Where Dreams Come True?: The Impacts of the 1941 Animators' Strike

Matthew Dominguez

"I only hope that we never lose sight of one thing – that it was all started by a mouse."[1] This is how Walt Disney referred to the beginning of the global success and admiration of the Walt Disney Company and the debut of Mickey Mouse in 1928. Mickey Mouse had helped spearhead the Walt Disney Company into a successful studio that would have a long-lasting influence on the animation and entertainment industries. Even today, after roughly ninety-two years of the debut of the beloved mouse and fifty-five years after the passing of Walt Disney, the company has remained a dominant figure in the entertainment and animation industry. The Walt Disney Company is currently made up of multiple film studios, cable networks, news channels, streaming services, cruise lines, and numerous resorts and theme parks in three continents.

Walt Disney, with much-needed help from his brother, Roy O. Disney, laid a solid foundation for the growth of a successful company that would ultimately bring entertainment for many generations to come. Despite being known as an entertainment powerhouse, many hardships plagued the company. Walt Disney's first attempt at an animation studio, Laugh-O-Gram Studio, would ultimately fail. Then, in 1928, Disney would lose the rights to his successful character, Oswald the Lucky Rabbit. Disney, along with his brother and business partner, Roy Disney, would often risk their finances to maintain the company, facing the brink of bankruptcy multiple times. However, one event that brought the biggest challenge to the Disney company and Walt Disney himself was the 1941 Disney Animator's Strike, which saw Disney's animators call for the company to be unionized.

---

[1] "Walt Disney Quote Page," *D23,* accessed April 14, 2021, https://d23.com/walt-disney-quote/page/5/.

Even though the strike was not the first and only labor movement strike in the animation industry at the time, it had been the most influential in the industry. Working conditions for animators had been deplorable and offered minimal rewards or benefits. Fortunately, the Disney Animators' Strike results had changed the working conditions for animators forever, creating needed changes for both animators and the companies that hired them. Additionally, the events surrounding the 1941 Strike would highlight the shift in attitudes toward labor conditions in the United States throughout this period. While discussing the 1941 Disney Animator's Strike, it is essential to briefly explain the history of the animation industry and the Disney Company before the production of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. National and international circumstances also helped pave the way for Disney's animators to go on strike. Additionally, it will be essential to discuss what events had transpired throughout the Disney strike and how it ended. It is also crucial to understand how the strike would change the Disney Company, Walt Disney, and the animation industry. The 1941 Strike was an important event in Disney history and animation history, which had long-lasting impacts for all those involved.

The Birth of Animation

The 1941 Disney Strike was one event within a larger labor movement in the animation industry and Hollywood. To understand why Disney's animators and others in the industry decided to strike throughout this period, we need to go back a few decades and discuss the history of the animation industry. This will also be beneficial as we can juxtapose the industry before and after the Animator's Strike and understand how much the event influenced animation.

Though it is challenging to establish a beginning for the contemporary animation industry, it will be safe to assume that we could trace its roots somewhere in the mid to late 19th century, with the production and creation of comic strips. Comic strips served as the primary production of cartoons, and many of animation's pioneers started as comic strip artists. Innovation had to take place to move from comic strips to animation.

Many different people and inventions played a significant role in developing animation throughout this time. Still, there have been debates about which animation short was the first. By the early 20th century, numerous pioneering directors and animators had firmly established animated cartoons within the broader entertainment landscape.

Despite the increasing success of animation, some early pioneers had abandoned the art form and decided to move back to working on comic strips. Winsor McCay had reportedly quit animation because he did not want to be a part of an assembly line; instead, he chose to return to illustrating comic strips. This move by McCay may provide some insight as to what the environment was like in the early animation industry. Before discussing the problems within the animation industry, it is necessary to examine what drove many young men to work for the animation industry, especially for the Walt Disney Company.

Disney and the Depression: The Reasons for Working at Disney

In 1928, Mickey Mouse had made his debut, one year before the Great Depression. Many would assume that the Great Depression would cause harm for the young Disney studio that had recently decided to go on their own independent route. The Disney brothers were no strangers to financial insecurity during the Great Depression. The hardships during this unsettling era, the success of Mickey Mouse helped lead the Disney Company to international fame during the 1930s. "Disney's short color cartoons swept the Academy Awards in their category throughout the thirties, winning every best of consecutively until 1940… The Great Depression was an ideal incubator for the Disney Company. During the Depression, with movie tickets cheap and millions unemployed, Disney had a ready-made audience hungry for distraction."[2] Disney's cartoons had offered a sense of escapism

---

[2] Kevin Shortsleeve, "The Wonderful World of the Depression: Disney, Despotism, and the 1930s. Or, Why Disney Scares Us," *The Lion and the Unicorn* 28 (1) (2004): 1-30, https://login.ezp.pasadena.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-

for many Americans. He had provided hope and reassurance for people during a difficult time when people were unsure what the future had in store. This time of Disney's success would often be known as "the Golden Age" of Disney's animated films.

Disney's success during this time also provided another benefit to the country besides escapism; it offered jobs. In "'With a Smile and a Song…': Walt Disney and the Birth of the American Fairy Tale," Tracy Mollet discusses how the 1929 Wall Street crash "brought with it an immeasurable depth of economic, social, and cultural turmoil. Five thousand banks failed in 1930, taking $7 billion in deposits with them. One hundred fifty thousand homeowners lost their properties in 1930, escalating substantially to 250,000 in 1932. Thirteen million Americans were out of work by 1933."[3] As a result of the Great Depression's effects, many young animators had little to complain about when they found themselves working at the Disney company during these years. It was challenging to obtain a job, let alone a job as an artist.

Jack Kinney, who had worked as an animator at the Disney studio during the Great Depression, talks about how fortunate animators had felt to work for the company during this tumultuous period. A, Kinney would go from making $20 to $22.50 a week, and eventually, he would make up to $27.50 a week. Unfortunately, around 1931, Kinney, along with other Disney animators, was asked to take a fifteen percent cut in salary, "but at least [they] still had [their] jobs and didn't have to join all those other people with their pants worn out."[4] Additionally, Kinney mentions that since many animators were young men, they could bounce back from the cut in their salaries. Many had gone back to work harder than before, filled with a sense of pride that they could help the company survive during that period.

---

com.ezp.pasadena.edu/scholarly-journals/wonderful-world-depression-disney-despotism-1930s/docview/221762772/se-2?accountid=28371.

[3] Tracey Mollet, "'With a Smile and a Song …": Walt Disney and the Birth of the American Fairy Tale," *Marvels & Tales* 27, no. 1 (2013): 109-24, doi:10.13110/marvelstales.27.1.0109, 112.

[4] Jack Kinney. *Walt Disney and Assorted Other Characters: An Unauthorized Account of the Early Years at Disney's.* (New York: Harmony Books, 1988), 26.

Furthermore, Ward Kimball was another infamous Disney animator who would begin his Disney career during the Great Depression. Before working with Disney, Kimball had dropped out of art school. Kimball's parents had hounded him to find work, with Kimball arguing that there were no jobs for him during the Depression. Kimball had no interest in working for Disney, nor did he know anything about the process of Disney animation.

Thanks to Kimball's training in art school, Disney had made an exception and paid him $15 a week for his first two weeks on the job. Usually, Disney did not produce a salary for an employee's first two weeks. Kinney and Kimball's experiences show that the Disney studio had offered young artists what millions of Americans were looking for at this time: employment. The Disney Company gained greater success during this period, though troubles were coming towards the studio, and it all began with the production of a famous young princess and seven little dwarfs.

Before the Strike: The Production of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*

Much of the Disney Company's problems that led to the 1941 Disney Animator's Strike began with the production of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs.* In December of 1937, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* debuted at the Carthay Theater in Los Angeles. The debut of *Snow White* revolutionized animation; cartoons, at the time, were made up of shorts that would complement other films or shows. However, "Walt explained that he wanted to move toward an animated feature intended for a worldwide commercial audience, something that no American studio had yet attempted."[5] His ambitions transformed the studio and how animators had worked. Walt Disney wanted *Snow White* to be different from previous animated cartoons. He wanted the film to be realistic and to be able to compete with live movies. As a result, multiple questions arose within the company. The movie's structure was the primary concern since animators were

[5] Todd J. Pierce, *The Life and Times of Ward Kimball: Maverick of Disney Animation,* (University Press of Mississippi, 2019), 35-36.

only used to animating six to seven-minute short cartoons. As noted by Kimball, Disney recognized that the key to making a successful animated film was to build the characters' personalities. The making of *Snow White* had required Disney's animators to learn entirely new skills, such as doing away with the brightly colored layouts seen in cartoon shorts. The film required much more muted colors and realistic special effects.

The film's production was filled with hard work and long hours for all those involved. To make matters worse for animators, a single scene in the movie could take an animator as long as six months to complete. Additionally, there were occasions where the scene would be cut from the film altogether, which meant months of aching work done for nothing. Eventually, the deadline for *Snow White* was fast approaching, which meant that animators had been asked to work longer hours, sometimes with no pay. Shamus Culhane would discuss animators' attitudes towards working without pay during the production. "When we were asked to work Saturday afternoons without pay, we all did so very willingly. Many of us worked Sundays as well. I never heard a single person grouse about working for nothing."[6] However, stress quickly made its way throughout the studio, and some animators relieved their stress by drawing crude pornographic scenes of the characters, including Snow White, the dwarfs, and the Prince. Luckily, this period within the studio had only lasted for a week and Walt Disney never heard about it. According to both Shamus Culhane and Ward Kimball, it resulted in fatigue and a relentless schedule. Disney's animators were willing to do this backbreaking work because of their loyalty to Walt, and they believed in his vision and in the film. Many thought "that a feature like *Snow White* might possibly transform the field of animation. They saw the feature as an opportunity to rake in large bonus checks, with payouts calculated for completed footage. The younger ones believed that this feature might be the place where they defined themselves as experts in this new approach to film, one that relied

---

[6] Shamus Culhane, *Talking Animals and Other People,* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 179.

more on classical illustration than on simple cartooning."[7] Tensions would continue to escalate following the film's release, especially when a situation arose regarding bonus checks.

Tensions Rise within the Disney Studio

Before the production of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs,* bonus checks had become an essential and integral benefit for animators at the Disney Company. In *Talking Animals and Other People,* Shamus Culhane explained that "while the base pay for animators was just about the same as the rest of the industry, under the bonus system, if you did very good work, it was possible to make a very high salary… [Disney] paid twelve dollars a foot for the best animation, and then it would scale down to eight, then four dollars. If a scene was just passable, or if it was a crowd shot, there was no bonus at all."[8] Culhane explained that the bonus system had been advantageous, especially for those who earned the twelve-dollar bonus. Though, before *Snow White,* the bonus system had only been used in conjunction with the production of shorts, not feature-length films. No one knew how the bonus system would be applied with a successful feature-length film, though many assumed the rewards would be even more prosperous.

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs was indeed a success. Critics and audiences had praised the film. Additionally, the film had earned a lot of revenue over its initial release, resulting in many animators developing high hopes of large bonuses. Quickly after the film's release, tensions began to rise, the rumor that the bonus checks for the work done on the film were no longer going to be distributed spread like wildfire. Then, it circulated that company management started the initial rumors to program employees to be grateful that they even received a bonus check at all, despite receiving much less than they had expected. Some rumors stated that a particular group of favored animators received substantially more in bonus checks than others. These rumors

---

[7] Todd J. Pierce, *The Life and Times of Ward Kimball: Maverick of Disney Animation, (*University Press of Mississippi, 2019), 37.
[8] Shamus Culhane, *Talking Animals and Other People,* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 169.

were allowed to spread because the Disney brothers had no idea how to address the issue. Nevertheless, it is safe to assume that animators had earned no more from the making of *Snow White* than they would have made making animated shorts. Shamus Culhane mentioned that his bonus was about equal to what he would have made if he had continued working on the shorts. "If the amount I received was any example of what others earned on the picture, it constituted a change in the basic policy. It may well be that Roy took Walt to a high place and showed him a vista of stocks and profits so huge that Walt could do anything he wanted, no matter how grandiose."[9]

Much of the profits made off *Snow White* were spent in other areas that the Disney brothers probably found more critical at the time. The Disney brothers had risked everything to produce *Snow White,* including their houses, the studio, and everyone's jobs. They spent millions of dollars in order to pay off their outstanding loans to Bank of America, with whom they already had a strained relationship. Walt Disney also used much of the revenue from the film to expand his company and build a $45 million studio in Burbank. "The new studio featured the Penthouse Club, where the top artists could get milkshakes and a backrub. There was even a personal trainer… But this was all for the artists who could afford it. Most of the staff had trouble affording the cafeteria... all the Penthouse Club did was to create more envy among the lower-paid echelon."[10] The new studio had inadvertently created distance between management and animators. Since animators had their own floor within the new Burbank studio, away from all other departments and Walt Disney. They now felt secluded and isolated from the rest of the company. Lastly, a portion of the revenue was set aside to produce the 1940 film *Pinocchio,* which further escalated within the studio.

Walt Disney had initially promised his animators that they would share in the profits from *Pinocchio* in the form of bonuses.

---

[9] Shamus Culhane, *Talking Animals and Other People,* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 186.

[10] Tom Sito, *Drawing the Line: The Untold Story of the Animation Unions from Bosko to Bart Simpson,* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 112.

Despite *Pinocchio* now being known as an acclaimed classic Disney animated film, it had initially been a box office failure. *Pinocchio, Fantasia,* and *Bambi* were all box office failures during this period. Besides *Snow White,* the 1941 film *Dumbo* was the only successful film of the "Golden Age" during its initial release. The other films had been negatively impacted by World War II, which was actively taking place within many parts of the world during this period, cutting off the European and Asian markets. These box office failures would eventually cause financial catastrophe for the studio, though *Dumbo* would provide some relief.

By 1941, the call for unionizing the company had begun to gain traction amongst Disney animators. The newly developed Screen Cartoon Guild had worked diligently to unionize Disney's animators, believing that this would allow them to control the industry. Walt Disney knew he had to try to appease his animators before the call for unionizing gained too much power. On February 10, 1941, Walt Disney delivered a speech to his employees explaining the dire circumstances they were in. Walt had explained to his animators that "'The war in Europe had depreciated our markets approximately ten percent,' he continued. "That wasn't so bad until Hitler started his Blitzkrieging, and then the foreign market completely disappeared… This contributed greatly to *Pinocchio* losing money.'"[11] This speech proved to be difficult for Walt. Pierce noted that Walt appeared anxious and had difficulty completing his sentences. Walt confided to his animators that he and Roy had taken a 75% pay cut to try to carry the brunt of the financial failures of the company and confirmed that he would take care of the animators that remained loyal to him during this time.

Unfortunately, the situation became dire as the Screen Cartoon Guild continued to recruit Disney animators to join their union to protest the company. They claimed the Disney brothers kept too much of their profits and did not care about their animators. The Guild would continue to hold meetings with Walt Disney and the company's lawyers to discuss complaints. Then,

---

[11] Todd J. Pierce, *The Life and Times of Ward Kimball: Maverick of Disney Animation,* (University Press of Mississippi, 2019), 79.

on April 24, 1941, Roy Disney announced that the company would have to adopt a five-day workweek and enact pay cuts for the highest-paid employees, which was intended to lower the cost of running the studio and to protect the lowest-paid employees from financial burdens. In addition to enacting pay cuts to the company's highest-paid employees, Walt had also tried to recover his losses through the public sale of the company's stock. Walt Disney had even given stock to employees to keep the stock within the company's control, but this created further division since the stocks had been distributed unequally. Despite Disney's best attempts to combat the growing presence of the Guild, it appeared that the strike was inevitable.

The Disney Strike

On May 29, 1941, the unthinkable happened. Protests that spread throughout the animation industry made their way to the Walt Disney Company. Disney animators suffered from "poor wages and arbitrary wage scales, long hours without pay for overtime, and total submission to Disney's executive authority in studio operations. Neither salaries nor working conditions were systemized under Disney's regime."[12] Furthermore, animators did not receive screen credits for their work. To make matters worse, all the work created by animators, even artwork of non-Disney characters done away from the studio, was owned by Disney. At this point, it only took one man to begin the final push towards the 1941 Animator's Strike. In 1941, Art Babbitt, one of the most well-known Disney animators, called for the Disney Company's union to address some of the most pressing issues affecting its animators. Upon realizing that the company union would do nothing to help the animators stand up to management, Babbitt, one of the best paid animators at the company, decided to join the Screen Cartoonists Guild. He escalated the already intense situation by demanding a raise for his assistant, arguing that his salary was an example of underpayment.

---

[12] Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*. (London: Verso, 1998), 406.

Additionally, Babbitt approached and demanded Walt Disney unionize the company with a few other animators. Walt Disney did not appreciate what was transpiring within his studio, and he had taken offense and felt betrayed by the decision to unionize. Walt Disney believed he was a fair boss who provided feasible opportunities and just payments to his animators. He expected loyalty from them. Nonetheless, Walt Disney's response was expected by many. According to Sito, Babbitt eventually faced harassment as he became more vigorous in his arguments to allow the Guild to represent Disney animators at the studio. For example, on the day Babbit was scheduled to testify to the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), detectives from the Burbank Police Department showed up to his home and arrested him on a concealed weapons charge. Never owning a weapon, he was quickly released. The head of Disney Studio security was the bother-in-law of the Burbank chief of police; this was a clear message from the Disney company to back off.



Figure 1- Disney Studios Cartoonists Strike flier. Artist Unknown, 1941. California State University, Northridge Special Collections.

Escalations between the Guild and the Disney studio would continue, leading Disney to fire Babbitt and many others who had joined the Guild. Disney declared that Babbit's involvement with union activity violated the Wagner Act. According to Michael Dennings, his firing as well as that of other union members served as a purge of Guild activists. For many animators, the firing of Art Babbitt was the final straw. That night, employees held an emergency meeting to discuss the events that had transpired and what their plan of action would be. Ultimately, the Union decided to put up a motion to strike against the Disney company, which was passed by an almost unanimous majority. Only four members opposed the strike.

For Disney, the following morning would be a drastic change from what he was used to when he arrived at his studio. "When [he] turned his car on to Buena Vista Boulevard, he found

the entrance to his studio choked with a crowd of three hundred picketers."[13] According to *Drawing the Line: The Untold Story of the Animation Unions from Bosko to Bart Simpson,* as many as 1,293 employees had walked out, including 600 artists. Even though Walt and other executives anticipated a strike, they did not believe it would last long or create any traction. They predicted that the strike would last 24 hours-they were wrong. The process and negotiations of the strike lasted for months, causing tensions for protestors, executives, and animators who chose to return to work.

The relationship between Disney animators had been tested throughout the strike. Friendships between animators who protested and those who had chosen to work ended in shambles. For many, the decision of who to ally themselves with was an easy choice. For example, all the artists who would later become known as the Nine Old Men returned to work at the studio. The choice proved to be difficult for some animators. Kimball, for example, "was very liberal and came from a family of union sympathizers. That morning when the picket went up, he and Fred Moore argued for ninety minutes over what to do. In the end, they both crossed the line."[14] Kimball's best friend Walt Kelly, however, joined the strike. As a result, Kimball and Kelly were never close friends again. Incidents like these occurred throughout the strike, friends turning into bitter enemies.

Walt Disney informed his employees that the studio would remain open despite the protests. He had also assured those who wanted to work that "there will be protection against disorder and the studio will supplement whatever numbers may be necessary to provide protection."[15] Apparently, protection was

---

[13] Tom Sito, *Drawing the Line: The Untold Story of the Animation Unions from Bosko to Bart Simpson,* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 121.

[14] Tom Sito, *Drawing the Line: The Untold Story of the Animation Unions from Bosko to Bart Simpson,* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 124.

[15] "Disney Says Studio to Stay Open Despite Strike Threat," *Los Angeles Times,* May 28, 1941, http://mimas.calstatela.edu/login?url-https:11www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/disney-says-studio-stay-open-despite-strike/docview/165168756/se-2?accountid=10352.

necessary for loyal Disney animators since the Guild made threats against workers by taking pictures of workers who had crossed the picket line and threatening to fine them for not observing the strike. The fine would be "equal to his or her salary for the duration of the strike, plus $5 a day for not walking in the picket line, plus $100 'for insubordination.'"[16] However, the Guild had not been the only party to take pictures of their foes. Walt Disney had photographers take pictures of those on strike and had the photos lined up in his office to observe them. Walt had observed the animators who he felt betrayed him. According to Kinney, Walt would sit in solitude, identifying all the animators that he could. Walt would say things like "'Damn, I didn't think he'd go against me'; 'That sonofabitch, I trusted him and he went out on me.'"[17] Those who observed Walt believed he was storing his feelings for future revenge.



Figure 2- Striking Cartoonists at Disney Studios, 1941. Photographer unknown, 1941. CSUN Special Collections.

Tensions only escalated as time went on. Strikers began vandalizing as their attitudes intensified as they continued to protest for weeks. Kinney mentioned that fights broke out and shots were fired. Ultimately, the Guild demanded to be recognized as the collective bargaining agency immediately."[18] As tensions

---

[16] "Walt Disney Cartoonists Strike in Bargaining Dispute: Workers Get Guild Threat Part of Film Studio's Employees Stay at Home to Avoid Demonstration," *Los Angeles Times,* May 29, 1941, http://mimas.calstatela.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/walt-disney-cartoonists-strike-bargaining-dispute/docview/165212381/se-2?accountid=10352.

[17] Jack Kinney. *Walt Disney and Assorted Other Characters: An Unauthorized Account of the Early Years at Disney's*. (New York: Harmony Books, 1988), 137.

[18] "Disney Strike Move Ruled Out: Motion Called Premature at Meeting of A.F.L. Screen Cartoon Guild," *Los Angeles Times,* May 24, 1941, http://mimas.calstatela.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/disney-strike-move-ruled-out/docview/165155101/se-2?accountid=10352.

continued rising, protesters gained many allies such as animators from other studios who joined their friends on strike. Labor groups outside of animation would eventually join in. The Screen Editors Guild called a strike against the Disney Company and donated $1,000 a week to the animator's support fund pledging that no actor would cross the picket lines. The American Federation of Labor called for the boycott of all Disney films and merchandise. Strikers from different Guilds protested Disney's expected blockbuster summer hit *The Reluctant Dragon,* causing the film to fail at the box office. Unfortunately for Disney, the negative press took a toll on him and almost drove him to another nervous breakdown.

By the second month of the strike, both sides were exhausted: some strikers began to look for new jobs, and many who remained only did so out of fear of being fined by the Union. By June 30, tensions seemed to de-escalate as Disney representatives requested a meeting with the union leadership. On July 2, the studio announced that they were entering negotiations. Before any consensus could be reached, conflicts began to rise once more. As a result, The Guild requested the involvement of the federal government. In response, Walt Disney would blame the strikers' actions on Communism. "'I believe you have been misled and misinformed about the real issues underlying the strike at the studio. I am positively convinced that Communist agitation, leadership and activities have brought about this strike, and have persuaded you to reject this fair and equitable settlement.' Against the advice of more level heads, Walt had his statement printed in the trade press, with dire consequences for all Hollywood."[19] By July 14, picketing at the Disney studio resumed.

Despite the war waging in Europe, it would take the federal government's involvement before the strike could come to a resolution. The National Labor Relations Board cited the Disney company's union as being an unfair labor practice. Unfortunately, Walt changed its name and resumed its activities. President Roosevelt sent a mediator to find a settlement that both parties

---

[19] Tom Sito, *Drawing the Line: The Untold Story of the Animation Unions from Bosko to Bart Simpson,* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 139.

could agree on. Walt Disney was not pleased with government intervention and refused to negotiate with Babbitt. To help mediate the situation, Walt Disney had to be removed from the scene. Vice President Nelson Rockefeller had invited Walt on a state-funded goodwill trip to South America, to help create friendly relations between the Americas. Walt agreed as this offered a source of revenue for his suffering company. Though Disney was met with strikers in South America over the mess back in Burbank, the trip ultimately provided Disney with new opportunities. From his trip to South America, Disney produced 1942s *Saludos Amigos* and then 1944s *The Three Caballeros.* Unexpectedly, this venture proved to be one of Disney's gravest personal mistakes.

A settlement between the Guild and the Disney studio had been made while Walt was in South America. "The base pay for inkers went from $18 a week to $35. The base pay of animators... went from $35 to $85 minimum... The salary increases went entirely to those making less than $85 per week, representing both the majority of Disney artists and also the majority of those who went on strike. The strikers also received about three weeks' back pay, equivalent to 30 percent of lost wages."[20] Additionally, nondiscriminatory unemployment was included for all those who had been on the payroll as of May 15, and employees fired before the strike could return to work at the Disney studio. Walt Disney attempted to have the federal ruling overturned, though he failed. The 1941 Disney Animators Strike had finally come to an end. The events that had transpired would significantly impact the Disney company and the animation industry.

The Aftermath: The Impacts on Disney and the Animation Industry

Despite the strike ending, the Disney company and animators were still plagued with fallout immediately afterward. Many relationships within the company had been destroyed due to the strike, creating a very complex situation when they all had to return to working with one another. Each faction of animators

---

[20] Todd J. Pierce, *The Life and Times of Ward Kimball: Maverick of Disney Animation,* (University Press of Mississippi, 2019), 93-94.

felt left out and targeted by the other. Kimball mentions that the Guild members believed they were met with hostility by loyalists and ill will, while the loyalists felt bullied and pressured by Guild members, "Art director Maurice noble told me no one wanted to speak to him, even in the men's room. Noble's desk was moved from a spacious third-floor office to a dank closet where he had to get up on a stool to see out a small window."[21] Many pro-union Disney artists quit and moved on from Disney's studios to work for other animation studios. Pro-union artists were always the first to go when there were staff cutbacks. Disney's animators continued to complain about poor working conditions, but eventually, they all left the studio.

Rivalries between animators had not been the only problem the company would face following the strike. After the strike, the animators who remained at the studio, despite being quite talented, were not the innovators the company needed. In contrast, those who left Disney were some of the most talented and innovative animators Disney had hired. Following the 1959 film *Sleeping Beauty,* Disney animation headed on a slow decline, with the studio downsizing its staff considerably. Throughout the mid-1950s until his death in 1966, Walt Disney moved his primary focus from animation to live-action films and the Disneyland theme park, which had opened in 1955. Following his death in 1966, the studio had entered what is now known as the "Dark Ages" of Disney animation, which lasted for roughly twenty years. Many animators were afraid to take risks and tried to follow the format set by Walt Disney. They had often lived by the mantra "What would Walt do?" According to Sito and Culhane, the 1981 film *The Fox and the Hound* encapsulates this difficult period in Disney animation. The film was criticized for not taking any risks or creating something new. It was the same traditional Disney format that people were getting bored with. During Disney's "Dark Age," the company barely survived multiple hostile takeovers from Comcast. Animation, as an art form, was dying. When Michael Eisner was brought in to save the company during

---

[21] Tom Sito, *Drawing the Line: The Untold Story of the Animation Unions from Bosko to Bart Simpson,* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 143.

the 1980s and serve as its CEO, he initially believed that live-action films would save the studio. Luckily, he was wrong.

Conclusion

The 1941 Disney Animators' Strike had created lasting impacts that would create decades-long difficulties for the company during the 1960s – 1980s. Though the result of the strike promised better working conditions for animators, the tension and hostility forced many talented Disney artists to abandon the company, leaving the animation studio in a problematic situation. The perseverance of the Disney company had prevailed and paved the way for the Disney Renaissance, the time when they created critically acclaimed films such as *Beauty and the Beast, Aladdin,* and *The Lion King.*

Unlike the impacts at the Disney Company, the changes within the animation industry were not faced with many issues. Disney lost pro-union artists, though the animation industry gained from these artists' contributions as they set out on their own ventures. The 1941 Disney strike also birthed a new group of radical animators who became increasingly political. Unlike the artists who chose to stay at Disney, this group of animators ambitiously worked to break Additionally, the strike had forced these animators to move towards the political left, offering them the opportunity to form new relationships with radicals. "Some of the animators became members of the Communist party; others were part of the broad California labor left, whose political face was the Democratic Federation for Political Unity."[22] These young, radical animators had ambitious goals that would ultimately take shape during the 1940s within independent political cartoons. "Of the cartoonists came together to produce an animated film for the labor movement's political campaign. The CIO's Political Action Committee (CIO- been founded in the summer of 1943 to provide an organizational base for labor political action and support for Roosevelt's reelection campaign

[22] Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*. (London: Verso, 1998), 414.

in 1944."[23] Their first film had been a success, allowing them to produce more films for the military. Despite the radical animators' initial success in the political arena and in changing animation, their movement began to face problems, ultimately ending their short existence. They were unable to survive long in America during the Cold War period.

Whether loyal to Disney or pro-union, animators across the industry benefited from the 1941 Strike. Following the Disney strike, the rest of the animation studios quickly followed and unionized their companies. By 1942, 90% of the industry had been unionized. According to Sito, unionizing had offered an enormous number of benefits that improved the livelihood of animators as it had laid the "foundation for the highest standard of living in the animation world."[24] Despite the abundance of new benefits, many loyal animators had a few complaints about the results of the strike. The main concern was there was no longer a family atmosphere within the company. Animators no longer had gatherings with one another, and the company had closed the Penthouse Club for some time. Instead, time clocks had become a permanent fixture within the studio. Despite these complaints, the 1941 Disney Strike had brought much-needed changes to the company that would benefit animators for years to come.

---

[23] Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*. (London: Verso, 1998), 419.
[24] Tom Sito, *Drawing the Line: The Untold Story of the Animation Unions from Bosko to Bart Simpson,* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 150.