How Tavernier's *It All Starts Today* affected a French village

"Before we were sad, but the film has changed our lives"

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One of the more compassionate movies produced last year was *It All Starts Today* by veteran French director Bertrand Tavernier. The film, which used professional actors and local residents with no previous acting experience, is a dramatic recreation of the everyday experiences of Daniel Lefebvre (Philippe Torreton), the head teacher of a pre-school in the once thriving, now poverty-stricken mining village of Anzin in northern France. The son of a miner, Lefebvre is called upon to deal with a myriad of social problems and some real family tragedies. Deeply concerned over power cut-offs to poor parents and lack of social workers, he decides to take a stand against the Communist Party-controlled local council.

How do teachers and schools cope when families cannot pay fees once provided by the government or by local councils? How do the parents feel who cannot pay? What do teachers do when families don't have enough money to feed their children or pay the electricity bill? What steps does a teacher take if they suspect a child is being physically abused? What are the implications if the teacher's report is a mistake and a child is removed from their family's care?

While providing no easy answers, *It All Starts Today*, which will be screened in New York and Los Angeles this September, honestly, and with sensitivity and optimism, examines some of these questions.

Moved by Tavernier's film, which presents a realistic picture of the day-to-day stresses, difficulties and achievements of teachers, and his interview last year with the *World Socialist Web Site*, I decided to visit Anzin and meet some of the parents and teachers who appeared in the film. I wondered what impact it had on them and how they viewed the experience of working on a dramatic recreation of their lives.

Hardship is not new to residents of the region. In fact, Emile Zola's novel *Germinal* was inspired by the struggle of miners from this area. Zola's novel details the determined fight by 12,000 miners and their families to halt wage cuts demanded by mine owners. Facing starvation and after a bitter conflict with the military, which is called in to break the strike, the miners were forced back to work under the conditions demanded by the owners.

Today Anzin and surrounding areas have some of the worst pockets of poverty and unemployment in France. The last coal mine in the region was shut 30 years ago and the steel industry closed a decade ago. Officially, unemployment in greater Valenciennes is 18.9 percent, but according to some estimates it is over 30 percent. The main source of employment consists of clearing land occupied by abandoned industry.

After a two-hour trip by train from Paris to Valenciennes station I met Michelle Niewrzedra, Anzin's pre-school director, who took me to the Bertrand Tavernier Pre-School, renamed in honour of the director. Niewrzedra, who has been the pre-school head for 10 years and a teacher for 30 years, has lived in the area all her life. Her father was a railway worker and her husband's family were miners. In the film, she played one of the mothers on the school committee.

The pre-school cares for 142 children, between two- and five-years-old, in five classes. It was odd at first to walk up the stairs, through the front glass doors and look down a school corridor that I had already come to know in the movie. The school walls were covered with children's photographs, paintings and drawings of Torreton and Tavernier. Although the corridor and schoolrooms were bright and colorful, the facilities were meagre and the playground completely bare. Niewrzedra explained that the school had been vandalised at least seven times in the previous 10 years.

We met many of the children who had appeared in the film. In one class those who participated were asked to indicate. A sea of hands shot up in the air and remained proudly raised for the whole time we were in the room. Some other toddlers—normally a class of 28 two-year-olds and six three-year-olds—were having a snack of milk and chocolate biscuits.

Niewrzedra said that many of the parents are unemployed and the children are often sent to school without food. If that happens, or if the family has no money for clothes, then other parents bring extra, she said. "This attitude," Niewrzedra added, "has only developed since the film."

She explained some of the difficulties facing teachers. "How can we give them enough attention and develop their full intellectual potential? Today there are so many problems with the families. Many don't have work, the parents have conflicts and sometimes the children don't have any money or food and there is no discipline in the home. The teachers are very conscious of these problems and although this exerts a huge pressure on us there is now a real awareness that we cannot blame the individuals."

Asked if Tavernier's film had forced the government to provide

more funding or teachers in the area, Niewrzedra smiled and said, "No, but the biggest change is that parents feel they can talk about their problems with the teachers. They are out in the open—they do not feel ashamed. The parents are more involved in the school and there is more solidarity."

The effect of Tavernier's film on the community has been significant and readily acknowledged by all those I met. Just as *It All Starts Today* ends with a festival devised by Valeria (Maria Pitaressi), Lefebvre's artist girlfriend, to overcome the tragedy, anguish and despair in the community, so the film itself has helped to invigorate and raise the cultural life and spirit of the community.

Martine Goeminne, the wife of the local school inspector, described Tavernier as a great artist and added: "I believe that Tavernier's film is like Emile Zola's *Germinal* because it presents the conditions and lives of the workers, but far more optimistically. It does not speak directly about politics, but about the social problems and therefore touches everyone. Before the film I found it impossible to speak about the problems in the community, now the door has been opened."

Goeminne continued: "In the 1960s our area was very productive with many mines and factories. Under these conditions we were able to develop culture for people—a large theatre was built in the area—but now there are no jobs and people are leaving. In the area there were once 35,000 workers and now only 10,000. Just recently a worker in the area committed suicide because he was out of work."

Benoît Constant, a retired metal worker who lives in a small house next door to the school, welcomed me to his home. Constant, who played Lefebvre's father in *It All Starts Today*, explained that he been reluctant to appear in the film, but decided to participate after discussing its importance with Tavernier.

"Of course I have always been aware of the problems in society—drugs, unemployment, vandalism and crime," he said. "But now I understand why they exist and I no longer blame the people. There are other reasons that have to be understood," he said.

Constant showed me a special album he had prepared with all sorts of memorabilia from the movie—newspaper articles, photos and reviews—and proudly read aloud a card from Tavernier and a letter from Torreton, expressing their gratitude for his contribution to the film.

Yamina Duvivier and Corinne Agthe, two mothers who also appeared in the film, explained its impact on them. Duvivier said: "Before the film we were very sad, but the film has changed our lives because it made us conscious of what is happening in the world around us and that we exist as well. Bertrand spent hours listening to us, finding out our concerns. This was very important because no one had ever listened to us before. Our lives and ideas were incorporated in the film and now we have the courage to speak."

Both women, who have been inspired to write and direct their own play, *Carpe Diem* (Seize the Day), said that poverty and unemployment meant that their children were denied a decent cultural education. "Without culture you cannot develop," Agthe said, "it's the opening to the future."

Carpe Diem continues to investigate the issues raised by Tavernier's film—the poverty and social problems in the area. "We have written the play", they said, "to explain everything we felt and to try and awaken others. We hope we have been heard. We know it will not change the world but it will make a difference."

This comment was typical of those who spoke to me. No-one expressed any confidence that the government would resolve their difficulties. Like Lefebvre, who refused to accept the cuts imposed by the local authorities, many voiced a new determination to take control of their own destinies.

In one way or another, everyone emphasised that the problems they faced were social, not individual. This basic conception, which may appear obvious, marks a change from the mood of despair that previously gripped many parents and teachers. One senses that the feeling of isolation and confusion felt by workers and their families in Anzin—a product of decades of political betrayal by the traditional organisations and parties of the working class—is beginning to break up. The film, which has brought to light previously untapped talents in this northern French village, has also compelled its residents to look more carefully at their own lives and to recognise that what they have to say is important and interesting.

It is not that the film resolves the difficulties confronting the community—to believe that would be to trivialise the political problems yet to be confronted. Nevertheless, many of those involved better understand their situation.

As Claude, another pre-school teacher who also appeared in the film, said: "In a certain way things have not changed since the film, for me at least. Last year I had 25 students in a class. Now I have 33 (three- and four-year-olds) because we made one class smaller. However to work on the film, and now the play, has allowed me to meet the parents in a different way. I see the parents and the problems in a new light, with more understanding. And although it is still very difficult to intervene with the families to raise issues, such as why are you not feeding your child, there is a better atmosphere amongst the teachers at the school. We now act as accomplices—together."

No small part of this understanding has come about as a result of the response that the film has evoked internationally. In Niewrzedra's office she showed me a huge folder of letters and postcards she had received from around the world, including from teachers in France, Canada, and Australia. "Dear cousins this film is true" and "You have shown my life" were common responses. As these messages show, Tavernier's film—through an examination of one small pre-school in northern France—has managed to reveal experiences that are universal.