

# Historic showing of Viola Liuzzo documentary in Detroit

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*Home of the Brave*, the documentary film about murdered civil rights activist Viola Liuzzo, will be screened at the Detroit Institute of Arts' Detroit Film Theatre on September 30, October 2 and 3. The September 30 showing will be followed by a panel discussion, with members of the Liuzzo family and the filmmakers.

Directed by Paolo di Florio, the film sets out the remarkable story of Viola Liuzzo, the 39-year-old mother of five and wife of a Detroit Teamsters official, who was brutally murdered following the voting rights march from Selma, Alabama, to the state capital of Montgomery in March 1965.

Liuzzo was gunned down by a carload of Ku Klux Klan members while ferrying marchers to the airport. The alleged triggerman, Gary Thomas Rowe, was an FBI informer. Liuzzo was the only white woman killed during the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s.

After the assassination, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover attempted to deflect focus away from the role of the agency in the murder by launching a smear campaign against Viola that exacted an immense toll on the family of the civil rights martyr. It took two decades for the Liuzzo family to uncover the truth about the slaying. Viola's children filed a lawsuit in 1979 against the US government seeking damages for their mother's murder. In 1983 a civil trial ended in the dismissal of the family's claims.

For 39 years, the story of Viola Liuzzo has been obscured and the lessons of her life and death largely buried. The making of the documentary and its screening in Detroit are of an historical character. Detroit was home to the Liuzzo family. The history of the city—particularly the great sit-down strikes in the auto plants in the 1930s—was the crucial experience from which emerged outstanding members of the

working class like Viola Liuzzo.

Detroit auto workers, both black and white, battled ferociously for an independent industrial organization against the auto companies, as well as against the privileged craft-unionism of the AFL. The struggles in Detroit were instrumental in the construction of the CIO—the first association encompassing a significant percentage of industrial workers. These conflicts, of a semi-insurrectionary nature, were substantially influenced by the participation of socialist and left-wing militants and groups.

The anticommunist McCarthy era, along with the gross betrayals of the United Auto Workers (UAW) and trade union leadership that abetted the destruction of factories in the 1970s and 1980s, dealt a serious blow to the working class and its political thinking. As a result, Detroit, once the heart of the industrial working class, has suffered an unprecedented economic and cultural decline.

The Viola Liuzzo story is an integral part of this history. Viola Fauver Gregg Liuzzo was born on April 11, 1925, in California, Pennsylvania—a coal mining town—and was the daughter of a miner who lost his job when his hand was severed in an accident. When Viola was growing up in the South, lynchings of blacks who held jobs during the Depression were common.

Like tens of thousands of poor black and white workers who migrated from the Southern states to work in auto and steel plants in the North, Viola's family moved to Ypsilanti, Michigan, in 1942. Ford Motor Company hired 42,000 people in that community during World War II.

In 1951 Viola married James Liuzzo, a Teamsters union organizer, and in the early 1960s became seriously involved in the civil rights movement. As son Tommy told reporters after her murder: "She wanted

equal rights for everyone, no matter what the cost.”

Viola Liuzzo was a principled woman, irreconcilably hostile to any form of racial and social inequality and profoundly committed to democratic rights. She personified some of the finest aspirations and traditions of the American working class. The film, *Home of the Brave*, treats the fate of this fighter who was, according to director di Florio, “murdered, slandered and deliberately forgotten in history.”

Although her husband Jim was a high-ranking Teamsters official and personal friend of the union’s president Jimmy Hoffa—Walter Reuther, president of the UAW, together with Hoffa attended Viola’s funeral—Viola’s case and her family were abandoned by the trade union movement. This was in line with bureaucracy’s general abstention from the mass civil rights movement for which Viola gave her life.

Viola’s daughter, Mary Liuzzo Lilleboe, spoke with Joanne Laurier of the WSWS regarding the significance of *Home of the Brave*’s upcoming screening in Detroit.

“My mother’s story is the story of the working class—one family’s example of what has happened to the working class, what has happened to cities like Detroit where workers at one time made a good living and now live in opposite conditions. I see it as going from a period of naiveté to one of discovering the hard truth about what exists.

“The US government is preaching human rights to the world, but what about my mother’s story, the Emmett Till story, a system in which the profits of a few take away the survival of the rest! The myth of what America is really like is being challenged by the facts.

“It was really painful for the working class and middle class to realize that Detroit is a city that has suffered so much and it needs to heal. Part of the problem is that it took the killing of a white woman for people to take notice of what was happening. This resulted in the first case being brought against the Klan.

“My memory of growing up in Detroit is that it was a wonderful town. It was prosperous in as much as people were working. I remember being a young girl and embracing the music of Motown. I was very proud of this achievement and how it impacted people. Our city was color blind, as was my mom.

“But the powers that be have been successful in dividing us. Mother would say that Jimmy Hoffa was

the most powerful man because one word from him and the whole country could be shut down. But that never did happen and workers have paid a price for that. Loyal, hard-working people make up the majority of the population, but their organizations have collapsed.

“My family’s experience after my mother’s murder was traumatic. There was a cross-burning in our yard. There was so much hate mail that all the mail had to be brought to the union hall in order to be sorted out. Garbage was thrown at our house and, worst of all, my sister Sally, six-years old at the time, was stoned when she went to school.

“I’ve also wondered why Detroit has never honored my mother for her role in the civil rights movement, like it honored Rosa Parks and even Joe Louis.

“I don’t think we have ever had in this country a government for the people and by the people. The Republicans and Democrats do not represent the people. In our soul, we have the desire for such a government. That’s our deep frustration today and that’s what we’re striving for.

“All the people globally need to work together. Near where I live they are closing down a factory and sending the jobs to China. The powers that be want us to believe that Chinese workers are therefore our enemy. But all over the world we face the same situation.

“As the saying goes, ‘All ships rise in a high tide.’ We were united when we fought to establish our rights. Today it is a global unity that is necessary. We need to unite in truth and awareness of what really exists, which most times is not so easy to see.

“My family’s story is Detroit’s story—the story of the working class. I think this movie calls upon us to go beyond the faith that we’ve all had that this is a country for the people, by the people. The movie calls on us to go beyond this.”



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