

Mutt and Jeff: On Strike (1920)

PRODUCTION COMPANY: Bud Fisher Films Corporation, distributed by the Fox Film Corporation.
PRODUCER: Bud Fisher. DIRECTOR/WRITER: Charles Bowers (?). RUNNING TIME: 7 minutes.

On Strike, starring the title characters from the newspaper comic strip *Mutt and Jeff*, is one of more than 300 short subjects featuring the duo released by various companies between 1911 and 1928. This short, released by Fox at the midpoint of its time with the series, centers on Mutt and Jeff's attempt to break free from their "boss," cartoonist- animator Bud Fisher, by creating and exhibiting their own "Mutt and Jeff" film. A novel melding of live-action and animated segments, the film is notable for its topical relevance, as well as its humorous depiction of the animated film industry.

The cartoon begins with Mutt and Jeff, along with a theater of patrons and a projectionist, preparing to watch a film of Bud Fisher "leading the life of Riley." Fisher appears to do just this, as we cut to live-action footage of him arriving at his residence in a chauffeured automobile, greeting his butler, and taking a seat at the drafting table in his well-appointed parlor. That film patrons would be shown such footage or interested in the home life of a cartoonist is not as much of a stretch as it may first appear. Bud Fisher was, in fact, somewhat of a celebrity. He made his name in 1907 when he began drawing *A. Mutt*, one of the first comic strips to appear daily, for the *San Francisco Chronicle*. The strip was an instant hit and was picked up for national syndication and later, international syndication. The strip originally documented the life of Mutt, a compulsive gambler. His recurring sidekick, Jeff, was added in 1908, and the title of the strip was changed to *Mutt and Jeff* in 1916 to reflect this. Over the years, Mutt and Jeff appeared not only in daily comic strips but also in musical theater productions, live-action shorts, and numerous animated screen incarnations. Fisher, a shrewd promoter, was often featured in conjunction with these events and was treated somewhat like a character himself. His service in the first World War received great attention in the newspapers, and his reputation as someone deserving admiration was perhaps cemented when he

engaged in a very public legal battle with William Randolph Hearst for the rights to *Mutt and Jeff*. The case went all the way to the United States Supreme Court, and Fisher emerged the victor.

After viewing the leisurely lifestyle of their boss, Mutt and Jeff become disgruntled. “Why should we work our heads off for that guy,” Mutt asks. The two proceed to a telephone booth to phone up the cartoonist. Fisher, in live action, is passed the phone by his butler, and he listens as Mutt demands “75% of the profits—a three-hour day and a five-day week!!” Fisher is seen replying, though we are not given an explanatory intertitle. Instead we read only Mutt’s response: “Arbitrate me eye!!!” A series of “rough language” symbols and the word “no” emerge from the listening end of Mutt’s phone, forming into a ball and smacking him on the head. As Fisher has refused to cave to their demands and Mutt and Jeff refuse to back down, Mutt and Jeff declare that they are going on strike. Whether this is commentary on the many headline-grabbing strikes involving organized labor that occurred during this period, or even making direct reference to the Actors’ Equity strike of 1919, cannot be said for certain. Mutt’s use of “arbitrate,” however, a term used almost solely in conjunction with labor disputes, seems to point to at least a connection. It is unlikely that Mutt, portrayed as speaking in an unsophisticated, lower-class dialect, would know the meaning of the word from any other context.

Following this declaration, Mutt and Jeff do not embark on what is traditionally thought of as a strike. They do not refuse to work. Rather, they decide to take the authority out of Fisher’s hands, creating an animated *Mutt and Jeff* comedy themselves. While this turn of events leads to amusing and delightful sequences, its presentation as a strike does not wholly add up. In the context of Fisher’s involvement with the production of the cartoons credited to his name, however, this makes some sense. Although he promoted himself to the public as deeply devoted to his art, Fisher was far more interested in the business side of *Mutt and Jeff* than in the creative. Early on, he hired a ghost artist to write and draw the comic strip, and though he named his production company after himself

and was for a time heavily involved with distribution of the shorts, actual production of the films—writing, animation—was farmed out to a group of animators in New York.

Laboring under the tight time constraints of putting out a film every week and working for relatively little pay, the animators bore the burden of creation while receiving only a fraction of the reward and respect that Fisher did. Lead animator Raoul Barré eventually left the business, reportedly owing to a nervous breakdown brought on by the stress of the job and his dealings with Fisher. Charles Bowers, who took Barré's place, lasted a similar length of time before leaving to work for another studio, and Dick Huemer would go on to speak quite uncharitably about Fisher in interviews much later in life. While all of this likely reflects the simple reality of an animator's life in the silent era, it is difficult not to read *On Strike* as illustrating some of their perspective. The film, in fact, repeats some of the ideas from an earlier *Mutt and Jeff* short, 1918's *A Fisherless Cartoon*, in which Fisher is called away from his drafting table, leaving Mutt and Jeff to finish drawing themselves. *On Strike* takes the idea further, tying the process of animation created without Fisher's involvement with the frustrated sentiments of those who performed the animation. Coincidentally or not, an essay arguing for Hollywood to "give labor the star dressing-room," making heroes out of workers, appeared in *Photoplay* in February 1920—during the exact period when *On Strike* was playing in U.S. theaters. It is worth noting that though Mutt and Jeff are shown to get their comeuppance in *On Strike* when the cartoon they create bombs with the audience, Fisher is depicted as so desperate without his "workers" that he kisses Jeff in gratitude at Mutt and Jeff's return.

Though the film-within-a-film that Mutt and Jeff produce is purposely rather crude in its production values, *On Strike* itself is an example of the animation methods developed by the mid-teens that would remain the standard for decades to come—namely, individual cel animation placed over static background drawings. Mutt and Jeff give a rudimentary demonstration of the cel animation technique as they create their own cartoon. Jeff draws individual cells on transparent "paper," placing one on top of the next to illustrate how the subtle changes made to each drawing

create the illusion of movement. Mutt photographs each cel onto a single frame of film as Jeff completes it. Although these techniques were considered major time-saving developments compared with earlier animation methods, the essential labor-intensive reality of animating individual drawings is still underscored when Jeff, happily drawing cels, asks Mutt how many they will need to do to fill a reel. “About 3000,” Mutt replies, his words forming into a ball and clobbering the bewildered Jeff over the head.

Mutt and Jeff comedy shorts were produced and distributed by many companies over the years, including Pathé Frères, Nestor Films, and Fisher’s own Mutt and Jeff Film Exchange. *On Strike* belongs to the series produced by Bud Fisher Films Corporation and distributed by Fox Film Corporation between 1918 and 1923. The *Mutt and Jeff* cartoons served in theaters as opening acts for Fox’s feature films, usually sharing the bill with a Fox newsreel and a single-reel *Sunshine* comedy. Fox marketed its *Mutt and Jeff* films to exhibitors as sure hits with patrons—even when feature films were not. “They win where features fail,” claims one trade ad from the *Exhibitor’s Herald* of August 23, 1919. “That sweet song of profits is the only thing that isn’t a laughing matter with Mutt and Jeff,” reads one from the August 2 issue of that year. Ads also traded on the popularity of the comic strip characters and of Fisher. “The American Public has declared in favor of Capt. Bud Fisher’s Mutt and Jeff—Successful showmen give their audiences what their audiences want!” (*Exhibitor’s Herald*, January 24, 1920) and “William Fox presents 52 Mutt and Jeff Cartoons by the world’s most celebrated fun maker in black and white, Capt. Bud Fisher” (*Exhibitor’s Herald*, August 9, 1919) are two more ads that demonstrate this.

On Strike was first made available to exhibitors in January 1920. The film was advertised in various newspapers across the United States between February and May of the same year. Several *Mutt and Jeff* animated shorts were re-released in the 1930s with color and a musical score added. It is unclear whether *On Strike* was one of the *Mutt and Jeff* shorts re-released at this time.

—Nancy McVittie

Further Reading

Crafton, Don. *Before Mickey: The Animated Film 1898–1928*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1982.

Gifford, Denis. *American Animated Films: The Silent Era, 1897–1929*. Jefferson: MacFarland, 1990.

The Huemer Family: Dick Huemer's Animation Pages, at <http://www.huemer.com/animate1.htm>

Dick Huemer worked for Max Fleisher (*Koko the Clown*, *Betty Boop*) and Walt Disney Studios in addition to animating *Mutt and Jeff* under Raoul Barré and Charles Bowers for Bud Fisher Films Corporation. This website contains interviews in which he spoke candidly and at length about his career and experiences in the animation industry.