, the Academy made clear that it wanted to be the centre of the motion-picture industry. In direct opposition to Holmes' argument, because the Academy was not given an opportunity to contribute to discussions, the Academy's resolution was the board's way of taking hold of the situation and making the Academy the centre of the story. This stands to reason because labour negotiation is not mentioned in the Academy's constitution, yet the board intervened. This signalled that something more complex had occurred than either Holmes or Davis propose.

As suggested in the Introduction, there are multiple histories of the Academy; some of these are acknowledged and created by the Academy, while others are buried. The first example of this curated history took place at the Academy's first banquet on May 11, 1927, with the first public telling of what has come to be known as the beach house story. Delivered by Fred Niblo, toastmaster of the evening, his version moved in many directions but was ultimately shaped around one notion: honesty. The purpose of Niblo's version of the beach house story was *not* to deliver a complete and honest narrative of the Academy's foundation. Rather, what Niblo was tasked with was conveying to the banquet attendees that even though the Academy was born from the mind of MGM producer Louis B. Mayer, it was still an independent organisation and, therefore, was not designed to control employees.

Niblo's beach house story can be labelled in this way because, in his version, Mayer's beach house is the location where the first conversation about the Academy occurred. Niblo explained that "this organization, began so simply and so honestly," with the idea first emerging from a discussion that had no connection at all to the motion-picture industry.<sup>151</sup>

---

<sup>151</sup> Fred Niblo quoted in Fisher, *The Inauguration of 'Oscar,'* 297.

Instead, while debating the origins of war, it was Mayer's proposal that wars emerged from hatred and that "if we had only stopped to adjust our differences...why wars would be stopped."<sup>152</sup> It was at this juncture that Mayer expressed his belief that a similar hatred and misunderstanding was boiling under relationships across the motion-picture industry. The notion of an organisation that could reconcile these disputes emerged from there. What makes Niblo's narrative succeed as a charming story about the Academy's origins is that he turns Mayer from an overbearing producer, into a saccharine idealist. Mayer was just, "so simply and so honestly" trying to do something good for an industry that had given him so much. Niblo says as much, arguing that the original Academy sponsors "all realize that we owe this industry a great deal."<sup>153</sup> This narrative suggested that it was Niblo's belief (and Mayer's too) that the creation of an organisation, an academy, was a way to give back to the industry.

Framing the story as Mayer giving back to the motion-picture industry is designed to make a sceptic feel ashamed for believing the Academy was a way for Mayer, and producers more broadly, to control the industry. Niblo goes on to describe Mayer's "inspiration," noting that he, Niblo, said "Great Scott! Why haven't you said anything about that before?" to which Mayer responded, "because I am a producer; because if I started it everybody would be saying, 'I wonder what Mayer has up his sleeve?'"<sup>154</sup> Niblo uses this as an example of the kind of misunderstandings that plague the industry as well as a way to reinforce the notion that the Academy was a gift to the industry. Niblo's claim of honesty hinges on the listener believing that he is being open about the Academy being Mayer's idea. If the listener questions Niblo's narrative, this pulls them into the divisions and misunderstandings that Niblo is describing and the Academy is attempting to remedy.

---

<sup>152</sup> Niblo quoted in Fisher, *The Inauguration of 'Oscar,'* 297.

<sup>153</sup> Niblo quoted in Fisher, *The Inauguration of 'Oscar,'* 298.

<sup>154</sup> Niblo quoted in Fisher, *The Inauguration of 'Oscar,'* 298.

What David Thomson acknowledges, in his own version of the beach house story, in *Vanity Fair*, and Niblo does not, is the wider context in which this conversation occurred. As detailed in Chapter One, the Academy was, in part, a reactive measure implemented to stop further worker unionisation after the signing of the Studio Basic Agreement. What Niblo fails to acknowledge is how Mayer's personal experience informed his (Mayer's) belief that there would be a significant economic fallout and a personal financial toll if widespread unionisation occurred. Thomson's version begins in the summer of 1926, when Mayer's wife and teenage daughters asked him to build a beach house.<sup>155</sup> Thomson describes Mayer as possessing "a survivor's sense of economics": in place of a qualified architect and traditional project manager, Mayer used studio labour to build the house.<sup>156</sup> In six weeks head MGM designer Cedric Gibbon, MGM production manager Joe Coen, and an unknown amount of studio labour worked seven days a week, around-the-clock to deliver Mayer and his family a Spanish-style beach house on Santa Monica beach.<sup>157</sup> With the signing of the Studio Basic Agreement occurring within weeks after completion, the entire affair, according to Thomson, is said to have opened Mayer's eyes to the economic benefits of non-union labour. Mayer had to break "ground right away" to avoid the additional costs associated with paying unionised workers and he feared what it meant for his bottom line if other workers, outside of the crafts, "got the union idea in their heads."<sup>158</sup> Therefore, in Thomson's account, it was the building of the beach house, rather than the conversation that occurred within it, that was the real driving force behind the Academy's foundation.

---

<sup>155</sup> David Thomson, "The House That Mr. Mayer Built: Inside the Union-Busting Birth of the Academy Awards," *Vanity Fair*, February 21, 2014, <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2014/02/secret-oscar-history?srsId=AfmBOopnlToqS7afagcdBJJEX1yFzJinSH2TJQUhos99uOWmZnpS5ROb>

<sup>156</sup> Thomson, "The House That Mr. Mayer Built."

<sup>157</sup> A. Scott Berg, "Louis B. Mayer: MGM's Archetypal Studio Head at Home," *Architectural Digest*, April, 1990, 284.

<sup>158</sup> Berg, "Louis B. Mayer," 284; Thomson, "The House That Mr. Mayer Built."

Drawing on Thomson's version of events, intervention into labour matters becomes a core Academy value. In this way, the Academy board's June 27 resolution – which was only signed by the original Academy sponsors – is recontextualised. Thomson's version also highlights that Mayer had a personal interest in abating the formation of further unions across the motion-picture industry and that personal investment could impact and inform actual Academy action. As a board member and a signatory to the board's resolution, we know that Mayer supported the Academy's position and, as a producer, was choosing the Academy over his producers association, the AMPP.

Additionally, what neither Holmes nor Davis acknowledge in their rationale for the Academy's involvement is the surge in support for the actor's union, Actors Equity. Almost immediately after the cuts briefly went into effect on June 22, *Variety* reported on the same day in 'Film Actors and Equity Again Up on Coast', that Frank Gilmore, Equity's executive secretary, had made the trip to California from New York to urge motion-picture actors to join the union.<sup>159</sup> Ross notes that many "actors turned to the union for help" and therefore Equity "had its best opportunity...to secure reorganization."<sup>160</sup> Equity capitalised on the disenfranchised and angry actors and its membership numbers surged, with the union enrolling as many as one-thousand-two-hundred members in a single meeting.<sup>161</sup> What was missing for Equity, however, as Ross explains, was a sense of loyalty. Ross notes that "most actors were unconcerned as to which organization represented them as long as they got their way."<sup>162</sup> Therefore, it was not the inherent appeal of Equity that drove actors to join; instead,

---

<sup>159</sup> "Paramount Cuts Movie Salaries," 1; "Film Actors and Equity," 5.

<sup>160</sup> Ross, *Stars and Strikes*, 27.

<sup>161</sup> Tom Waller, "Equity Shop is Established in Hollywood; Players to Negotiate Agreement with Hays," *Motion Picture World*, July 9, 1927, 75.

<sup>162</sup> Ross, *Stars and Strikes*, 28.

membership increased because Equity was the loudest at proclaiming it would be proactive in advocating for “better basic conditions.”<sup>163</sup>

Also significant, especially regarding the Academy’s eventual success over Equity, is the latter’s obvious lack of organisation. Whether this was due to the unprecedented increase in membership, or because of the rapidly changing situation, Equity was clearly disorganised in its public messaging. For instance, when asked around July 9, 1927, by Tom Waller of *Motion Picture World*, to comment on the content of an upcoming Equity meeting, Wedgewood Nowell, a “special representative of Hollywood Equity,” and Academy member, said “the meeting is for the purpose of accomplishing the purpose which the meeting may determine to accomplish.”<sup>164</sup> Waller does not speculate as to what Nowell means here. The best I can determine is that Nowell is saying that the Equity meeting would determine a purpose and, following this, meeting participants would discuss how Equity would accomplish said aim. Nevertheless, a special Equity representative lacking a clear message undermined the work Equity was attempting to accomplish. It also set Equity apart from the polish that was present in the Academy’s resolution which, at the time Nowell made his statement, the producers had already agreed to. A lack of member loyalty and Equity’s disorganisation allowed the Academy to occupy a third space between producers and the union. The board’s resolution shows they agreed, in part, with producers that cost-cutting needed to occur, but really what the board wanted to control was the terms of negotiation.

This modicum of agreement that cuts eventually did need to occur, fed into a growing narrative that the Academy was favourable to producers. This belief has already been

---

<sup>163</sup> Tom Waller, “Jump in Equity Membership is Consonant with Salary Slash,” *Motion Picture World*, July 9, 1927, 81.

<sup>164</sup> Waller, “Jump in Equity Membership,” 84.

addressed, in part, in the discussion of Holmes' argument previously and is especially evident in the comment he uses from *Equity* that labelled the Academy a company union. A similar belief is shared across film scholarship. As briefly mentioned in the Introduction, some film scholars have labelled the Academy a company union that is, as Davis defines, a system "established within individual companies in which committees of workers and managers would discuss complaints about pay and working conditions and attempt to settle them internally."<sup>165</sup> However, while Davis defines the concept of a company union, he pushes back against labelling the Academy one. His rationale for this is that the organisation "was never a company," because "its members were employed by more than a dozen companies."<sup>166</sup> While it is true that the Academy had committees that mediated disputes, which will be further discussed in Chapter Three, using Davis' reasoning in this way, the Academy can only be considered a company union if the entire motion-picture industry is viewed as one "company." Due to the Academy's selective membership process, which separated its members from the general motion-picture population, this cannot be the case. The fact that the Academy was not representative of the entire industry was inherent to the organisation's rationale and structure. Therefore, the Academy cannot be viewed as one "company" because it is not representative of the entire industry.

Nevertheless, these views persist in scholarship, likely due to reporting from the Academy's foundational period. As previously indicated, early in the Academy's tenure *Equity* was asserting that the organisation was controlled by producers. On June 29, 1927, *Exhibitor's Daily Review* reported that "Equity people" had labelled the Academy a company union.<sup>167</sup> Davis confirms this, highlighting that in *Equity* magazine the union argued actors had been

---

<sup>165</sup> Davis, *The Academy and the Award*, 7.

<sup>166</sup> Davis, *The Academy and the Award*, 7.

<sup>167</sup> "Academy Draws Fire in Coast Salary Dispute," *Exhibitor's Daily Review*, June 29, 1927, 5.

“seduced” into joining the Academy.<sup>168</sup> When asked by *Variety* to comment on Frank Gilmore’s arrival on June 22, 1927, unnamed “producers” did not alleviate concerns when they expressed the opinion that “actors can have protection...through membership in the newly organised Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.”<sup>169</sup> Producers perceiving the Academy as the preferred organisation for representation, even though the Academy was not available to every motion-picture employee, reinforced Equity’s stance that the Academy was at the very least, favourable to producers. When considered alongside Fred Niblo’s banquet speech on May 11, 1927, recalling the Academy’s inception, the Academy itself can also be viewed as knowing that its connections with producers would nullify its claims of being an independent organisation.

It is curious that Equity was unable to capitalise from its suggestion that producers and the Academy were colluding. On June 29 into June 30, 1927, two days after the release of the Academy’s resolution, the AMPP held a marathon meeting to discuss the implications of the Academy’s opposition to the AMPP’s proposed plan to cut salaries.<sup>170</sup> Tom Waller reported in *Motion Picture World* that the outcome of the meeting was the withdrawal, “to a major extent,” of the decision to cut salaries.<sup>171</sup> Waller goes onto label the situation “the greatest faux pas” the motion-picture industry had ever experienced; he also immediately credits the Academy’s resolution with causing the reversal.<sup>172</sup> Further, Waller goes into detail about what was occurring outside of the AMPP’s meeting: who arrived and when, when people left and with whom, and so on. While some left “smiling,” others were questioned about whether they were leaving out of dissention after “loud voices” were heard.<sup>173</sup> For Holmes’ argument to

---

<sup>168</sup> Davis, *The Academy and the Award*, 7.

<sup>169</sup> “Film Actors and Equity,” 5.

<sup>170</sup> Waller, “Think Producers,” 7.

<sup>171</sup> Waller, “Think Producers,” 7.

<sup>172</sup> Waller, “Think Producers,” 7, 33.

<sup>173</sup> Waller, “Think Producers,” 34.

work completely, this four-hour meeting would need to have been a performative exercise. There is no evidence in Waller's report of behaviour that would support this contention. As mentioned previously, after this meeting occurred and the cuts were paused, Ross highlights that Equity's popularity began to wane because "most actors were unconcerned as to which organization represented them as long as they got their way."<sup>174</sup> With "their way" – that is, a pause on salary cuts – achieved, many actors felt there was no need for Equity anymore. Despite Equity's view that the Academy was a company union, Ross' observation highlights that motion-picture workers did not care what the backroom dealings were or who negotiated on their behalf. All the actors cared about was that their interests were being represented and the cuts were being stopped. As the Academy was immediately receiving credit in the trade press for accomplishing this, it was clear that the Academy had succeeded over Equity and won the favour of workers.

The Academy board's intervention into the proposed salary cuts of June 1927 accomplished the work it had touted the organisation was capable of at the first membership banquet, a month before the announcement of the cuts. Studio executives were aware of the many conflicts that existed across the industry, and they sought to exploit these, to cut the salaries of most employees across the motion-picture industry. The executives believed that if they claimed to be suffering equally, by cutting their own incomes by the same percentage as those of their employees, they would be viewed as "taking hold" of the dire economic situation and making equal sacrifices to save the industry.<sup>175</sup> The executives failed to understand that the Academy's desire to succeed outweighed any loyalty its board members had to their studio or their producers association. Driven by personal beliefs, the Academy board's resolution

---

<sup>174</sup> Ross, *Stars and Strikes*, 28.

<sup>175</sup> "Regulating Hollywood," 5.

showcases the board's vision for the Academy organisation, their desire to control negotiations and begin its intervention into labour disputes. I argue that the Academy's structure facilitated this because it was the board's voice alone that was the impetus for the AMPP to call off the cuts. Additionally, with the board calling on its producing members to individually intervene and oppose the cuts, the Academy's board leveraged the power of its members to influence the outcome in the organisation's favour.

By labelling the Academy a company union and arguing it was colluding with producers without further enquiry, scholars like Holmes have missed the complex environment that developed in the wake of the announcement of the cuts. In particular, the growth of Equity, in which Holmes is particularly interested, threatened to destabilise power dynamics across the motion-picture industry. With the Academy also publicly opposing the cuts, the AMPP was forced to deal with the unpopularity of its decision. The association made the choice to negotiate with the Academy, which at least was run by fellow industry elites. The Academy, unlike Equity which wanted total actor unionisation, was calling for a more reasonable (from the AMPP's perspective) pause to the cuts, that would force further negotiations. It is evident that the AMPP negotiated with the Academy because it preferred the Academy's model over the union's. Further, what scholars like Davis needed to consider was the Academy's desire for control. Its intervention was not a noble effort to bring industry unity but was instead driven by the board's interest in labour negotiation, which had been sparked by the Studio Basic Agreement. I argue that the Academy's structure facilitated the leveraging of the board's power. By intervening in the first major labour issue to emerge after its official launch, the Academy showcased that labour was a primary interest of the organisation. The original sponsors, who made up the Academy's first, unelected board, wanted to use their position to direct the organisation's focus.

### **Chapter 3. Structural Decline: The Academy on the Brink of Collapse, 1933**

In this chapter I assert that in 1933, amid the fallout from the March 6 Bank Holiday, the Academy's internal structure generated a bias that appeared to place producer interests above all others, contributing to its downfall. Due to its actions, or lack thereof, the Academy failed to fulfil its obligation to fairly and equitably represent all its members. This is particularly apparent in the Academy's writers branch. In what followed, writer resentment within the Academy drove the writers branch to splinter off, with writers creating their own organisation, the Screen Writers Guild. Accusations of Academy and producer collaborations had increased to such an extent that Academy membership began to decline. Eventually membership had reduced to such a degree that, by the end of 1933, the organisation was in financial ruin and on the brink of total collapse. My argument, that the Academy's structure facilitated this failure provides a significant and unique contribution to the scholarship that focuses on the Academy's foundation and early years. It contributes to a robust area of discussion within the broader area of Academy scholarship and draws upon recent scholarship including the work of Bruce Davis and Harvey G. Cohen. However, this research primarily draws on archived material, including newspapers, to ensure historical accuracy of events.

In summary, this chapter argues that by 1933 the Academy's structure was failing. While Chapter Two covered the beginning of the Academy's interest in labour, with the June 1927 salary cut crisis, 1933 marked the end of the Academy as a labour negotiator. With the creation of labour guilds like the Screen Writers Guild, the Academy had failed in one of its intended purposes – to prevent the unionisation of motion-picture workers. As a result, producers no longer believed the Academy was useful in labour matters. Simultaneously, because workers created their own labour organisations and wished to negotiate on their own

terms, by the end of 1933 branches also viewed the Academy as obsolete. On the edge of collapse, the Academy needed to pivot away from labour negotiation to ensure its survival.

In early March 1933, just days after being sworn in, the new American President, Franklin D. Roosevelt, declared a national bank holiday. It was the beginning of his strategy to rescue the United States' depressed economy. His proclamation noted that a national emergency had developed due to "heavy and unwarranted withdrawals of gold" and the hoarding of that gold and silver.<sup>176</sup> The holiday, which was to fall between March 6 and March 14, 1933, involved a complete closure of all banks. This had an immediate effect on every American industry, including the motion-picture industry, which had thus far *not* fallen into a similar economic depression as the rest of the United States. Motion pictures had survived until this point because of the industry's ability to vertically integrate, controlling the production, distribution and exhibition of its product. As Iwan Morgan observes, "Hollywood did not depend on a high level of national prosperity to generate profitable returns" because most Americans did not consider motion pictures a luxury, and profits were aided by low ticket prices.<sup>177</sup> However, the closure of banks in March 1933 instigated the motion-picture industry's economic crisis. Their essential financial line was cut off, and thus the industry was sent into chaos.

East Coast executives issued funds to the West Coast producers, who were tasked with distributing them across studios. Therefore, after the declaration of the bank holiday, the relationship between East and West Coast executives would prove more essential than ever.

---

<sup>176</sup> Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Proclamation 2039: Bank Holiday March 6-9, 1933," *The American Presidency Project*, Inclusive Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/proclamation-2039-bank-holiday-march-6-9-1933-inclusive>

<sup>177</sup> Iwan Morgan, "Introduction: Hollywood and the Great Depression," in *Hollywood and the Great Depression: American Film, Politics and Society in the 1930s*, ed. Iwan Morgan and Philip John Davies (Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 4.

The first signs of crisis emerged when New York banks declined to issue the funds with which studios paid salaries. As *The Hollywood Reporter* announced, as early as March 4, 1933, two days prior to the closure of banks, the AMPP in California had decided that it did not have the capacity to pay all salaries in full for the coming week.<sup>178</sup> Up to 80 percent of all studio cash was tied up with East Coast banks; if withheld, “only a partial payment of all salaries at every studio” could be made.<sup>179</sup> A *New York Times* article noted that “the Presidential proclamation prevents the sending of the money by exchanges,” and quoted an anonymous producer, who explained, “even if we had the money in New York, we would not be able to get it out here.”<sup>180</sup> Not only is this revealing as to the precarious nature of the motion-picture economy, but it also illuminates how studios operated economically. The fact that Californian-based studios had most of their funding supplied from New York highlights the degree of control that East Coast executives had over the economic functioning of their West Coast studios. Understanding this relationship between East and West Coast executives begins to expose the fractious environment that the Academy found itself in at the beginning of 1933. Unlike June 1927, when New York executives decided to cut salaries, but delegated their implementation to the AMPP, here in March 1933, there was a correlation in attitude and consistent interaction between East and West Coast executives. The Academy was tasked with negotiating these relationships in the following months.

Just as in 1927, East Coast executives decided that the only measure that could save the industry from collapse was swift and severe salary cuts. This again provided an opportunity for the Academy to step into negotiate. On March 6, 1933, the day the banks closed, *The Hollywood Reporter* divulged that, as early as March 4, producers were trying to come to a

---

<sup>178</sup> “Producer Action Today,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, March 6, 1933, 1.

<sup>179</sup> “Producer Action Today,” 1, 4.

<sup>180</sup> “Movie Payrolls Stop; Studios May Close,” *The New York Times*, March 7, 1933, 4.

mutual and consistent understanding regarding salary payments across the industry.<sup>181</sup> This was because no studio, it was believed, could pay the upcoming week's wages in full. As would become a pattern in the coming year, a consensus could not be reached. At this time, around March 6, Mayer of MGM was the only producer who did not agree with the plan to withhold wages. MGM was in a better financial position than the other studios. It had a "reserve chest" that it could "dip into" to pay all salaries under one hundred dollars.<sup>182</sup> The following day, March 7, the producers' position had progressed from being unable to pay the week's salaries, to wanting a general cut to all salaries of 25 percent; by March 8, the cut had increased to 50 percent in some cases.<sup>183</sup>

According to Harvey G. Cohen, economic mismanagement had been ruling motion pictures for years, and between the years of 1932 and 1933 "every studio [lost] money except MGM."<sup>184</sup> This explains why MGM could pay its outstanding payroll and everyone else struggled. The fact that MGM was in a relatively good financial position, and was confident it could pay one week's wages, means little, however, given that "nearly every production office was on the verge of bankruptcy."<sup>185</sup> Cohen attributes this to the cost of "retrofitting theatres and film studios with sound equipment," rather than the high salaries of executives and stars.<sup>186</sup> Nevertheless, just as in June 1927, salary cuts were necessary and would have been beneficial for all studios, large and small, across the whole industry. The uncertain status of the banking industry, combined with most studios' lack of cash reserves sparked an almost

---

<sup>181</sup> "Producer Action Today," 1.

<sup>182</sup> "Producer Action Today," 4.

<sup>183</sup> "Closing Seems Certain," *The Hollywood Reporter*, March 7, 1933, 1; "Acad. Board Urges Cuts," *The Hollywood Reporter*, March 8, 1933, 1.

<sup>184</sup> Cohen, "The Struggle to Fashion the NRA Code," 1048.

<sup>185</sup> Sandler, "PR and Politics at Hollywood's Biggest Night," 3-4.

<sup>186</sup> Cohen, "The Struggle to Fashion the NRA Code," 1048.

immediate panic that extended from executives in the East all the way down to extras and freelancers in the West.

On March 6, 1933, at almost the same time that producers declared they could not pay salaries, the Academy's board met to discuss the bank holiday for the first time. Labour negotiation had become the Academy's primary focus since the salary cut crisis in June 1927. Therefore, once again, in March 1933, it rapidly became the self-appointed negotiator for the entire industry. After President Roosevelt's bank holiday proclamation, the Academy's board were quickly in contact with the AMPP. Trying to replicate its last June 1927 salary negotiation with producers, the Academy wanted swift decisions and outcomes. The board worked with producers to create an economically viable path forward and, on March 6, the start of the banking holiday and the day after producers decided they were unable to pay salaries for the week, the Academy's board had reached a solution. It is essential to highlight at this juncture that in the preceding six years, while the Academy's structure had not been altered, its board had changed significantly.<sup>187</sup> With only three of the original fifteen Academy board members remaining, such a change shifted the priorities of the board, especially with influences like Mayer gone from their positions.<sup>188</sup>

Unlike June 1927, when the Academy was attempting to gain control of labour negotiations in the industry, in March 1933 the board was fulfilling expectation and obligations. The Academy's board released a statement acknowledging that "unless immediate and radical

---

<sup>187</sup> The Academy's board members in March 1933 were, Frank Capra, Al Cohn, Donald Crisp, John Cromwell, Oliver H.P. Garrett, Benjamin Glazer, Lawrence Grant, Sam Hardy, Frank Lloyd, Conrad Nagel, Fred Niblo, Max Ree, J.T. Reed, B.P. Schulberg, Karl Struss and Darryl Zanuck, *Emergency Bulletin*, March 14, 1933, AMPAS Reference Collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Los Angeles, CA, 3, <https://digitalcollections.oscars.org/digital/collection/p15759coll4/id/1657/rec/53>

<sup>188</sup> Original Academy board members that remained on the board in March 1933 were Frank Lloyd, Conrad Nagel and Fred Niblo.

steps are taken...the companies will have to be suspended at once and for an indefinite period.”<sup>189</sup> In its annual reports from 1929 and 1930 respectively, contract negotiation and the conciliation of disputes were listed by the Academy’s secretary, Frank Woods, as the organisation’s great achievements in the preceding year.<sup>190</sup> In this context, the board’s statement from March 1933 endorsing the producers’ belief that “radical steps” needed to be taken or studios would close, can be viewed as an attempt by the Academy’s board to resolve the situation quickly. However, as we will see, by agreeing with producers so swiftly and, moreover, without consulting general Academy members, the Academy’s board had instigated the organisation’s trajectory from triumphant negotiator towards financial ruin.

The problem for the Academy’s board was that this first step was less negotiation between producers and the board, but rather it was closer to a straightforward endorsement of the producers’ position. This did nothing to quell accusations of collusion between the two groups, which had also continued to brew over the years. The board’s original statement goes on to confirm that the “substantial cuts” to salaries would be effective from the bank holiday date of March 6, which was two days prior, and would continue “for a period of eight weeks,” a period that was five weeks longer than the bank holiday itself.<sup>191</sup> The board concluded their statement with an assurance that “the Academy will be kept fully informed by the producers of every development.”<sup>192</sup> However, this declaration did nothing to articulate how the process of disclosure – by producers or the Academy – would occur, and offered no

---

<sup>189</sup> Davis, *The Academy and the Award*, 171.

<sup>190</sup> *Annual Report 1929*, 1929, AMPAS Reference Collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Los Angeles, CA, 4, <https://digitalcollections.oscars.org/digital/collection/p15759coll4/id/1940/rec/1>; *Annual Report: For the Year Ending December 31, 1930*, 1930, AMPAS Reference Collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Los Angeles, CA, 6, <https://digitalcollections.oscars.org/digital/collection/p15759coll4/id/1999/rec/2>

<sup>191</sup> Davis, *The Academy and the Award*, 171.

<sup>192</sup> “Acad. Board Urges Cuts,” 4.

speculation as to what such “developments” would be. This implies that there was a belief on the board’s part that there would be no issue working with producers, because both producers and the board shared the same goal and had already agreed on the means of achieving it. As we shall see with hindsight, this was the entirely the wrong approach for the Academy.

This early March 1933 statement from the Academy’s board marked the beginning of the Academy’s downfall. Even though there was not an immediate public outcry, there was private dissatisfaction that rapidly became public comment. Unlike the Academy’s negotiations with producers in 1927, because of the nationwide economic depression the Academy in 1933 had no leverage. Workers had no power to protest or strike, especially if they wanted to keep a positive public image. Cohen notes that in the following months “major studios made a point of showing enthusiasm” for the United States government, and its initiatives to revive the national economy.<sup>193</sup> Cohen highlights that this voiced support was not reflective of the studios’ genuine support; rather, it was a public relations ploy to show the American public the motion-picture industry was “doing their part” for the nation.<sup>194</sup>

Therefore, any public statement against salary cuts, especially when the rest of the nation was suffering, had to be carefully managed. Thus, the Academy was relying on workers desiring stability more than wanting a fair deal. This was a logical assumption, but it failed to consider the always-simmering divisions that existed across every facet of the motion-picture industry.

Such tensions had changed and become more intense by 1933. Significantly for the Academy, the change in the Academy’s board resulted in dissent and dissatisfaction. The tensions that existed outside the Academy, those which it purported to solve, began to invade the

---

<sup>193</sup> Cohen, “The Struggle to Fashion the NRA Code,” 1042.

<sup>194</sup> Cohen, “The Struggle to Fashion the NRA Code,” 1042.

organisation. *The Hollywood Reporter* alleged that director and Academy board member Frank Lloyd described to a directors branch meeting, that the producers “stuck two guns in our [the board’s] bellies and stampeded us into writing our recommendation for the cut.”<sup>195</sup> This statement suggests the board were in no way enthusiastic about the measure. Therefore, a question arises concerning why the board would support a measure with which they did not agree. In June 1927, the Academy board’s resolution moved against the producers’ salary cut, and this worked in the Academy’s favour. The decision in 1933 however, to disagree with the producer’s position, yet sign a statement endorsing it, highlights that the situation was more complex. *The Hollywood Reporter* goes on to confirm that, despite there being a debate about the measure, the Academy’s directors branch, like the board, also ultimately gave its support for the cuts with “little opposition.”<sup>196</sup> This decision by the directors branch was the beginning of a series of meetings in which, despite grievances, Academy branches accepted the producers’ terms because the economic situation was so dire.

Even though the directors branch eventually relented and agreed with the Academy’s board, the hypothesis that the economic situation took precedence over personal belief was more aggressively tested with the Academy’s writers branch. This highlights that there was tension across multiple branches, and there were individuals who did not want to automatically acquiesce to producer demands. The writers branch was more argumentative than the directors; the writers “divided into two groups” and argued “for a couple of hours”; however, by morning, the writers also fell into line.<sup>197</sup> When the arguing “fizzle[d],” they too endorsed the board’s agreement.<sup>198</sup> To be clear, this does not mean the writers trusted either the

---

<sup>195</sup> “50 Per Cent Cut Carried,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, March 9, 1933, 6.

<sup>196</sup> “50 Per Cent Cut Carried,” 6.

<sup>197</sup> “50 Per Cent Cut Carried,” 6.

<sup>198</sup> “50 Per Cent Cut Carried,” 6.

producers or the board of the Academy. *The Hollywood Reporter* concluded its report with the observation that “over 75 per cent of those who have signed or intend signing, believe that the cut is in to stay, that this eight week thing is but a promise, and a promise that means absolutely nothing.”<sup>199</sup> This suggests that even though a desire for stability outweighed distrust of producers in this instance, the latter was never completely gone.

While *The Hollywood Reporter*'s statement reflects how negatively workers felt about producers, it is also a damning comment about the Academy's board. It was the Academy who promised to divulge any mismanagement, who were going to keep producers in line and honest. Such a statement highlights the lack of trust the Academy's branches had in the board. Statements like Frank Lloyd's also contribute to this. A member of the board, an original Academy sponsor, feeling that the board had no choice but to sign the agreement, highlights the lack of control the Academy's board had in early 1933. If *The Hollywood Reporter*'s numbers are even close to accurate, most workers, including Academy members, did not trust the organisation to abide by its statement and ensure the cuts only lasted eight weeks. Despite this level of distrust, by agreeing with the board's statement, the Academy's branches were also helping producers to get what they wanted. Workers wanted stability in the chaos and agreed to the first deal that was presented to achieve this.

While the Academy was successful in getting its members to agree that cuts were necessary to prevent studio closures, non-Academy members in the industry were not as easily convinced. This led a small group of unionised workers to reject the salary cut proposal, bringing the entire motion-picture industry to a stand-still. Without a unanimous agreement, the salary cut proposal could not work. It stands to reason that if unionised workers were

---

<sup>199</sup> “50 Per Cent Cut Carried,” 6.

exempt, then every worker would want to become unionised, so that they would also have no change in their income. As unionised workers united against the measure, circumstances began to rapidly change. For example, on March 10, *The New York Times* reported that the “Majority of Players Accept Film Pay Cut.” The story included a boast from Louis B. Mayer that “97 per cent” of workers accepted a salary cut.<sup>200</sup> However, two days later, on March 12, *The New York Times*’ reporting had changed tone, with an article headlined “Film Union Workers Balk,” which clearly stated that union workers were ready to strike.<sup>201</sup>

It is here that the Academy’s policing of who was and was not permitted to be a member begins to cause serious issues for negotiations. While the Academy’s directors and writer’s branches signed the agreement within days, when film union workers “balked,” the acting branch of the Academy, as “the only group that was not willing to debate the producers,” also refused to sign the deal.<sup>202</sup> Again, sharing similarities with the 1927 salary cut crisis, some Academy members and some unionised members were aligned in their attitude towards producers. However, the stark difference in 1933 was that the Academy was an element in their dissatisfaction. No longer could workers be apathetic as to who represented their interests. Workers, regardless of their affiliations, were beginning to unite against the agreement, wanting fair salaries and a different approach. As a result of the Academy’s board agreeing with producers, the organisation needed to rapidly change its approach or risk losing its members to unions, which appeared to be fighting against the decree.

Ultimately, because workers did not all agree to the cut in a timely fashion, on March 13, 1933, for the first time in history, all motion-picture studios closed simultaneously. The

---

<sup>200</sup> “Majority of Players Accept Film Pay Cut,” *The New York Times*, March 10, 1933, 18.

<sup>201</sup> “Film Union Workers Balk,” *The New York Times*, March 12, 1933, F4.

<sup>202</sup> “Majority of Players Accept Film Pay Cut,” 18.

Academy changed course; it removed the board of directors from negotiations, and created an Emergency Committee, composed of one member from each Academy branch.<sup>203</sup> The Emergency Committee's focus was on negotiating agreements between studios and workers and ensuring their proper enforcement. In this instance, the Academy broke away from its traditional pattern of appointing a high-profile actor, producer or director to a position of authority. Instead, the Emergency Committee was led by sound technician J.T. Reed.<sup>204</sup> Davis describes the studio closures as "the executives...grandstanding just a little."<sup>205</sup> He meant that, producers were exercising their power and highlighting for all workers that a salary reduction, no matter how great, was the preferable option because a little money was better than none at all – and producers could make the latter happen. At the same time, the Academy's board were relinquishing power, transferring this power to the Emergency Committee. However, as we shall see, because of the Academy's organisational structure, the Emergency Committee was unable to make change. The Academy's pyramid design meant that power inherently rested with the board and there was no structural mechanism to shift power from one entity to another.

The closures, then, were the producers' attempt to manipulate workers into agreeing to their salary cut terms. There was no real economic need to close studios, especially considering that every studio's profit hinged on a steady stream of films being released. The lack of economic necessity to close studios is exemplified by an article in *Variety*, which highlighted that all studios, particularly MGM, were "anxious" to get back into production.<sup>206</sup> The same

---

<sup>203</sup> The members of the Academy's Emergency Committee in March 1933 were, J.T. Reed, chairman; Walter Huston, William K. Howard, B.P. Schulberg and Howard J. Green; with Lawrence Grant, Donald Crisp, Karl Struss and Oliver H. H. Garrett serving as alternates; *Emergency Bulletin Number Two*, March 22, 1933, AMPAS Reference Collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Los Angeles, CA, 1, <https://digitalcollections.oscars.org/digital/collection/p15759coll4/id/1662/rec/54>

<sup>204</sup> Davis, *The Academy and the Award*, 173, 174.

<sup>205</sup> Davis, *The Academy and the Award*, 172.

<sup>206</sup> "No Production Shut Down," *Variety*, March 14, 1933, 5.

story revealed that other studios, like Fox, were working “out its own salvation,” by making their own deals in attempts to get people back to work.<sup>207</sup> Once again, the Academy’s power was disintegrating, with studios making deals without the organisation as an intermediary. Meanwhile, voluntarily closing studios highlighted how much power the producers had and underscored that they were not afraid to exercise it. Even though some studios that had no reserves and were on the verge of bankruptcy, they still had the ability to pause all workers’ incomes, even the incomes of unionised employees.

Desperate to prove that its allegiances did not lie with producers, the Academy’s establishment of the Emergency Committee was a ploy to revitalise the organisation’s image as independent. However, the Academy’s course correction tilted too far in the other direction; just as the first negotiations in March alienated actors and writers, the creation of the Emergency Committee was the first step in losing producer support. The Emergency Committee developed a fifteen-point plan that prioritised reopening studios and operated as a road map forward.<sup>208</sup> Within twenty-four hours, the plan was streamlined and simplified into fourteen points.<sup>209</sup> The Academy’s plan was to have the same agreement with every studio, which would have ensured that the whole industry, including freelancers and unionised workers, were on the same path. It was exactly the kind of leadership that the industry needed, especially in such chaos. It was also exactly the kind of unity that the Academy promised it would bring in 1927. However, because the motion-picture industry in 1933 contained more division than ever before, what the industry needed was not what the industry wanted, and major issues with the plan were almost instantaneously reported in the trade press. On March 14, the same day the Academy streamlined its fourteen-point plan, *Variety*

---

<sup>207</sup> “No Production Shut Down,” 5.

<sup>208</sup> “Academy-Producer 50 Per Cent Cut Agreement,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, March 13, 1933, 3.

<sup>209</sup> *Emergency Bulletin Number Two*, 1.

offered the most extensive report yet on negotiations. It revealed that virtually every Academy branch, including the producers, took issue with the Academy's plan. This resulted in a series of extremely contentious meetings breaking out across the industry so that workers could discuss what their branch could do to combat it.

The Academy always claimed to be a non-partisan organisation, yet with the release of its slimmed-down fourteen-point plan, to which neither producers nor workers had agreed, the feeling from every branch was that the organisation was prejudiced. Each group accused another of being the Academy's priority. Actors had "the stormiest meeting of any of the Academy branches" and were "strictly anti-everything."<sup>210</sup> Such a sentiment is reflective of their meetings before studios closed as well, revealing that the issues actors had with the Academy were not isolated to the organisation's fourteen-point plan. Actors fought over every point the Academy's Emergency Committee had proposed, including a provision allowing for every branch to meet with producers to discuss their grievances.<sup>211</sup> To add to the complexities, actors were not just unhappy with the Academy's plan, they were also dealing with internal divisions. These division can be best distilled in the attitude of, and reaction to, veteran actor John Gilbert. Gilbert, who was previously one of the most famous actors in the world, by 1933 "was out of pictures."<sup>212</sup> Nevertheless he advocated in the Academy's actors branch in favour of the salary cut because, in his words, "if the studios are allowed to close, no one could foretell how long it would be before they resume"; this, coincidentally, was also the exact position of producers.<sup>213</sup> While Gilbert may have had the respect of his fellow actors, on this issue he had no influence. *Variety* concluded its story by noting "the cut

---

<sup>210</sup> "No Production Shut Down," 25.

<sup>211</sup> "No Production Shut Down," 25.

<sup>212</sup> "No Production Shut Down," 25.

<sup>213</sup> John Gilbert quoted in "No Production Shut Down," 25.

resolution of the Academy board was not voted on.”<sup>214</sup> Clearly, Gilbert’s view diverged from those of his fellow actors and a consensus could not be reached.

It is unknown if, in this instance, the Academy’s board was collaborating with producers, but the perception of this was enough for Academy members to turn against the organisation. The question of the Academy’s impartiality was under so much strain that the media also began speculating as to the organisation’s motives. *Variety* described the Academy as “long fathered by the producers’ own organization, the MPPDA,” although this was not a complete reflection of fact, as explored in Chapter One.<sup>215</sup> We know there was collaboration between the Academy and Will Hays during the Academy’s foundational period. However, due to limitations in the availability of material, particularly correspondence, we cannot be sure of the extent of Hays’ influence on the organisation. Especially in relation to 1933, it remains unknown how many years discussions between Hays and the Academy occurred. What can be taken from *Variety*’s comment, however, is what it reveals about how those in and around the motion-picture industry viewed the relationship between the MPPDA and the Academy. *Variety* is commenting on appearances and general beliefs. Questions regarding the Academy’s relationship with producers can be seen as longstanding, and from discussions in Chapter Two we know this to be true. The re-emergence of these questions during the Great Depression highlights how every facet of the Academy’s existence was being questioned as it began to fracture.

Describing the Academy in this way highlights that there was a broad view that, despite how it wanted to be perceived, the Academy had a public image problem when it came to its

---

<sup>214</sup> “No Production Shut Down,” 25.

<sup>215</sup> “No Production Shut Down,” 5.

relationship with producers. Such perceptions were informed by the Academy's structure, which prioritised the elite and separated Academy members from the rest of the motion-picture industry. This had the effect of alienating non-members, as evidenced by statements such as those featured in *Variety*. Between 1927 and 1933, the broader perception of the Academy had changed, it was no longer believed that the Academy was for all members of the motion-picture industry. This alteration in public perception was a self-induced problem driven by the Academy's structure. In 1933, the belief that the Academy was producer-controlled persisted even after the Academy altered its approach and created the Emergency Committee. Despite no concrete evidence of producer interference during negotiations, the Academy's agreement with virtually every producer point brought fears of Academy and producer collusion to the forefront. Additionally, the fact that the Academy did not consult its membership before agreeing with producers increased the assumption that those at the top of the Academy were colluding with producers. Shifting negotiation responsibility to the Emergency Committee, then, was done out of self-preservation. However, opinions about the Academy had already been formed, especially with every branch already having decided that the Academy was working against its member's interests.

The complexity of the Academy's relationship with producers can be understood through the reaction of the producers branch to the Emergency Committee's amended plan. The Academy's four other branches – directors, writers, actors and technicians – were all disconcerted by the organisation's apparent alignment with producers. The producers branch, however, started to turn on the Academy for the opposite reason. Producers believed that the Emergency Committee was working to undermine the producers' position. This resulted in producers threatening to terminate the Academy altogether.

The division between producers and the Academy, much like the disagreements between the writing and acting branches of the Academy, began privately. As it increased, quotations from those involved began to appear in the press. *Variety* reported from inside the producers branch meeting that “all were burned up over the Academy’s bulletin” (that is, the Emergency Committee’s amended fourteen-point plan).<sup>216</sup> Producers believed that the Emergency Committee had “inserted certain clauses which producers had not agreed to.”<sup>217</sup> These included a stipulation that the Academy had the right to audit studio books and another that required producers to hold weekly meetings so workers could air grievances.<sup>218</sup> To further highlight their fury, because there was “a studio belief that the Emergency Committee...had attempted to put something over on them,” producers sent for the Emergency Committee and through “heated words...hinted at a possible collapse of the Academy.”<sup>219</sup>

The producers’ relationship with the Academy was a complicated one. On one hand, it is evident that producers had no control over the actions of the Emergency Committee; however, on the other hand, producers believed they had the power to completely shut down the organisation. This once again highlights how the Academy’s structure, which placed all the power with the board, contributed to its own demise. With the board removing themselves from negotiations and relinquishing decision-making power to the Emergency Committee, there was chaos. It was not clear who controlled anything. As a result, no deals could be made, and no consensus could be reached. Producers clearly believed they had some level of control over the organisation, given that they threatened to shut it down. Yet, this power did not extend to all areas of the organisation, because they believed the Emergency Committee

---

<sup>216</sup> “No Production Shut Down,” 25.

<sup>217</sup> “No Production Shut Down,” 25.

<sup>218</sup> “No Production Shut Down,” 25.

<sup>219</sup> “No Production Shut Down,” 5.

was attempting to circumvent their previous agreement. What is clear is that the Academy was fracturing from within.

Producers taking issue with the Academy's fourteen-point plan did nothing to quash brewing discontent, especially within the Academy's writers branch. As March 1933 continued, some members of the writers branch announced their intention to step away from the Academy to create their own representative guild. This decision was the apex of the resentment writers had toward the Academy. Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund chronicle the foundation of the Screen Writers Guild during this period. They explore writers' dissatisfaction with being exploited by producers and highlight the collective frustration with the Academy's lack of willingness, or ability, to do anything about this. Ceplair and Englund quote screenwriter Donald Ogden Stewart to exemplify how writers felt like "a commodity" and "owned" by producers.<sup>220</sup> Writers felt creatively confined, but with freelancing being a far "shakier" mode of employment, writers were also counterintuitively, not willing to leave a studio job.<sup>221</sup> Ceplair and Englund capture the cycle of hope and disappointment that writers faced across all aspects of their profession. This cycle was exacerbated by the Academy because, while writers' exploitation was often acknowledged, it was never corrected within the organisation's framework. Writers had a continual frustration with producers, and this was leading to fury with the Academy because, from the writers' perspective, the organisation had no desire to improve the conditions under which writers worked.

However, it was not the organisation's response, or lack thereof, to a single situation that was the driving force behind writers' dissatisfaction with the Academy. In this instance, it is

---

<sup>220</sup> Donald Ogden Stewart, *American Film Institute Oral History Project*, December 1971, 94, quoted in Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund, *The Inquisition in Hollywood: Politics in the Film Community 1930-1960*, (Anchor Press, 1980), 16.

<sup>221</sup> Ceplair and Englund, *The Inquisition in Hollywood*, 21.

evident that writers had been frustrated for a prolonged period, and the salary cuts in 1933 only increased their anger. Ceplair and Englund note that meetings between writers occurred as early as February 3, 1933, with at least one follow-up occurring on February 10.<sup>222</sup> This confirms that writers had been frustrated with the Academy prior to March 1933. The original meeting was aimed at recognising “the divergence between the studio executives’ greed and their pious mouthings,” but what was lacking was a single issue that all writers could unite behind.<sup>223</sup> This echoes the pattern of unionisation exposed by Wakstein and Fisk and discussed in Chapter One and is the opposite of what occurred with actors in June 1927. At that time, actors had no preference as to what organisation or union succeeded. In 1933 writers were beginning to decide who they did *not* want to represent their interests. Here in 1933, individual writers had so many grievances, specific to their experience, that there was no universal concern shared by all that could be used as an impetus for organisation. The genius of the Academy was its messaging. In 1927, the Academy made clear that it stood for unity across all branches of the motion-picture industry. It stood to ensure everyone in the industry got along, so any censorship bodies or governments that threatened any motion-picture worker were unable to tear the industry apart. Just like the Academy, the Screen Writers Guild needed a single issue to unite all writers. This was particularly so because the contentious issues varied, they included a desire to create a standard contract, get better working conditions and wanting to alter crediting practices to prevent plagiarism.<sup>224</sup>

With the Academy fracturing and discontent rising, the writers’ decision to officially break away from the Academy did not occur until the last week of March in 1933. The Academy’s structure – that is, the board being the only element of the organisation that had control over

---

<sup>222</sup> Ceplair and Englund, *The Inquisition in Hollywood*, 21, 24.

<sup>223</sup> Ceplair and Englund, *The Inquisition in Hollywood*, 20.

<sup>224</sup> Ceplair and Englund, *The Inquisition in Hollywood*, 21, 23.

decisions – exacerbated writers’ frustrations. Writers blamed the Academy’s lack of ability to enforce agreements made within the organisational framework for their unhappiness. In 1927, the Academy created its own mechanism, the Conciliation Committee, to negotiate labour disputes, ensuring that the organisation would be at the centre of all labour negotiation. According to its original 1927 constitution and by-laws, the Academy defined the Conciliation Committee as the mechanism through which all disputes in the industry would be resolved.<sup>225</sup> Key to this was the fact that “any member of the industry,” including non-Academy members could raise a concern.<sup>226</sup> However, as Monica Sandler notes, “only members were able to represent and help determine complaint outcomes.”<sup>227</sup> This suggests that, like many issues concerning the Academy and labour, there was an inclusive façade that masked a divisive structure. The Conciliation Committee was extremely successful; Sandler highlights that it was “the primary labor negotiating forum for writers and actors” between 1927 and 1933.<sup>228</sup> However, it was always marred by the undertone that, like the Academy itself, it was controlled by, or skewed results towards producers. There remains a question as to whether this bias was a reality. Davis reports that, when looking at hundreds of Conciliation Committee files at the Margaret Herrick Library he observed there was a “commendable effort to do things evenhandedly,” and notes that even when a file was listed as having been “settled,” it did not mean that a matter had been “ruled in favor of the studios.”<sup>229</sup> Nevertheless, Davis acknowledges that “the committee had no legal power to enforce its decisions,” which, after six years, had built up to become a central concern for writers.<sup>230</sup>

---

<sup>225</sup> *Constitution and By-Laws*, 1927, 14.

<sup>226</sup> *Constitution and By-Laws*, 1927, 14.

<sup>227</sup> Sandler, “PR and Politics at Hollywood’s Biggest Night,” 4.

<sup>228</sup> Sandler, “PR and Politics at Hollywood’s Biggest Night,” 4.

<sup>229</sup> Davis, *The Academy and the Award*, 38, 41.

<sup>230</sup> Davis, *The Academy and the Award*, 38, 41.

To continue this thread of connecting writers' frustrations with the Academy's systems, while the Conciliation Committee may have been useful for a period, and may have never directly shown bias towards producers, it was nevertheless a mechanism implemented by the Academy to stifle outside influence. Davis judges that the committee was "the nub of Mr. Mayer's grand come-together-and-talk-it-out design."<sup>231</sup> Through closer examination of the Conciliation Committee's activities, it becomes apparent that the committee kept disputes out of an actual court of law and within the control of the Academy. In his regular column, "Tradeviews," in *The Hollywood Reporter*, W.R. Wilkerson began 1933 by praising the Conciliation Committee and the Academy for their ability to manage and mediate the thirty cases that were put before it in 1932. The "Tradeviews" column, like the rest of the *Reporter*, tended to have "a pro-studio slant" and this extends to a pro-Academy slant in Wilkerson's January 25 column about the committee.<sup>232</sup> For example, Wilkerson praises the Academy's ability to move cases from the courts and into its own machinery. Wilkerson considers this function as "one of the important features of the whole matter," concluding that "the fact that this was done is proof that Academy members with grievances feel that they can get a fair treatment from that body and that court action is usually unnecessary."<sup>233</sup> Such an observation is interesting, especially considering that, unlike a court of law, the committee's findings had no binding status and it had no mechanisms to enforce its rulings. This was by design; because the Academy was structured like a pyramid, the board was the only group that had any power. Therefore, committees like the Conciliation Committees functioned only as a façade, so that the industry believed it had a negotiation mechanism, when, in reality, the committee could never enforce its decisions.

---

<sup>231</sup> Davis, *The Academy and the Award*, 38.

<sup>232</sup> Davis, *The Academy and the Award*, 181.

<sup>233</sup> W. R. Wilkerson, "Tradeviews," *The Hollywood Reporter*, January 25, 1933, 1.

Ensuring that disputes moved through the Academy's Conciliation Committee is reminiscent of the ultimatums made during the salary crisis of 1927. Actors were strongly encouraged to accept cuts and were concerned about the consequences if they did not. Featured in the July 2, 1927, edition of *Motion Picture World*, an anonymous "Universal player said that in the letter he received asking him voluntarily to accept the cut in salary it was also intimated that something was certain to happen if he did not accept 'graciously'."<sup>234</sup> The motion-picture industry broadly was not above intimidation. Therefore, one questions how the self-described "honest" and "clean" Academy was operating, given it wanted to control the way legal disputes were negotiated.<sup>235</sup> Due to Wilkerson's pro-Academy slant, instead of questioning why cases moved from courts to the committee, he celebrates this writing, "when the persons in an industry...believe that their own colleagues will see that they get fair breaks... it surely means that better and more friendly relations are being brought about."<sup>236</sup> The vexation of writers at this time does not align with Wilkerson's observations and, with the benefit of hindsight it is clear that Wilkerson was wrong when he commented that the industry would be more united than ever in 1933.

The frustration that writers felt about how the Academy represented their interests is exemplified in the Conciliation Committee itself. It provides a window into both the situation writers found themselves in generally across the motion-picture industry and how their grievances were resolved. In the same January 25 "Tradeviews" column, Wilkerson reports that a total of thirty complaints, across all branches, were lodged with the Academy in 1932.<sup>237</sup> Of these thirty complaints over half came from writers, a number that far exceeded

---

<sup>234</sup> "Open Warfare Between Producers and Stars is Definite If Salary Slas [sic] is Enforced," *Motion Picture World*, July 2, 1927, 33.

<sup>235</sup> Niblo quoted in Fisher, *The Inauguration of 'Oscar'*, 299.

<sup>236</sup> Wilkerson, "Tradeviews," 1, 2.

<sup>237</sup> Wilkerson, "Tradeviews," 1.

any other branch.<sup>238</sup> Wilkerson provides no specific details of these complaints but reports that most were resolved and, by the beginning of 1933, only five cases remained pending.<sup>239</sup> Three months later, on March 4, 1933, *The Hollywood Reporter* reported the number of plagiarism cases writers had brought before the organisation. Of the eight cases, six “were considered sufficiently serious to be passed along to the Academy Conciliation Committee.”<sup>240</sup> The date of this article coincides with the bank holiday and follows the two February meetings of the Screen Writers Guild. Combining this information, it is evident that writers were extremely frustrated with the operations of the industry, especially with the practice of plagiarism. Additionally, they were dejected with the systems in place that were tasked with resolving their grievances. It is clear from *The Hollywood Reporter* article alone that the Academy’s Conciliation Committee had no binding power, with the article noting that “the [Conciliation] committee plans to appoint a committee to make a close study of the subject of plagiarism,” indicating that the volume of writer complaints about this issue were increasing. Additionally, this emphasises the level of control, or lack thereof, held by the Conciliation Committee. All the committee was capable of was creating a separate committee to investigate. It is not clear what either committee would do with the findings, suggesting that neither had any power to implement or recommend systems to rectify issues. This is similar to the Academy’s Emergency Committee, created in 1933: because both committees operated separately from the board, neither had enforcement power.

To further emphasise this powerlessness, *The Hollywood Reporter* adds that this additional committee would also investigate whether “the powers of the conciliation committee [could]

---

<sup>238</sup> Wilkerson, “Tradeviews,” 1.

<sup>239</sup> Wilkerson, “Tradeviews,” 1.

<sup>240</sup> “8 Plagiarism Cases Before Writers’ Board,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, March 4, 1933, 1.

be broadened.”<sup>241</sup> However, there is no mention of what these additional powers would be, and the article never acknowledges that the Conciliation Committee did not have the ability to enforce its decisions. It is clear from this reporting that writers had a large volume of complaints, especially compared to the other Academy branches, and that specific issues like plagiarism were recurring. It is also evident that the Conciliation Committee, an element of the Academy, recognised that plagiarism disputes were increasing, leading to a re-evaluation of how it had responded. However, because of the inherent issues brought about by the Academy’s structure, the Conciliation Committee, regardless of its investigations or enquiries, would have remained a façade. Without power, the Conciliation Committee had no enforcement mechanism and thus would never induce change.

Considering the Academy committee’s lack of enforcement power and the number of grievances that writers had with the industry, it is not difficult to understand why so many writers wanted to leave the Academy. On March 27, 1933, *The Hollywood Reporter*, in an article titled “Writers Get Together,” explained that “the writers have been talking for a long time about the necessity for organizing, for getting together for the whole craft.”<sup>242</sup> While this appears to be similar rhetoric as the Academy used in 1927, instead of focusing the language on a broader, more abstract concept of “industry unity,” the statement focuses on the “craft” of writing. This recalls the work of Sean Holmes, discussed in Chapter One, which highlighted the importance of creative freedom when theatre actors unionised in the early twentieth century. In 1933, motion-picture writers wanted to unite and placed an emphasis on their shared creative pursuits. So, while the ideas of unity and organisation are present, there is also an underlying sense that writers needed to separate themselves from other industry

---

<sup>241</sup> “8 Plagiarism Cases,” 1, 3.

<sup>242</sup> “Writers Get Together,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, March 27, 1933, 1, 3.

branches, due to their creativity. Having felt alienated by the Academy's concept of industry unity, writers wanted to sever themselves from the industry collective and instead prioritise their fellow writers.

The announcement of writer organisation in *The Hollywood Reporter* was the first outward sign that something was fundamentally wrong with the relationship between the Academy and its writers branch. The story goes on to say that, "the writers' branch of the Academy apparently has felt that it is in no position to take or advocate for any drastic action."<sup>243</sup> This is an indictment of the Academy and its framework, further emphasising that because its pyramid structure concentrated power at the top, the rest of the organisation was devoid of power. Writers felt immobilised by the organisation, felt they were unable to do anything or propose any changes and, ultimately, that they had no protection. This highlights, that, from the writers' perspective, by the end of March 1933 the Academy's industry unity proposal had failed. The only way for writers to get any advocacy was to splinter, form their own guild and look out for themselves.

To save the Academy from total collapse, its Emergency Committee pivoted and implemented a "sliding scale" of wage reduction to make the Academy's plan "more equitable."<sup>244</sup> Clark highlights that while the Academy was busy demanding access to studios' books, "the only assurance to remaining employees was a stipulation in the fourteen-point plan requiring the full resumption of salaries at the end of the eight-week period."<sup>245</sup> Thus, while the studios had agreed to the Academy's plans in theory, there was no point of actual enforcement, because the entire deal was based on trust. The only studio that did not

---

<sup>243</sup> "Writers Get Together," 3.

<sup>244</sup> Clark, *Negotiating Hollywood*, 42.

<sup>245</sup> Clark, *Negotiating Hollywood*, 43.

honour the Emergency Committee's plan was Warner Bros. Under the direction of Harry Warner, at the conclusion of the eight-week period the studio refused to back-pay salaries or restore incomes to the same levels they were before the Bank Holiday.<sup>246</sup> This decision alienated producer Darryl Zanuck, who had been at Warners for more than a decade and was also on the Academy's board.<sup>247</sup> Zanuck resigned from the studio in protest. The incident highlights the level of strain on the Academy's relationship with studios. In June 1927, after the Academy's board issued their resolution, the producers consented within forty-eight hours. In 1933, Warner was in open defiance of the Academy. The difference was that, unlike 1927, this time it was the Emergency Committee that directed studios. Just like the Academy's Conciliation Committee, there was no way for the Emergency Committee to force Warner to comply. The Academy's board resolution in 1927 called upon its members to defy their producers' association, and this gave the Academy leverage over the AMPP. It would have used the AMPP's members to undermine the organisation from within. In 1933, the Emergency Committee had no leverage, and no way to force its decision on Harry Warner.

For the remainder of 1933, motion-picture studios were embroiled in conflicts with each other, as well as with the United States federal government, over the construction of the Code of Fair Competition under the National Recovery Administration.<sup>248</sup> While the Academy attempted to intervene and represent the entire industry, most of the motion-picture industry had already been alienated by the organisation. By the end of 1933, the Academy was on the "sidelines" of the industry and of code negotiations.<sup>249</sup> This signified the end of the organisation's six-year interest in labour issues and negotiation.

---

<sup>246</sup> "Zanuck Out of Warners," *The Hollywood Reporter*, April 15, 1933, 5.

<sup>247</sup> "Zanuck Out of Warners," 5.

<sup>248</sup> See Cohen, "The Struggle to Fashion the NRA Code," 1039-1066; Davis, *The Academy and the Award*, 184-199 and Ross, *Stars and Strikes*, 90-119, for further detail on the construction of the motion-picture industry's NRA Code.

<sup>249</sup> Davis, *The Academy and the Award*, 198.

Once its biggest strength, the Academy's structure brought about its downfall in 1933 as the motion-picture industry's central labour negotiator. Economic uncertainty, brought on by the Great Depression, enhanced existing grievances, tensions and divisions across the motion-picture industry, and within the Academy. The Academy's board, in an attempt to fulfil one of the Academy's roles – maintaining the status-quo across the industry – agreed too rapidly to a producer proposition to cut employee salaries. By not consulting the Academy's membership, who were already harbouring feelings of alienation and were questioning the organisation's relationship with producers, the Academy's board began a series of events that would lead to the organisation's undoing. The 1933 Academy board evidently did not understand how the organisation's structure influenced its ability to succeed, because transferring the issue to the Emergency Committee rendered the entire organisation futile. This situation developed because there was no mechanism to transfer power or give Academy committees enforcement power; as seen in June 1927, the Academy's power lay in the board's ability to leverage the organisation's membership. By the end of 1933, the Academy was haemorrhaging members, who had elected to leave the organisation and create their own guilds, to advocate for themselves. This further diminished the Academy's power. Even if the board had regained negotiating power from the Emergency Committee, with Academy members gone there was nothing to leverage, and the flow of power had been disrupted. Thus, devoid of its membership and no longer the centre of labour negotiation, the Academy was pushed to the outskirts of the motion-picture industry.

## Conclusion

In May 2027, the Academy will celebrate its centenary. In preparation for this milestone, the organisation has created a “global outreach” initiative known as “Academy 100,” which the organisation believes will “drive the future of [both] the global film industry and the Academy.”<sup>250</sup> The project aims to “Celebrate. Inspire. Preserve. Curate. Connect [punctuation original],” global film communities and industries.<sup>251</sup> It will unite these groups through Academy activities and programs, and it will showcase one-hundred years of the Academy’s contributions to the worldwide film community. Academy 100 emphasises how the modern Academy views itself and signals how it wishes to be viewed in the future. In reality however, the Academy of 2027 will not be significantly different from the Academy of 1927. Both versions of the Academy are rooted in industry collaboration. The Academy still wants to be viewed as the organisation that unites the branches of the motion-picture industry through cooperation.<sup>252</sup> Becoming an Academy member is not significantly different either. Even though the organisation’s outlook has expanded from the American film industry to the global film community, the Academy remains invitation-only. Unlike 1927 however, prospective members must be sponsored by two active Academy members from their potential branch, and their candidature is reviewed by their respective branch executive committee.<sup>253</sup> However, just as was the practice in 1927, the ultimate decision, to accept or reject the prospective member remains with the board of directors, now known as the Board of Governors.

---

<sup>250</sup> “Academy 100,” 2025, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, <https://www.academy100.org/>

<sup>251</sup> “Academy 100.”

<sup>252</sup> Since 1927 the Academy’s branches have expanded from five to nineteen. The Academy branches in 2025 are actors, animation, casting directors, cinematographers, costume designers, directors, documentary, executives, film editors, makeup artists and hairstylists, marketing and public relations, music, producers, production and technology, production design, short films, sound, visual effects and writers. Artist representatives may also become members of the Academy but are not recognised as an official branch. “Branch Requirements,” 2025, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, <https://www.oscars.org/about/becoming-new-member/branch-requirements>

<sup>253</sup> “The Academy Invites 534 To Membership,” media release, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, June 26, 2025, <https://press.oscars.org/news/academy-invites-534-membership>

Considering these similarities, it is understandable that the Academy has elected to conceal significant portions of its history, especially regarding its origins, from public view. While the Academy's early efforts to hinder unionisation do not reflect the modern organisation's ethos, much of the structure that facilitated the obstruction remains. As was concluded in Chapter Three, the Academy's power has always rested in its structure. Having a board of directors, or Board of Governors as it is in 2025, to oversee and ultimately control all Academy decisions is central to the Academy's operation and ability to function. Examining the early Academy through its structure reveals how the concentration of power at the top of the organisation, impacted and influenced organisational actions. If the modern Academy acknowledged this, because the structure of the organisation remains essentially the same, questions may be raised as to the power and direction of the current Academy. This is particularly true because, as we have just seen, the Academy's structure enabled real-world behaviour and influenced and impacted events in June 1927 and March 1933. Focusing on the organisation's structure in its early years reveals that the organisation was impeding union progress and reinforcing the studios' control over the motion-picture industry. Does the 2025 Academy have these same abilities? With its new interest in the global film community what impact does this structure have on a global scale?

I argue that the early Academy in 1927, by concentrating power at the top of an already tiered system, was interested in giving those who already wielded power more opportunities to advance their interests. By looking to original documentation, like the Academy's original constitution, it is clear that this structure and power imbalance was at the heart of the organisation. Anchoring an approach in primary documentation in this way allows us to gather information directly from the source and avoid mistranslation. Original Academy documents such as those used in this study are devoid of opinion, argument or bias and allow

for a more complete understanding of the organisation. By examining the Academy through its structure, we gain a fresh understanding of the organisation, revealing how power was transferred and moved within the organisation. We can recognise that the Academy's board, despite publicly presenting as a vehicle for unity, was strongly interested in stalling the financial and power shifts that would occur if workers had the ability to negotiate in their own interest.

We should not limit our examination of the Academy to its Academy Awards as such a focus can obscure the organisation. Many scholars have focused solely on the awards, and this lens can lead to the unintended consequence of diminishing the organisation's role in the wider motion-picture community. The Academy Awards are only one aspect of the organisation, and approaches that focus on the awards allow for elements of the Academy's history, like its labour activities in 1927, to slip through unchecked. Even analyses like that of Michael Schulman, which examine how the Academy's membership – the Academy Awards voting body – can impact awards outcomes, still do not extend any real scrutiny of the Academy as an organisation. Further work is therefore needed, to bridge these gaps in scholarly interests.

Until now, the Academy's structure has not been used as a mechanism to view the organisation in its entirety. The implication in existing scholarship, including in Sandler's work, and in Brown and Pinkston's chapter, is that the Academy pivoted to focus on the awards as a way to continue having value in the motion-picture industry.<sup>254</sup> This position aligns with the conclusion of this thesis that, by the end of 1933, the Academy was no longer useful to the wider industry, particularly regarding labour negotiation. My work contributes to these accounts because acknowledging the Academy's history leading up to these awards

---

<sup>254</sup> Sandler, "PR and Politics at Hollywood's Biggest Night," 1-16; Brown and Pinkston, *Oscar Dearest*, 14-34.

reframes their origins. Through my approach, it is clear that the structural failure of the Academy in 1933 necessitated a shift in the organisation's interest. Combining this with Sandler's work, the awards are then reframed as a mechanism for organisational survival. For this reason it is unfortunate that more work has not been focused on the Academy's organisational activities outside of awards. Just as historical context and events influenced the Academy's actions regarding labour, it is also evident that the Academy's failures led to its greatest success. Therefore, the connection between organisational history and awards history cannot be ignored and should be explored in further scholarship.

It is clear that placing the organisation's origins in context reveals that, although partially created to stop workers from unionising, which impeded progress, the Academy was nevertheless an essential and necessary organisation for an industry in crisis. External elements were threatening the business models of studios, and the Academy was essential as a mechanism through which the motion-picture industry could represent itself. Through its selective membership it generated a level of prestige that, coupled with the concentration of power at the top, structured the Academy to ensure that it could fill a gap in the industry. The elite members who populated all branches were necessary to generate interest in the organisation. This interest led to power in the public sphere and allowed the Academy to be the face of the motion-picture community. These elite members were essential to the Academy's structure. The board could leverage the power they held against other organisations to succeed in achieving Academy goals. As I have shown through my analysis and comparison of Academy appointments from May 1927, the Academy was initially controlled at the highest levels by its original sponsors. This allowed their interests to become Academy interests. Due to the Academy's pyramid structure, they had the ability to direct Academy action.

The events of June 1927 highlight how the Academy's structure successfully functioned. Through their resolution, the Academy's board entered into labour matters in which, up until that point, they had not acknowledged as an organisational interest, in either documentation or banquet speeches. The Academy's board resolution in June 1927 illustrates the correlation and connection between the personal interests of board members and the Academy's actions. This connection further consolidates the belief that the Academy's power rested with the board, as the interests of members were not shaping the organisation; it was instead being shaped by the board alone. Nevertheless, the Academy's members and their individual power were essential to the Academy's success. By instructing their members to disregard the AMPP's instruction to cut salaries, the Academy successfully gained the producers' loyalty. Producers' switching their primary loyalty to the Academy, directly led to the AMPP reversing their salary cut proposal forty-eight hours later. This early success for the Academy allowed the organisation to become the centre of labour negotiation and meant that grievances flowed through its framework. It granted the organisation a level of control over all workers in the motion-picture industry, even though the Academy's interests only represented the industry elite.

Our understanding of how the Academy's structure informed its level of power and overall value to the industry is further verified when also considering the events of 1933. The Great Depression created further division across the industry and the Academy was caught in the middle. The Academy, being in its sixth year, had lost the goodwill of many of its members. These members had realised that, outside of the board of directors, the organisation's mechanisms were a façade for change and Academy committees had no ability to enforce their decisions. Only the Academy's board of directors could produce actionable outcomes.

As a result of the inability of the Conciliation Committee and Emergency Committee's to enforce directives, the writers branch fled to create their own guild. Writers led the way, determining that they had more power if they controlled the negotiations, rather than relying on an organisation that had centralised its power. Producers also fled, unhappy with the Academy. Without enforcement mechanisms, and the Academy's board losing their leveraging power, producers like Harry Warner decided they did not have to work through the Academy and began making their own deals directly with employees. This type of action from members bled the Academy. Without its members it had no power, without power it had no value, and with no value it was on the verge of collapse. In this way, the Academy's structure, which once led to its successes, was now responsible for its failure. The Academy were unable to change any of its membership requirements or change its structure because, as I have established, these elements were essential to the Academy's success. Therefore, it pivoted to awards, to generate positive publicity for the motion-picture industry and, by extension, itself.

My approach offers a new way of looking at the Academy. In approaching from the inside out, through its structure, both the Academy's histories and objectives are reframed.

Questions are then raised as to whether, by concealing this history, the Academy continues to hide its intentions today. Disentangling the actions of the board of directors from the beliefs and desires of the broader organisational members remains an area that can be further studied. Additionally, mechanisms like the Conciliation Committee and the Emergency Committee need to be further researched, especially the impact the committee's decisions had on motion-picture history.

As the Academy has hidden so much of this foundational history from view, we may never know the full extent of the organisation's involvement in labour activities in the late 1920s and early 1930s. However, by combining original archive material from the Academy with additional items like newspapers from the period, we can start to generate a comprehensive picture of what the Academy was capable of. In conjunction with contemporary scholarship from a wide range of research areas, the dynamic inside the organisation, as well how other groups and historical events shaped the Academy, also come into view. When we balance all this information we arrive at this thesis, which sheds light into an area of history that the modern organisation is embarrassed by. As film scholars, it is vital that we do not shy away from areas that institutions attempt to shun; it is important that we hold institutions, especially ones like the Academy who hold great industry power, accountable for their history. Embracing the Academy in its entirety recasts the modern organisation; it adds a layer of complexity, showing how the Academy has weathered and changed overtime. The Academy becomes less an unwavering, unknowable institution, and transforms into a living, breathing and everchanging ecosystem.

## Bibliography

- “8 Plagiarism Cases Before Writers’ Board.” *The Hollywood Reporter*, March 4, 1933, 1, 3.
- “25% Salary Reduction Asked of P-F-L N.Y. Executive Staff by Zukor.” *Variety*, June 15, 1927, 4.
- “50 Per Cent Cut Carried.” *The Hollywood Reporter*, March 9, 1933, 1, 6.
- “Acad. Board Urges Cuts.” *The Hollywood Reporter*, March 8, 1933, 1, 4.
- “Academy 100.” 2025. Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.  
<https://www.academy100.org/>
- “Academy Draws Fire in Coast Salary Dispute.” *Exhibitor’s Daily Review*, June 29, 1927, 1, 5.
- “The Academy Invites 534 To Membership.” Media release. Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. June 26, 2025. <https://press.oscars.org/news/academy-invites-534-membership>
- Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Board of Governors. *98<sup>th</sup> Academy Awards of Merit*, approved April 10, 2025. Complete Rules.  
[https://www.oscars.org/sites/oscars/files/2025-04/98th\\_aa\\_complete\\_rules.pdf?VersionId=KHfTeEBPx9GJx9jvW\\_Ki.1YJgUzDheAU](https://www.oscars.org/sites/oscars/files/2025-04/98th_aa_complete_rules.pdf?VersionId=KHfTeEBPx9GJx9jvW_Ki.1YJgUzDheAU)
- “Academy-Producer 50 Per Cent Cut Agreement,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, March 13, 1933, 3.
- “Actors Organize For ‘Just’ Contract.” *The New York Times*, March 5, 1913, 17.
- Afra, Kia. *The Hollywood Trust: Trade Associations and the Rise of the Studio System*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2016.
- AMPAS Reference Collection. Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. <https://digitalcollections.oscars.org/>.
- Balio, Tino. *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930-1939*. University of California Press, 1995.
- Berg, A. Scott. "Louis B. Mayer: MGM’s Archetypal Studio Head at Home," *Architectural Digest*, April, 1990: 144-146, 284.
- Bernheim, Alfred L. "The Evolution of the Legitimate Theatre in America." *The New York Times*, March 25, 1928, 120.
- “Big Business’ Net Returns.” *Variety*, May 18, 1927, 3.
- Bona, Damien, Gail MacColl and Mason Wiley. *Inside Oscar: The Unofficial History of the Academy Awards*. Ballantine Books, 1996.

“Branch Requirements.” 2025. Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.  
<https://www.oscars.org/about/becoming-new-member/branch-requirements>

Brown Peter H. and Jim Pinkston. *Oscar Dearest: Six Decades of Scandal, Politics, and Greed Behind Hollywood's Academy Awards, 1927-1986*. Perennial Library, 1987.

Ceplair, Larry and Steven Englund. *The Inquisition in Hollywood: Politics in the Film Community 1930-1960*. Anchor Press, 1980.

Clark, Danae. *Negotiating Hollywood: The Cultural Politics of Actors' Labor*. University of Minnesota Press, 1995.

“Closing Seems Certain.” *The Hollywood Reporter*, March 7, 1933, 1, 2.

Cohen, Harvey G. “The Struggle to Fashion the NRA Code: The Triumph of Studio Power in 1933 Hollywood.” *Journal of American Studies* 50, no. 4 (2016): 1039-1066.  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/44162812>

Dalton, Andrew. “Oscars Get Audience Bump from ‘Barbie’ and ‘Oppenheimer,’ but Ratings Aren’t Quite a Blockbuster.” *The Associated Press*, March 12, 2024.  
<https://apnews.com/article/oscars-2024-ratings-barbie-oppenheimer-7ced9e47263fee4f5c17cb111fe38638>

Dalton, Andrew and Krysta Fauria. “Hollywood’s Strikes are Both Now Over as Actors Reach Deal with Studios and Return to Work with Writers.” *The Associated Press*, November 10, 2023. <https://apnews.com/article/actors-strike-ends-hollywood-5769ab584bca99fe708c67d00d2ec241>

Davis, Bruce. *The Academy and the Award: The Coming of Age of Oscar and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences*. Brandeis University Press, 2022.

Dorney, John, Jessica Regan, and Tom Salinsky. *Best Pick: A Journey through Film History and the Academy Awards*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2022.

“Film Actors and Equity Again Up on Coast,” *Variety*, June 22, 1927, 5.

“Film Union Workers Balk.” *The New York Times*, March 12, 1933, F4.

Fischer, Erika J. *The Inauguration of 'Oscar': Sketches and Documents from the Early Years of the Hollywood Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and the Academy Awards, 1927-1930*. K.G. Saur, 1988.

Fisk, Catherine L. “The Different American Legal Structures for Unionization of Writers for Stage and Screen.” In *The Palgrave Handbook of Screenwriting Studies*, edited by Rosamund Davies, Paolo Russo and Claus Tieber. Palgrave Macmillan, 2023.

MPPDA Digital Archive. Flinders University, Adelaide, SA.  
<https://library.flinders.edu.au/mppda>

Gomery, Douglas. "Film and Business History: The Development of an American Mass Entertainment Industry." *Journal of Contemporary History* 19, no. 1 (1984): 47-52.

Guiralt, Carmen. "Self-Censorship in Hollywood During the Silent Era: *A Woman of Affairs* (1928) by Clarence Brown." *Film History* 28, no. 2 (2016): 81-113.

"The History and Structure of The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences." Media Release. Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. 2015.  
[https://www.oscars.org/sites/oscars/files/87aa\\_academy\\_history.pdf](https://www.oscars.org/sites/oscars/files/87aa_academy_history.pdf)

"The History and Structure of The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences." Media Release. Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. 2016.  
[https://www.oscars.org/sites/oscars/files/88aa\\_academy\\_history.pdf](https://www.oscars.org/sites/oscars/files/88aa_academy_history.pdf)

"The History and Structure of The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences." Media Release. Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. 2017.  
[https://www.oscars.org/sites/oscars/files/89aa\\_academy\\_history.pdf](https://www.oscars.org/sites/oscars/files/89aa_academy_history.pdf)

"The History and Structure of The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences." Media Release. Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. 2019.  
[https://www.oscars.org/sites/oscars/files/91aa\\_academy\\_history.pdf](https://www.oscars.org/sites/oscars/files/91aa_academy_history.pdf)

"The History and Structure of The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences." Media Release. Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. 2020.  
[https://www.oscars.org/sites/oscars/files/92aa\\_academy\\_history.pdf](https://www.oscars.org/sites/oscars/files/92aa_academy_history.pdf)

"The History and Structure of The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences." Media Release. Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. 2022.  
[https://www.oscars.org/sites/oscars/files/94aa\\_academy\\_history.pdf](https://www.oscars.org/sites/oscars/files/94aa_academy_history.pdf)

"History of the Oscars Presentation." Media Release. Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. 2021. [https://www.oscars.org/sites/oscars/files/93aa\\_presentation\\_history.pdf](https://www.oscars.org/sites/oscars/files/93aa_presentation_history.pdf)

Holmes, Sean P. *Weavers of Dreams, Unite! Actor's Unionism in Early Twentieth-Century America*. University of Illinois Press, 2013.

Jarvey, Natalie. "The Year That Broke Hollywood." *Vanity Fair*, December 20, 2023.  
<https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/the-year-that-broke-hollywood>

Kilkenny, Katie. "Would You Do It Again? A Year After the Strikes, Hollywood Reckons with the Aftermath." *The Hollywood Reporter*, July 19, 2024.  
<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/business/business-news/actors-writers-strikes-one-year-later-1235950418/>

Kimmel, Jimmy. "Jimmy Kimmel's Oscars Monologue 2024." Monologue, March 10, 2024. Posted March 11, 2024, by Jimmy Kimmel Live. YouTube, 13:43.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IYuS3XEJsbY>

Lee, Wendy and Stacy Perman. "WGA Members Easily Ratify New Contract to End 148-Day Strike as Anxieties Loom." *Los Angeles Times*, October 9, 2023.

<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/business/story/2023-10-09/wga-members-easily-approve-contract-to-end-148-day-strike>

Lundén, Elizabeth Castaldo. *Fashion on the Red Carpet: A History of the Oscars, Fashion and Globalisation*. Edinburgh University Press, 2021.

“Majority of Players Accept Film Pay Cut.” *The New York Times*, March 10, 1933, 18.

“Mary Pickford on A.M.P.A.S.” *Variety*, May 18, 1927, 9, 17-18.

“Mary Pickford Wins Divorce in Nevada.” *The New York Times*, March 4, 1920, 9.

McKenna, Denise. “The Photoplay or the Pickaxe: Extras, Gender, and Labour in Early Hollywood.” *Film History* 23, no. 1 (2011): 5-19.

Morgan, Iwan. “Introduction: Hollywood and the Great Depression.” In *Hollywood and the Great Depression: American Film, Politics and Society in the 1930s*, edited by Iwan Morgan and Philip John Davies. Edinburgh University Press, 2016.

“Movie Payrolls Stop; Studios May Close.” *The New York Times*, March 7, 1933, 4.

Nielsen, Michael C. “Labor Power and Organization in the Early U.S. Motion Picture Industry.” *Film History* 2, no. 2 (1988): 121-131.

“No Production Shut Down.” *Variety*, March 14, 1933, 5, 25, 40.

“Open Warfare Between Producers and Stars is Definite If Salary Slas [sic] is Enforced.” *Motion Picture World*, July 2, 1927, 7, 33.

“Paramount Cuts Movie Salaries 10 Per Cent.; Entire Industry Is Expected to Follow Suit.” *The New York Times*, June 23, 1927, 1.

Perry, Louis B. and Richard S. Perry. *A History of the Los Angeles Labor Movement, 1911-1941*. University of California Press, 1963.

Petersen, Anne Helen. *Scandals of Classic Hollywood: Sex, Deviance and Drama from the Golden Age of American Cinema*. PLUME, 2014.

Pintar, Laurie. “Behind the Scenes: Bronco Billy and the Realities of Work in Open Shop Hollywood.” In *Metropolis in the Making: Los Angeles in the 1920s*, edited by Tom Sitton. University of California Press, 2019.

“Producer Action Today.” *The Hollywood Reporter*, March 6, 1933, 1, 4.

“Regulating Hollywood.” *Variety*, June 15, 1927, 5, 8.

Roosevelt, Franklin D. “Proclamation 2039: Bank Holiday March 6-9, 1933.” *The American Presidency Project*. Inclusive Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley.

<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/proclamation-2039-bank-holiday-march-6-9-1933-inclusive>

Ross, Murray. *Stars and Strikes: Unionization of Hollywood*. Columbia University Press, 1941.

Sandler, Monica. "PR and Politics at Hollywood's Biggest Night: The Academy Awards and Unionization (1929-1939)." *Media Industries Journal* 2, no. 2 (2015): 1-16.

Sands, Pierre Norman. *A Historical Study of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (1927-1947)*. Arno Press, 1973.

Schatz, Thomas. *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System*. McGraw-Hill, 1981.

Schulman, Michael. *Oscar Wars: A History of Hollywood in Gold, Sweat and Tears*. HarperCollins, 2023.

Scott, Allen J. *On Hollywood: The Place, the Industry*. Princeton University Press, 2018.

"Industry's Net \$45,000,000." *Variety*, May 18, 1927, 3, 19.

"Story of Forty-Year War for a Free City." *Los Angeles Times*, October 1, 1929, 1, 3.

"Story of Long Fight to Control Film Industry." *Los Angeles Times*, October 31, 1929, 1, 2.

Thomson, David. "The House That Mr. Mayer Built: Inside the Union-Busting Birth of the Academy Awards." *Vanity Fair*, February 21, 2014.

<https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2014/02/secret-oscar-history?srsId=AfmBOopnlToqS7afagedBJJEX1yfzJinSH2TJQUhos99uOWmZnpS5ROb>

Wakstein, Allen M. "The Origins of the Open-Shop Movement, 1919-1920." *The Journal of American History* 51, no. 3 (1964): 460-475.

Waller, Tom. "Calm Settles Over Hollywood as Economy Conferences End." *Motion Picture World*, July 30, 1927, 313, 316.

Waller, Tom. "Equity Shop is Established in Hollywood; Players to Negotiate Agreement with Hays." *Motion Picture World*, July 9, 1927, 75, 100.

Waller, Tom. "Jump in Equity Membership is Consonant with Salary Slash." *Motion Picture World*, July 9, 1927, 81, 84.

Waller, Tom. "Think Producers Rescind Salary Cut at Meeting." *Motion Picture World*, July 2, 1927, 7, 33-34.

Whitcomb, Jon. "Ben-Hur Rides Again." *Cosmopolitan*, December 1959: 26-29.

Wilkerson, W. R. "Tradeviews." *The Hollywood Reporter*, January 25, 1933, 1, 2.

Will H. Hays Papers. Indiana State Library, Indianapolis, IN.

<https://indianamemory.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p16066coll64>

“Writers Get Together.” *The Hollywood Reporter*, March 27, 1933, 1, 3.

“Zanuck Out of Warners.” *The Hollywood Reporter*, April 15, 1933, 1, 5.