

“*In Dubious Battle* is a strike story, Steinbeck’s bitterest and most partisan narrative, and at the same time one of his most powerful novels. Jim Nolan, a young employee of a San Francisco store, is beaten by the police while innocently watching a radical demonstration and as a result is fired from his job; bitter, he joins the Communist Party. He is introduced to Mac, an organizer, who is to be his mentor in Party work. Mac, hard-bitten, cynical, and realistic, is militant Marxism personified; he welcomes trouble and bloodshed because they will provoke the class hatred he can manipulate for Party purposes, and he cynically finds ways to use the deaths of Party comrades for propaganda purposes.

The central action of the novel is a strike among itinerant apple-pickers (‘fruit tramps’) in the fictional Torgas Valley. Before the Party cell comes from San Francisco to organize them, the pickers have little class consciousness and passively accept their cut in wages. Mac and his comrades succeed in persuading them to strike, but brutal violence and destruction are involved: a man is killed during a riot over the arrival of strike-breakers, the lunch-wagon of a Party sympathizer is burned and he is beaten, several men including Jim are shot in a battle with the strikebreakers, and Anderson, a farmer who has agreed to let the striking pickers camp on his land, is ruined financially when vigilantes burn his barn containing his entire apple crop. Mac secretly encourages this violence, since he knows it will build up the hatred needed to solidify the working class in the Valley as well as in the rest of the country.

The strike is a failure; the pickers are reduced to starvation, some of them are shot, and as the novel ends Jim Nolan is killed by vigilantes who ambush him through a ruse. But Mac’s purposes have been served; his main interest has not been in the plight of the Torgas Valley pickers but in the Party’s long-term plans for revolution, which are best served when workers are martyred and a strong class feeling is stirred up. A doctor, Burton, serves as a philosophical commentator and spokesman for the intellectual class in the novel, and thus perhaps serves as Steinbeck’s mouthpiece.

The attitude of the author, however, is ambiguous; *In Dubious Battle* is at first glance a piece of Party propaganda, yet the Party tactics are often seen to be foolish, irrational, and gratuitously destructive. Communist criticism did not approve of the novel, probably because it shows so many human weaknesses and passions in consecrated Party workers; and it is likely that this cool reception helped to turn Steinbeck away from Communism toward other and more moderate forms of liberalism. The style of *In Dubious Battle* is violent, coarse, and forceful; the climactic ending, in which Mac, carried away by anger, harangues the crowd in an effort to use Jim’s murder for propaganda purposes, is especially well done.”

Donald Heiney

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Jim Nolan: When we first meet Jim Nolan, there's not much left of him. He's just gone through the most dehumanizing period of his life: he's spent 30 days in jail on a bum vagrancy charge, and he's dealing with the inexplicable death of his mom. But now that he has hit rock bottom, he is looking for meaning in his life.

Why does he decide to join the party?

Can you identify the moment of his epiphany?

What is he now looking for?

How does he change over the course of the novel?

What impact does his death have and what is the symbolism in the manner of his death?

McLeod: Mac's utter practicality makes him the perfect Party man—even if it makes him a questionable human being. He will use anyone/everything around him, especially where the cause is concerned—even if it destroys others. It's a chilling philosophy of use; one that neither cares for nor respects the emotional life of human beings. He has no problem sacrificing anyone for the greater good. He is especially hardened to individual need because he knows of the great inequality and mass suffering around the country—even around the world. It's this solidarity with people he doesn't even know that makes the men around him a little bit suspicious. They constantly ask Mac, "What's in it for you?"

Identify some specific examples of how Mac uses and manipulates people to get what he wants.

Find quotes where Mac indicates his motivation and willingness to use people.

Doc Burton: He is a guy who has worked with Mac many times over the years on strikes, but his motivations are a mystery to Mac. Doc doesn't seem to be a card-carrying Party member, and yet he is deeply invested in the health and well-being of the workers. Mac trusts Doc because even though Doc doesn't believe in the cause he tells Mac he does "believe in men."

Doc has a theory about how individual men function in a group: they're not like themselves at all. He is particularly interested in mob psychology and how "group-man," as he calls it, works like a little cell in a larger organism.

Doc and Mac have several philosophical discussions that are important for readers to understand.

You will need an understanding of the leading characters and the terms and conditions of the strike. You should be able to articulate the relative positions of all parties involved: their motivations and expectations of gain.