CHAPTER-III

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John Steinbeck was one of the most controversial American writers from the depression of the 1930’s until his death in 1968. The novel In Dubious Battle is regarded as his first major novel which deals, on working class having no property, with the background of a strike of migrant pickers in California’s apple orchards in Torgas valley. Steinbeck wrote to a friend:

“I don’t like communist, either. I mean I dislike them as people. I rather imagine the apostles had the same waspish qualities and the New Testament is proof that they had equally bad manners” Steinbeck maintained that attitude throughout his life. (In Dubious Battle in California, The Nation 302)

To another struggling novelist, George Albee, he wrote:

“I’m not interested in strikes as a means of raising men’s wages, and I’m not interested in ranting about justice and oppression, mere outcropping which indicate the condition--- the book is brutal. I wanted to be merely a recording consciousness, judging nothing, simply putting down the things”. (25)

The novel is based on the experiences of a strike leader Pat Chambers, a labor organizer working in the field. He considers the problems of human greed an inhumane behavior towards other humans as a result of lack of understanding. The novel is a cold violent book, despite essential differences from other novels, which continued interest in the underdogs of a predatory
commercialized society. The scenes in the novel change from small town to the farms, the nature of California agriculture, to factories in the field. Steinbeck acquired his knowledge of the novel’s migrant workers and had become conversant with the denizens of *Tortilla Flat*. His hometown was in Salinas, situated in the heart of a rich lettuce growing region, the place of labor agitation. The workers vernacular, dress and social behavior details of landscape are based on personal familiarity.

The main incidents of the novel are taken from an actual strike that occurred in San Francisco near Fresno. The strategies of leadership and organization are based on the actual tactics of two communists who worked in the area. The intimate familiarity with his materials made possible for the author to achieve a realism and natural of experience. The situation in California, where entrenched interests looked upon themselves of depending in the last frontier in the land of opportunity seemed need to a worried world to be verging on class warfare. It is important in understanding the communal tensions in Steinbeck’s novels. There are different Steinbeck books dealing with the migratory farm laborers on the California fruit farms but it was the bitterest of the three. He wrote in Feb.1935:

“I guess it is a brutal book, more brutal because there is no author’s moral point of view. The speech of workingmen may seem a little bit racy to the ladies clubs, but since ladies club won’t believe that such things go on any way it doesn’t matter. I know this speech and I’m sick of workingmen being gelded of their natural expression until they talk with a fire oxamion flavor…… A workingman bereft of his profanity is a silent man”. (In *Dubious Battle in California*, The Nation 304)
The novel’s action begins with Jim Nolan joining the party and being sent shortly afterward into the fields with the organizer Mac as his mentor. Arriving at the migrant workers campsite, Mac uses every means to gain their confidence- even to the extent of delivering a baby. He and Jim exploit the migrant workers dissatisfaction with a wage cut to organize a strike using London, the migrant natural leader, Dakin, who owns a good truck, Sam, the most violent striker and Burke, who turns out to be an informer, as lieutenants. The strikers are also assisted by Anderson, a small grower who let them camp on his property. Doc Burton, an uncommitted is the observer and commentator who directs the legally required sanitation arrangements; Joy and Dick are fellow communist party members. The novel In Dubious Battle, published in 1936, follows two main characters, Mac and Jim, through the process of an apple pickers strike in a small California town. At the beginning of the book Jim joins the Communist Party, and Mac takes him along when he goes to try to agitate the pickers and incite them to strike after the growers association cuts their wages to fifteen cents. Steinbeck paints a verbal watercolor picture of migrant workers in a small California town during the tough years following the crash and depression of 1929. He shows clearly how the workers live, how small farmers suffer and how grass-roots organization, such as the American Communist Party, try to effect changes that would improve life for the poor workers. The story takes place in the fictional town of Torgas Valley, California.

Jim Nolan gathers his few belongings in a small case and takes his leave of his rooming house, telling the landlady he will not return. She tells him he is always welcome back and emphasizes that she has many who return year after year. She always finds room for them. He walks to an office on the second floor of a run-down building in the rapidly fading business section of town. He has an appointment with Harry Nelson. The office is sparsely furnished
with only a desk, filing cabinet, two chairs and a cot. He poured milk into his coffee, and then he looked up, and his eyes smiled for a second:

He said, “Now here’s the way we work on applications, Jim. Your card went in to the membership committee. I have to talk to you and make a report. The committee passes on the report and then the membership votes on you. So you see, if I question you pretty deep, I just have to.” (IDB 6)

Harry is busy working on a report. Jim tells Harry the story of the mysterious disappearance of his sister when she was still in school, which changed his mother. It has made her quieter and sort of dead and has made his father angrier and more combative. Harry makes a point of taking the paper with him, because the cops go through the place regularly.

Dick comes home with twenty dollars he has collected, and Jim says that they could all eat for a month on that. Joy has been charged with sticking a cop in the shoulder with his pocketknife. Mac comes in and tells Dick to call their lawyer, George Camp to get Joy out of jail on a drunk charge. Mac says he and Jim will go down to Torgas Valley in the morning.

Jim and Mac catch a freight train that Mac knows will be going out empty. Mac shows Jim how to get on, and they start to pile up papers, which have fallen off, to sit on. Three more men jump into the same car and try to intimidate Mac into giving up all his papers, which have fallen off, to sit on, which he offers to share. Mac bluffs one of the men:

Jim asked, “Are you really a prize-fighter, Mac? “Hell no. He was the easiest kind of a sucker. He figured I was scared of him when I offered him some of my paper. You can’t make a general rule of it, because sometimes it flops, but mostly a guy that tries to scare you is a guy that
can be scared.” He turned his heavy, good-natured face to Jim. “I don’t know why it is, but every time I talk to you I either end up soap-boxing or giving a lecture.” (IDB 31)

Jim and Mac go to work picking apples, and Jim meets Dan, an old man who is a tree-topper and is reduced to migrant crop work. Dan reminisces about how the Wobblies got toilets and showers for the loggers. He talks about how they organized and joined unions only to find that the elected leaders sold them out. It is like water heaving before the boil, as anger kicks hell out of the men. Jim insists on a plan to direct things when it all blows. The weather gets colder. One sullen angry boy dumps his bucket too hard, gets smart, and the checker threatens to toss him out. The checker tries to bribe Jim to give him information. Jim says he will try for a price. The checker offers five dollars and a steady job. Jim follows the boy to tell about the strike and the reasons are the filthy bunk houses, the pay cut, the five percent house cut the grocery store takes and the general conditions.

Dick comes in early before Mac and Jim have much sleep. Mac tells Jim that Dick will be romancing the female sympathizers in the area and gives Dick a list. Doc Burton is with him. Mac sends Dick off with a mention that he can bum breakfast at Al’s lunch wagon. Mac explains the situation to Doctor Burton over coffee. The men are ready to strike and the land is available. They need the doctor to set up the camp and make sure it is clean and tidy for the health of the people.

Mac lays out the camp and the men dig latrines before the first strikers arrive. A general meeting is held before people start building. Squads and squad leaders are picked, and Dakin is elected. Tents are pitched, and shelters are laid out. A cook center is created with three old stoves.
A hundred old automobiles line the road facing out from the camp. Anderson watches as his five acres are turned into a camp. When the camp is done, nine hundred men go to work picking Anderson’s crop, using whatever they have for containers. By dark it is done, and the apples are boxed and stored in Anderson’s barn.

On the morning of the second day of the strike, the men organize a picket to meet the train. They leave about a hundred men behind to guard the camp. Burke wants to start a fight. Mac says that they should talk first. As the men march to the train station, ten deputies on motorcycles space themselves along the line of marchers, and a big open car goes ahead and parks across the road loaded with armed men. Mac hopes for something to make the men mad soon. He is afraid that the whole thing will just fizzle out.

In the morning, then men are apathetic. Dakin and London send out squads of fifty men to find strikebreakers, just to give them something to do besides fighting among themselves. Jim goes with a group that includes Sam, who was in riot in San Francisco and now is blacklisted as a longshoreman. The group spots some pickers and accosts them. Sam disarms the checker, beats him a bit and kicks him between the legs hard. Jim is hit in the shoulder. Dakin goes mad when vigilantes ambush the strikers while picking up blankets and destroy his truck.

They eat the food that is inedible. They get beans and pork grease for supper which they cannot eat. They go to talk to London, and he gives them a can of sardines. Dick read the latest paper headlines, “Supervisors vote to feed strikers.” He wants a paper signed by the strike chairman. He says that he has one woman who is eager. She sixteen (axe handles across). When morning comes, Mac seems more cheerful. He has found an American flag to drape over the
coffin. Breakfast is plain oatmeal. Doc changes Jim’s bandage and tells him that old Dan is upset because he doesn’t think he will get to go to the funeral.

The funeral march begins with police controlling the traffic. The picture of the town people watching and even taking off their hats shows what a thin line divides them and the migrant workers. The townspeople stand on their lawns as the migrants march in the street. Mac and Jim stay back as they reach the county cemetery. A man says he was almost picked up the night before, on a vagrancy charge. Mac sends Jim to find London with the news:

“Now listen, you guys,” he said. “If you got no money you can have a cup of coffee and couple of sinkers. But don’t eat up a dinner on me and then tell me to call cop. Jesus, I’m being busted by pan-handlers.”(IDB 36)

Mac shows the paper reports that the strikers committed all the violence, including the burning of Anderson’s barn. The stories accuse Mac and his people of being foreign agitators bringing violence from Red Russia into peaceful America. The pickers are called fruit tramps that are living on the fat of the land, supplied by secret sympathizers. They are called malcontents and murderers and urges action. Two old cows and the calf are slaughtered as three prime steers. Mac tells Jim about a hideout under the bridge where there is food, water and blankets, just in case they get dynamited out. He predicts that London will become a party member.

Mac and Jim walk carefully through the orchard to go visit Al. Mac says he tried it once and could only take two days before he was eager to get back in trouble. Mac wants to apologize, but Anderson does not. He has lost his dogs to the fire. He has reported them to the sheriff, and they will be kicked out. Anderson says that he could kill them right there but that the sheriff will
do it for. Jim is the main, though Mac and London are also strong characters. He is disillusioned with the system, which he thinks killed his father and his mother. He leaves his old life behind and joining the party to dedicate his life to the cause of the working man and his family, the cause of the downtrodden masses. His father had died fighting these very battles and always lost. His mother was the cold religious one, but she refused a priest at the death. Jim is a neophyte in the party, but he is self educated in social science and psychology.

The strikers fierce reaction to injustice is violent and doomed to failure. Steinbeck’s close familiarity lays the possibility of his precommitment and prejudice in the presentation. But being aware of this danger was able to avoid it. He said it was not his purpose to look through, the narrow glass of political or economic preconception. He firmly believed that every migrant worker should be humanely treated and not exploited.

“You get off this land, you’ve got no right on this land at all, checkers said. You bastard never owned nothing. You never planted trees an’ seen ‘em grow an’ felt ‘em with your hands. You never owned a thing, never went out an’ touched your own apple tree with your hands”. (IDB 141)

His stance towards Doc Burton, one of the characters toward the strike situation, is that of an open minded observer whose involvement transcends the particular and immediate terms of conflict of universal forces.

The novel In Dubious Battle is the best strike novel in the English language which demonstrates Steinbeck’s personal knowledge of communist labor organization tactics in the field and presents the people totally committed in bringing absent substantial changes in American society. In 1936 a strike by lettuce packing shed workers was crushed at a cost of
around a quarter of a million dollars. Civil liberties, local government, normal judicial processes were all suspended during the strike and Salinas was governed by a general staff directed by the associated farmers and the big lettuce growers and shippers. The local police were bossed by a reserve army officer imported for the job and at the height of the strike all male resident between 18 and 45 were mobilized under penalty of arrest were deputized and armed. Beating, teargas attacks, wholesale arrests, threats to lynch San Francisco newspaper men if they didn’t leave town, and machine guns and barbed wire all figured in the month-long struggle which finally broke the strike and destroyed the union. The novel is built around the action of a similarly bitter confrontation, the events of the strike. The narrative is in the same manner as the Joad’s journey in *The Grapes of Wrath*. The book is a story of the conflict between a certain group of apple pickers striking for a reasonable wage and an organization of orchard owners who adamantly refuse their demands:

a conflict between the communist organizer who is dominated by an idea so completely that he has lost his sense of the value of the individual and the simple, pathetic goodness of the fruit pickers who he ‘organizes’ into strikes, starvation, bloodshed, and defeat.( IDB 88)

The strike situation in *In Dubious Battle* is emblematic of man’s hopes for a better life and illustrative of his need for cooperative effort and unity with his fellow men. Geismor has deplored the violence and the sensibilities of those involved:

Human life is ……. Wasted for the sake of dogma, and the strike…… portrayed on the surface of ‘*In Dubious Battle*’ as so glamorous emerges indeed as horrible. Lie fights lie, radical power struggles against capitalist
power, blood is used by the landowners to intimidate and blood is used by the strike leaders to stimulate. The average man….. caught between these two extreme, suffers and makes his fellows suffer for no purpose of his own……. The average humanity of ‘In Dubious Battle’ is irresolute, vain, calculating in the individual case and with his brothers forming the arrogant, stupid and cruel mob. (IDB 50)

Man’s search for fulfillment is a search which may take religious, political, intellectual, financial or any other courses, a striking expression of the optimistic realistic eschatological image. He describes the motivating vision as he sees it. Steinbeck’s novel is more than a story of social ferment. It seriously deals with eschatological man, the image of which is a creature with a terrible duality of motivations. He has violent resentment of the social forces which have cheated him out of his rights and passionate attachment to a splendid vision of an age to come when the furious conflict generated by injustice will have been resolved forever into the peace of a classless community.

Jim Nolan, begins his life with his birth into the party and his life ends with his sacrificial death. As the novel opens, he rises from the chair in which he has been sitting for a long time, washes up, combs his hair, packs his meager belongings in a paper bag and informs his landlady that he will not return to his rented room paid up for the next week. A serious disenchanted young man without a family and recently released from jail is cut off from his previous life and seems almost at the end of life. He remarks several times that he feels dead and states his reasons for wanting to join the party. After joining a party he is sent with Mac, a seasoned, experience hardened agitator, to organize a strike among apple pickers in a nearby valley. As Mac outlines the situation, Jim is so excited, “I feel dead, I thought I might get alive again”. (IDB 65)
Torgas is a little valley and it has mostly apple orchards. Most of is owned by a few men. Of course there are some little places but there are not very many of them. When the apples are ripe the crop tramps come in and pick them, and from there go on over the ridge and south, and pick the cotton. The few guys that own most of the Torgas Valley wait until most of the crop tramps are already there. They spend most of their money getting there, of course. They always do. And then the owners announce their price cut.

Mac’s performing and delivering the baby is not only desirable as a human gesture but also his hopes to use the workers together and because the young women in labor is the daughter-in-law of the leader of the group and because the focal point of illness, death or birth is a convenient tool in getting men to work together. Mac declares to Jim:

“We’ve got to use whatever material comes to us. That was a lucky break. We simply had to take it. ‘Course it was nice to help the girl, but hell, even if it killed her----- we’ve got to use anything----- with one night’s work we’ve got the confidence of the men and the confidence of London. And more than that we made the men work for themselves in their own defense as a group. That’s what we’re out here from anyway, to teach them to fight in a bunch. Raising wages isn’t all we’re after”. (IDB 142)

The apple pickers are angered at the wage reduction. Mac, to sustain attempt at striking, moves swiftly and expertly to set up supporting machinery. He enlists the aid of Al Anderson, a generous and soft hearted diner owner whose father lends the strikers a few acres of private property for camping, “If there was a nice piece of private land, it’d be all right. By tomorrow a couple of thousand men will be on strike, and the apple picking will stop”. (IDB 65)
Jim Nolan, the man’s life is a dark litany of loss. His joining the communist party is a reaction against loss than any direct commitment to principles. When Harry Nilson asks, why do you want to join the party, he replies, “Well – I could give you lot of little reasons, mainly it’s this: my whole family has been ruined by this system”. (IDB 5)

Jim is motivated by desperation. The active commitment in him initially is not present. He says, He has nothing to lose. Harry responds nothing except hatred. You’re going to be surprised when you see that you stop hating people. Jim is lifted from a dark abyss of despair by the party and is given light. He is head of wrapping department in Tulman’s departmental store. He goes out to see a picture show one night. While coming home he sees a crowd in Lincoln Square. He stops to see what has happened. After sometime, he hears the sirens, the riot squad comes from the other side. The cop slugs him, and book for vagrancy. Mr. Webb, the manager at Tulman’s refuses to know him. He is filled with anger against the boss, the superintendent, and grocery man. He meets in the cell, all people raised in the same conditions. They don’t hate a boss or a butcher but the whole system of bosses. There is not hopelessness in them. They are working but at the back of every mind there is conviction that sooner or later, they would win their way out of system they hated. There are three white tents, for fifty men. Some sleep on the ground in sausage roll of blankets. Numbers of people sit around the little fire in the middle of the flat cleared place. They get to stand by their own people. Jim and Mac make the men work for themselves, in their own defense as a group. They teach them to fight in bunch. Men should always like to work together, have got to organize. It’s like blowing up a balloon, without knowing when it is going to burst. It’s a reaction against injustice.

Doc Burton is a young man with golden hair, whose face is almost girlish in its delicacy, has large eyes and a soft sad look like those of a bloodhound. Mac plans to work some ideas with
him. He is a dedicated volunteer who arrives to set up an organized sanitary camp area which will satisfy the county health requirements. Mac concentrates on group solidarity and organizes his human equipments. In five acres of private property they have a layout of a perfect camp, dig toilets, take care of sanitation, garbage disposal, some way for bath and the air full of carbolic or chloride of lime which smells healthy. Doc focuses attention on the appearance of “group-man” in the Torgas Valley. He says:

“I want to watch these group men, for they seem to me to be a new individual, not at all single men. A man in a group isn’t himself at all, he’s a cell in an organism that isn’t like him any more than the cells in your body are like you. I want watch the group; and see what its like— it might be worth while to know about group—man, to know his nature, his ends, his desires. They are not the same as our” (IDB 104).

Doc, is an open minded observer whose involvement transcends the particular and immediate terms, as a conflict of universal forces---- the whole thing. As he says, a group ends may be entirely different from the ends of its individual members. The monsters are a sort of organism that absorbs its members, drains them of their individualities and makes them into organizations man.

The idea of group man in the striking men is different from the individual man who makes up the group. The angry mob of strikers no longer act like a body of men collected together but as one big animal which is called into existence whenever emotion, hunger, anger or hope unite men. Old Dan remarks of the cumulative effect of ears of persecution, “It’s like the
whole bunch, millions and millions was one man, and he’s been beat and starved, and he’s gettin’ that sick feeling in his guts”. (IDB 48)

The novel, *In Dubious Battle* documents the birth and the growth of group man. It examines his characteristics and motivations, desires and fears. Despite his interest in group man, Steinbeck realized the importance of individuals. He said, “Man is a double thing- a group animal and at the same time an individual”. Doc Burton is a spokesman. “He’s a queer kind of a Doc, not a party man, but he works all the time for the guys”. (IDB 85). Doc is neither migrant nor landowner, neither party man nor townsman, but merely his own. Mac speaks that he is a mystery to him:

“You’re a mystery to me, Doc. You’re not a party man, but you work with us all the time; you never get anything for it. I don’t know whether you believe in what we’re doing or not, you never say, you just work, I’ve been out with you before, and I’m not sure you believe in the cause at all” (IDB129).

Doc is a dreamer, mystic, metaphysician- distrustful of all utopian schemes, striving for complete self – consciousness. His selfless humanitarian endeavors to help the striker despite his distrust of their oversimplified program is inconvenient for those who wish to manipulate others selfishly. He focuses on particular individual rather than the group. He advocates a view of humanity rooted in common sense that allows for sympathy for the individual. He resides in the background of the volcanic emotions and events that rip the valley. Where there is a need, he does his best to assuage. He finds his place. He is a helping individual who is wounded by the malignancy of the phalanx. Mac and Jim typify the teleological thinkers who is striving for goal,
are subsumed by that goal and ultimately lose touch with life around them. F.W.Watt a critic points, ‘the man who devotes himself utterly to an ideology, who goes to the ultimate stage in ‘wanting nothing for himself becomes nothing literally, a faceless inhuman being’. (23)

Doc chooses to act in small ways, not at the spearhead of the phalanx, without due recognition of those about him, enrich the lives of the strikers by his quiet and earnest labor. Mac has broad shoulders and long arms, face wide between cheek bones with flat planes under the eyes like those of a Swede. His lips are dry and cracked. He is less scientific, aware that group man is different. He tells Jim:

“It’s damn funny about a bunch of men, how they act. You can’t tell. I always thought if a guy watched close enough he might get to know what they’re goin’ to do. They get steamed up, an’ then, all of a sudden, they’re scared as hell (IDB 195).

Mac has a bloody symbol, a rallying cause and characteristically exploits for every spark of indignant hostility. The chain of violence begin and like a string of firecrackers continue to explode throughout the novel with brutality and senseless mayhem. Amidst the skirmishes and retreats, the gains and losses, Mac and Jim remain strangely detached from the hurts and angers of the men. They are moved by the excitement of organizing a huge group animal- a life of its own. They accept without pity the death of members of their group as calculated losses.

General Hugh Johnson, the director of Roosevelt’s National Recovery Administration is the highest ranking federal official in the city. He denounces a general strike as a threat to the community, and goes on to say that if the government refuses to intervene, the people have the right to take matters into their own hands. Steinbeck despained that such action would mean the
loss of responsible control over confrontation and a reversion to barbarism. In the novel he has Mac, the strike organizer who denounces vigilantes as, “The dirtiest guys in any town---------they’re the same once that lynch Negroes----they like to hurt people and they always give it a nice name, patriotism or protecting the constitution.”(IDB 131)

Mac the principle organizer admits form the beginning that situation is hopelessly stacked against the strikers because the grower are unusually well organized commending resources at their disposal.

London is a large man with immense shoulders, stiff dark hair. His face is corded with muscular wrinkles and his dark eyes are as fierce and red as those of a gorilla, with a power of authority. The big personal natural leader with a volatile temper and fists to match his anger. Leader of the man says, “Take one guy that you know ever’ thing about him, an’ take ten more the same, an’ you can’t tell what in hell they’ll do” (IDB 221).

Harry Nilson, a small man is, neatly dressed in a dark suit. His thick hair is combed straight down on each side from the top in a vain attempt to cover a white scare car half an inch wide, which lies horizontally over the right ear. His eyes are sharp and black, nose large and thick at the bridge and narrow at the point. The mouth might at one time have been full and soft but habitual muscular tension has drawn it closed and made deep live on each lip. He is not over forty but his face bears heavy parenthetical lines of resistance to attach. His large hands are two big for his body. His long fingers with spatulate ends have flat thick nail.

Burke, the third group leader is a suspicious, dangerous man. Mac insists that they be elected and teaches London that the man must vote everything they do. The strikers soon learn the extent of the power massed against them when they are harassed by official, assaulted and
killed by vigilants, maligned in newspaper editorials, denied medical care by the county, and cut off from the aid of their supporters and sympathizers. Mac appraises the situation, “It’s not so hard to do when a few men control everything, land, courts, and banks. They can cut off loans, and they can railroad a man to jail, and they can always bribe plenty.” (IDB 70)

Dakin, cool perceptive, less manipulatable is a fairly successful man who treasures his possessions. He is made a general chairman of the strike committee, because of his good nature. He never gets mad with anything which is a good quality otherwise, the committee is sunk. The development of the strike forms the frame of *In Dubious Battle* and it requires violence. The orderliness of the violence comes from its absolute double necessity—double in that it is necessary both to the strike and to the growth of Jim’s soul.

The problem applying the theory to the development of the strike in *In Dubious Battle* is that even after the organizers oratory has impressed the disgruntled migrant workers with the need for concerted action. The agitators must continually devise means for maintaining the group’s commitment and preventing dejections. Both the strikers and the grower’s troops are motivated by self interest.

The novel *In Dubious Battle* is the best strike novel ever written. The problem of interpretation begins with identifying the ‘dubious battle’ of the title. Steinbeck prefaces the novel with a quotation from Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, in which the term is used to describe Satan’s revolt against God. The reference to Milton has led to continuing outcropping of often contradictory explications that seek to point out analogies between the war in heaven and the strike in California, particularly between characters in the human and cosmic conflicts. Both the battles are dubious not in the sense that the outcomes are unnecessary and unjustified. The forces
of God and the growers are overwhelming. There is no justification for either, who will win but why the opponents should ever have come to blows. There are no exact parallel between the struggles. The battle of the novel’s title is not because the outcome is uncertain but rather because it is a kind of struggle that should never have occurred at all. It is not trying to justify God’s ways to man but to call for an end to man’s inhumanity to man. The difference between the motives and tactics of the two sides in the strikes depicts that both are determined upon the triumph of their particular programme. They are not concerned about exploiting people. They are insensitive to the isolated dreamer like Doc Burton who seeks to ameliorate people’s situations. When his talent is recognized, he is exploited by the side he chooses to support and destroy vengefully by the one he opposes. As Tom Joad in *The Grapes of Wrath*, who after a painful struggle finally learn to devote himself in trying to make people understand each other, Doc Burton wishes to see the whole picture, so that there is an end to the dubious battle and a more consecrated effort towards constructive change and so reacts against injustice.

Mac and Jim join a group of men— all strangers to the two newcomers. Sympathy is probably with the mistreated strikers and their radical leaders. The party’s modus operandi is blatantly opportunistic. The crop tramps are cowardly and cruel, uncooperative and untrustworthy. Violence is bloody but without weapons. Jim’s birth into the party, his growth in knowledge and power and finally his death are the elements which make him different. His participation in the strike extends beyond the reality and links him to all humanity and belief that no sacrifice is too great if it is for a better life for more men, from the depths of depression and lack of self esteem to a pinnacle of self realization, dedication and religious transfiguration. Mac likes people like too much in an attitude of great compassion. He says, “We’re goin’ to have
thousand or two men with no place to go. They’ll kick ‘em off the ranches and won’t let ‘em on the road.” (IDB 83)

The battle is against injustice, but the battle of the strikers for higher wages is just as hopeless as that of Satan and his angels against the ranks of heaven. The sympathy for Satan mirrored for Jim and Mac and many of the characters of Paradise Lost have counterparts in In Dubious Battle. The parallelism with Paradise Lost, such as setting the strike in a lush valley and having the crop to be picked as apples rather than cotton. Jim is seen as a sacrificial Christ figure who comes to save the outcasts and gives his life. He gives reason for joining the party. He thinks that he may get alive again. He contains several details which links him to Christ. Rooster crow and Jim suffering from his wound ask for water.

Birth and death, permeates the novel. Jim is born again into the party. The strike and group men are born of the picker’s anger. Violence is born of violence and after birth comes death. According to Fontenrose, a critic Satan’s role is obviously play by the party as a collective person, although Jim, Mack or another may represent the party in its satanic role. In contemporary folklore the devils color is red. The act of delivering Lisa’s child, in the Torgas valley is a symbol which radiates into many aspect of the novel. The birth is a symbolic event on a small scale. Group men is born in the cooperative effort of the men who boil water, collect and sterilize clothes to be used in the birth. The unification of the men is most the important and crucial job:

Every men who gave part of his clothes felt that the work was his own.

They all feel responsible for the baby. It’s theirs because something from
them went to it. There’s no better way to make men part of a movement than to have them gives something of it (IDB 16).

Group men are never anything but an animal. They don’t think, they only feel and act and most of their acts are violent ones. Jim is trained by Mac just as a new field dog is taught by allowing him to run with the experienced hunters. Anderson is described as moving his hands several times like puppies as he talks to Mac. Dakin becomes a mad dog when his truck is wrecked. The mutual relationship between Mac, Jim and other workers is an important part of the novel’s subject, which brings the vast forces down to the level of individual humanity. The natural elucidation of the labor organizers, goals and methods through Mac and Jim, their different personality explores the cause and nature of commitment. Mac also seems cruel and dehumanized. The destruction of the sympathizer’s lunch wagon, the death by fire of two beautiful dogs, the delivery of a baby without adequate knowledge-all illustrate that, they want, to win over the workers. There is no room for outsides attachment, “Don’t you go liking people, Jim, we can’t waste time liking people and there’s no such thing as personal feeling in this crowd can’t be”. (IDB 26)

Mac is devoid of feelings but learns to submerge through his devotion to the cause. Mac and Jim loose essential humanity and are dedicated to the cause, amount to a martyr complex. Mac acts from knowledge and experience, Jim through the sheer inspiration of one touched by a holy fire. He emerges as a teacher with no deviation and Mac failing to suspend his humanity falls into the errors. He incites the workers not for their benefit and party’s cause but to avenge Jim’s death, for entire personal reason. Mac said, “We never had a chance to own anything, we’d like to own something and plant trees”, “The reason for the strike is this pay-cut. Now the owners’ll run in scabs an there’ll be trouble.” (IDB 88)
The conception of the workers as an instrument, a single entity rather than a collection of individuals is shared with party organizers. Dan, the old worker, London, the migrant workers’ leader, Doc Burton theorizes about the phenomenon that a man in a group isn’t himself at all, he’s a cell in an organism that isn’t like him any more then the cells in your body are like you.

From the very first migrant worker, it continues in the sullen young apple pickers who negligently bruise the fruit and threatens a company employee with violence. The men who assign the job of protecting Anderson’s house and barn neglect their duty and cause ruin. The occasional glimpses of dirty personal habits, unfounded suspiciousness and pointless cruelties serve natural sympathies for the strikers, the leaders – Dakin Burke and London. The blatant injustice of the owner’s way of dealing with the strike is counter-weighed by the strikers. Mac and Jim, the community party’s organizers have superior knowledge of tactics. The means employed are unscrupulous and inhumane, as those of the owners. The speech of the men is full of picturesque folk metaphor. This is flat and colorless. Pictures are the product of along and abstract view. The novel opens with a man sitting alone in a quiet furnished room and it ends with the same man dead. His face is blown off by a shotgun blast. His body is propped up above a crowd of perhaps thousand men whipping into a vindictive mob butchered by the superior force of well armed, blood thirsty deputies and vigilantes. The opening movement is slow and expensive, precipitates strike with well space moments of dramatic stillness – a great symphony in which the final chord, the massacre is not sounded.

Steinbeck was sympathetic with the workers and he identified them with rebellious angels and fallen man. Satan and the party are made to serve mankind. There is a slight twist that capitalism will eventually elevate labor to keep the communist from winning like Milton, who sought to justify the ways of god to man. Doc’s belief that, man has met an defeated every
obstacle every enemy except one, he cannot win over himself. The seriousness of the references to paradise lost indicate the struggle between labor and capital, as the biblical myth of man’s fall. Jim Nolan, the corrupter of mankind but also as a savior, a type of Christ, feels his previous life in his boarding house room at a dead end. He has never known any hope, he feel dead, everything in the past is gone. He wants to start new and succeed a new life after his commitment to the communist party.

He is born again. He preaches to any one who will listen. Mac’s eulogy over Joy’s dead body amounts to a definition of martyrdom and applies to Jim. He is greater than himself—there is a kind of ecstasy in him all the time, even when they beat him—he isn’t afraid. He doesn’t want anything for himself. His face is transfigured after the shotgun kills him, leaving him miraculously in a kneeling position and Mac’s sharp exclamation, “Oh, Christ”. No matter how different their conditions and actions are their lives take on significance engaging in the most essential attribute to Christ—sacrificing their lives for benefit of the mankind:

“When you cut your finger, streptococci get in the wound, there’s a swelling and soreness. That swelling is the fight your body puts up, the pain is the battle. You can’t tell which one is going to win, but the wound is the first battle ground. If the cells lose the first fight the streptococci invade, and the fight goes on up the arm. Something had got into the man, a little fever has started and lymphatic gland is shooting in reinforcement. I want to see, so I got to the seat o the wound”. (IDB 98)
“Leadership has to come from the men. They have got to do the job themselves. The strike is a wound. Group men are always getting some kind of infection. This seems to be a bad one. I want to see Mac, I want to watch these group men, for they seem to me to be a new individual, not at all like single man. A man in a group isn’t himself at all, he is a cell in an organism that isn’t like him any more than the cells in your body are like you. I want to watch the group and see what its like. People have said, “Mobs are crazy, you can’t tell what they’ll do. Why don’t people look at mobs not as man but as mobs nearly always seems to act reasonably, for a mob. The strike is a wound. Group men are always getting some kind of infection.”(IDB 113)

The novel In Dubious Battle assumes new significance when viewed from a modernistic perspective. It is a defeat of pastoral dreams by the barbarity of modern technological society-the villain that takes its greatest toll and wins Steinbeck greatest laurels:

“Men always like to work together. There’s a hunger in man to work together. We made the men work for themselves, in their own defense, as a group. That’s what we’re out here for anyway to teach them to fight in a bunch, raising wages isn’t all we’re after.” (IDB 49)

Steinbeck is not appreciated by an apathetic society suspicious and resentful of talent and is exploited by fanatics denoted to a cause. He has a balancing portrayal of describing in 1948 as “the ecclesiastical left and the lumpen right. The novel is not an anatomy of a 1930’s strike but a
bildungsroman, encompasses its complex meaning of presenting any process of growth from immaturity to maturity, physical, mental or spiritual. Steinbeck is not a revolutionist but genuinely a well intentioned person who wants to improve society to their own advantage without hunting others. His subsequent like some nightmarish aspects but he survived to reap deserved honors.

Pascal Covici, a New York editor, read the manuscript of *In Dubious Battle* conscientiously and points at Steinbeck’s communist organizer diverged from the orthodox party line. Though he was obviously alarmed at its violence, he hastily assured Steinbeck for publishing the book. As to the communist ideology Steinbeck explained:

“My information for this book came mostly from Irish and Italian communists whose training was in the field not in the drawing room. They don’t believe in ideologies and ideal tactics. They do what they can under the circumstances.”(Steinbeck 45)

The novel *In Dubious Battle* is where Steinbeck deals with migrants and denizens to form a strong and immediate understanding with the people who worked.

Recovering from an economic slump in the late twenties, agricultural production in California increased during early thirties. Wages continued the downward spiral, protest strikes began to break out but were easily quelled by the greater power of the growers, the in effectiveness of the strike leaders and the vast supply of cheap labor from the newer, the depression era migrants. According to Benson and Loftis:
For a year there were victories (usually modest gain in hourly wages) than defeats. While the organization had weakness – it was badly split between the doctrinaire party leaders in the cities and the pragmatic organizers in the field- it did have the great strength of being able to mobilize support, moral and material, among those sympathetic to the farm workers plight.

(BL 10)

The significant part of this movement for Steinbeck is that he knew the workers and he gained the acquaintance, through a Carmel area sympathizer, including the Valley prototype of Mac and Jim Nolan, beginning an intimate and informed knowledge of the whole labor movement. Cicil Mc. Kiddy, a movement organizer of the 1934 Sam Joaquin Valley strike, is Steinbeck’s major sources for *In Dubious Battle*. He had a talk with other men involved in farm labor organization. His has is own background in farm labor, he went himself in summer 1934 to the migrant camps in the Salinas area to listen to the workers talk. Benson and Loftis points out:

Although not a small apple growing valley dominated by a few large growers, the Tagus Ranch did present some similarity to Steinbeck’s Torgas Valley. Off highway 99 below Fresno and about six or seven miles above Tulare, the ranch spread over four thousand acres, all planted in peaches. The ranch was divided into half dozen sections, each with a camp for migrant workers. The workers were Mexicans plus Dust Bowl migrants. The ranch had a company store and issued company tokens to be used at the store. Pat Chambers claims that they had people working there for three or four seasons that had never seen any cash paid out by the ranch. To insure careful handling, most fruit picking, whether apples or
peaches, was paid for by the hour and the prize offered by the management of the Tagus ranch in the summer of 1933 was identical to that offered by the Growers Association in Steinbeck’s novel—fifteen cants an hour. (BL 12)

In an interview with chambers in which the party leaders say, they quote:

“As human being go, I don’t think you’ll find many better than farm workers. ----- The overriding purpose was (to improve) wages were a part----. To achieve that, you had to create unity. After that, if any organization came, that was a bonus. Your first consideration was the needs of working people. You asked nothing from them. You don’t try to build an organization at their expense” (Chambers 13)

Chambers and another leader, Caroline Decker had to be very cautious about the mixed ethnic background of the workers: blacks, Hispanics, migrants. In Dubious Battle is a straight story of real human events, a story about, perversion of justice in the interest of owners, destruction of property and life, danger of violent revolution. It is a big struggle to achieve human dreams and establish human freedom in the quasi Milton hell that is modern life, because in which an individual is dispossessed a group has a soul, a drive, intent, an end, a method, a reaction and a set of tropisms which in no way resembles the same thing possessed by the men who makeup a group, considered as individuals multiplied. The group man theory is embedded in the story in a deeper sense. Thomas Kiernan believes that it is Steinbeck’s first hand involvement in the migrant experience. In a letter to George Albee dated January 15, 1935 he realized the change:
“I have planed to write a journalistic account of a strike. But as I thought of it as fiction the thing got bigger and bigger. It couldn’t be that. I’ve been living with this thing for sometime now. I don’t know how much I have got over, but I have used a small strike in an orchard valley as the symbol of man’s eternal bitter warfare with himself.” (49)

He recognizes the book as about a movement:

“I’m not interested in strike as means of raising men’s wages and in ranting about justice and oppression, mere outcropping which indicate the condition but man hates something in himself. He has been able to defeat every natural obstacle but himself he can’t win over unless he kills every individual. And this self hate which goes so closely in hand with self love is what I wrote about.” (Steinbeck 98)

The nature of the strike situation almost guaranteed an abundance of “objectionable” material bloody acts of violence, realistically rough language and sharp pictures of ignorance, hostility, deprivation, cruelty and greed. Maxwell Geismer writes:

That violence in itself has a inherent fascination for Steinbeck, that its appeal lies merely in the glitter of the knife, the tearing of the flash, the hangings, shootings, mutilations with which his work is filled; and this violence is used for effect more often than edification. (23)

He said that the struggle for a better life simply affords Steinbeck a better chance for his own familiar violence. Steinbeck firmly believed that every migrant worker should be treated
humanly and not exploited. His purpose was to elicit pity and sympathy through pathetic characters and scenes towards human dignity.

The novel *In Dubious Battle* has been praised for its principle merit of being the best strike novel written during the decade of great labor unrest- the depression years of the 1930’s. It is based on information gathered from radical organizers working in the field with the migrant pickers on California farms, it is treated as a fictional document. Steinbeck has used accurate information from reliable sources. He wrote to a friend, “I am not interested in strike as a means of raising men’s wages, and I’m not interested in ranting about justice and oppression, mere outcropping which indicate the condition”. (Steinbeck-Life 98)

Steinbeck had made no effort to produce any typical strike. Its depiction serves as backdrop for the tragedy of an individual, a unique human being engaged *In Dubious Battle*. The word dubious is borrowed from Milton’s description of Lucifer’s uprising God in *Paradise Lost*. The battle in Steinbeck’s novel has cosmic dimensions, the outcome is never in doubt. His fierce reactions are hopelessly against the nervous strikers. The strike organizers realize when the growers have prepared for concerted action. Dubious about the battle is its causes and consequences and not the outcome. He wrote to a friend, “I still think that most realistic writing is farther from the real, than the most honest fantasy. The battle with its tricks to make a semblance of reality wasn’t very close”. (Steinbeck 55)

The incident depicted is based on actual events, are drawn from different times and strikes in different regions. Steinbeck has changed the geography of California to keep his narrative from being associated with any particular strike and to avoid the exposure of his sources. His central figure did not have any real life counterpart but was inventive from his own
experiences not as a labor organizer but as an inspiring writer to fulfill his ambitions and find his own places in society- to embody his conception of the individual’s ‘condition’ in the contemporary world. He has no participatory experience of involving a character with his own temperament in events- it becomes an archetypal account of one Youngman’s battle to make a place for himself in an uncaring, manipulated society – an effort that offers always dubious and ends in disaster.

Steinbeck knew Marxism, since he also knew the party leader in the Tagus Ranch strike. Marx tended to see man a little more than an animal. He does not grant man volitions, feelings and conscience which are unpredictable and therefore can be used to change the movement of history. He fails to account for humanity’s capacity for self transcendence, for consciousness or person hood and for dreaming or aspirations – that consciousness of the person in a different and batter conditions:

The last word of Doc, when Mac asks him whether he is feeling well or not, “I don’t know, I’m lonely, I guess. I’m awfully lonely. I’m working all alone towards nothing. There’s some compensation for you people. I only hear heartbeats through a stethoscope. You hear them in the air. (IDB 232)

Steinbeck has embraced communism in In Dubious Battle, a frustrated search for values in which Steinbeck traverses the entire circuit of contemporary escapes. The blank wall of stupid refusal to look at the things without colored glass of some kind gives a feeling of overwhelming weariness and a desire to run away. The labor organizers see failed strike as prelude for a larger, more violent revolution. The foredoomed battle against the farm owners gave Steinbeck, the title of the novel, In Dubious Battle. He lean heavily upon dialogue to tell
his story. For the most part his characters speak crisply, their language and attitudes, passionate and angry. He uses a character, Doc Burton to give full voice to his own theories. He knows that one day he will be successful in fighting against injustice:

“This valley’s organized. These guys here’ll probably start deserting as soon as much trouble start. The thing will carry on an on. It’ll spread and some day- it’ll work. Some day we’ll win- we’ve got to believe that.”

(IDB 121)

When *Tortilla Flat* appeared in 1935 Steinbeck had already completed his next novel *In Dubious Battle*, published in 1936. It dealt not with mystical romance or exotic people in far away places but with pressing contemporary problems in American life. Together with *Of Mice and Men* (1937) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), the novel indicates Steinbeck’s bitter awareness of the social conflicts and individual tragedies and disappointments born of the turmoil and deprivation of the depression years. Devoid of the frivolity and light hearted warmth of *Tortilla Flat*, *In Dubious Battle* is a raw, harsh work, that Steinbeck himself called it, “a brutal book”. It is a novel which explored the biased motivations, ruthless methods and savage battles of strikes and labor disputes. Steinbeck predicted that the communists will hate it. As a novelist, he was less interested in political theory or ideological dogma as he was in human behavior. The novel attempted to articulate the beliefs, feelings, desires and fears of striking men and their radical leaders. Steinbeck wrote neither to inspire, nor to provoke nor to condemn but to understand and portray honestly an aspect of life he found fascinating and perhaps bewildering.
The true subject, the true hero of the book is not individual destiny of Mac or Jim but the history of their common task, the strike of fruit pickers of which the novel is the liad behind which even further is profile in itself, an adventure more vast, more impersonal:

A Masterpiece of realistic and naturalistic fiction: realistic in its completely objective narrative and accurately reported dialogue, and naturalistic in its content. (Survey of Steinbeck criticism to 1971, 155, Steinbeck’s literary dimension)

Thus the novel, *In Dubious Battle* is called a masterpiece because of its content which narrates man’s fierce reaction to injustice. It is the nature of man that he bears everything for sometime but if someone tries to invidious distinction then he reacts fiercely against injustice not thinking of the dire consequences. Hence instead of being guileful or arousing one’s indignation, or casting a shadow on one’s life, one should try to ameliorate the condition of others to do justice and thus live and let live. Then only the world can be a paradise to live in, a place to enjoy beatitude and then only there will no war of attrition.