

The Real Norma Rae: Crystal Lee Sutton

by Susan Giesen, W A M M



Sally Fields portrayed a character standing up for her rights. That movie was based on the life and struggles of Crystal Lee Sutton.

A dear friend of mine died this past year. She was not just my friend, but your friend, too, and a friend to every working woman and man. She was Crystal Lee Sutton, the real Norma Rae. That's how she signed her name. And she was REAL! When she came to visit our family, our granddaughter described her as just that. Crystal could not have been pretentious even if she tried.

Is being real what makes a good union organizer? Is that what makes a person courageous? Is that what makes a person put others before self? Crystal had all those qualities, and that is why the movie Norma Rae made a good story.

But, there was much more to Crystal than the movie revealed. Like most Hollywood movies, it had a happy ending. However, in actuality, Crystal's life did not have a happy ending. After the movie was released, she was blackballed from getting a decent job anywhere near her hometown. When she got cancer, her husband's insurance didn't cover all her prescription drugs, and she went without the health care she needed. She died a National Hero. The national media even said so. They just forgot to tell the price so many heroes pay, and how our country rewards them.

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About Crystal Lee Sutton: "Crystal Lee Sutton's role in the history of labor is assured. In the early 1970s, Crystal Lee was 33 and working at the J.P. Stevens plant in Roanoke Rapids, N.C., where she was making \$2.65 an hour folding towels. The poor working conditions she and her fellow employees suffered compelled her to join forces with Eli Zivkovich, a union organizer, and attempt to unionize the J.P. Stevens employees . . . Sutton was physically removed from the plant by police, but the result of her actions was staggering. The Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU) won the right to represent the workers at the plant and Sutton became an organizer for the union. In 1977, Sutton was awarded back wages and her job was reinstated by court order, although she chose to return to work for just two days. She subsequently became a speaker on behalf of the ACTWU."
More: www.crystalleesutton.com/about.html.