

Labor's Star Vicky Starr

by Bob Roman

DSA member/activist Vicky Starr's life as a union organizer and co-founder of the United Packinghouse Workers, first in the slaughterhouses in Chicago's Back of the Yards neighborhoods in the 1930s and 40s, made her a touchstone for many authors and a star of the Oscar-nominated documentary, "Union Maids." Accounts of her life are referenced in dozens of books, including Studs Terkel's bestseller *The American Dream*, the Lynds' *Rank and File*, Howard Zinn's and Anthony Amove's *Voices of a People's History of the United States*, Judith Kegan Gardiner's *Provoking Agents*, and *First Person America* by Ann Banks – and this is hardly a complete Starr bibliography. Organizing slaughterhouses required extraordinary, even downright conspiratorial efforts. Union meetings were held in secret and new attendees needed to be vouched for by older members; simply to breathe the word "union" was to bring instant dismissal from your job and blacklisting. But because the workers were willing to grab control of production in a time-critical industry, they were able to win concrete victories and ultimately union recognition. Rick Halpern's book, *Down on the Killing Floor*, describes Starr's experience. Sadly, Vicky Starr died last Thanksgiving Day in Evanston, Illinois at age 93.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Vicky helped to organize clerical workers at the University of Chicago into Local 743 of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. She was also an active member of the Chicago Women's Liberation Union. Under the name Stella Nowicki, Vicky Starr was, along with Sylvia Wood and Katherine Hyndman, one of the stars of "Union Maids," a documentary (available from New Day Films) about female union organizers in the 1930s. This 1978 Academy Award-nominated film also won a blue

ribbon at the American Film Festival, and was shown on public television. Her participation in this documentary was a sweet spot in Vicky's life, and she took every opportunity to accompany screenings with a personal presentation to bring the struggles of the past to life and make them an inspiration for people struggling today.

My acquaintance with Vicky Starr came late in her life, years after DSA was formed through the merger of the New American Movement (NAM) and the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC). Vicky had been a member of NAM while I had been a member of DSOC. When we finally had the opportunity to work together, I observed that being an organizer often requires, among other things, a certain boldness combined with many of the interpersonal skills that characterize a good party host. Being a bureaucrat requires, among other things, a talent for systematic mastery of information and record keeping. Vicky Starr could do either or both and do it well. She was formidable.

Vicky Starr was honored with a Debs-Thomas-Harrington Award at an event that featured fellow DSA member and then Screen Actors Guild President Ed Asner, and keynote speaker Congressman Lane Evans. In the years since, she remained a faithful patron of the dinner, attending nearly every one. If Vicky Starr helped change the meat packing industry and advanced the organizing of female white collar workers a generation later, the experience also changed her in many ways, major and minor. On one occasion when she organized a DSA mailing party, she absolutely forbade anyone to lick an envelope or a stamp. "You wouldn't dare," she said, "if you saw how that glue was made." ♦

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