

The Dardenne brothers' *Two Days, One Night*: Who should pay for the present situation?

Joanne Laurier
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Written and directed by Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne

The latest movie from well-known Belgian filmmakers Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, *Two Days, One Night* [*Deux jours, une nuit*], recounts the story of a woman desperately trying to keep her job in the face of a management-sponsored competition among her co-workers.

This is the ninth feature film by the Dardenne brothers, whose body of work includes *The Promise* [*La Promesse*, 1996], *Rosetta* [1999], *The Son* [*Le Fils*, 2002], *The Child* [*L'enfant*, 2005], *Lorna's Silence* [2008] and *The Kid with the Bike* [*Le Gamin au vélo*, 2011]. Their career bears certain similarities to that of British filmmaker Ken Loach. The Dardenne films, concentrating on the life of the working class, have been set and shot for the most part in Wallonia, the predominantly French-speaking region of southern Belgium and one of the oldest industrial regions in the world, now thoroughly devastated.

In *Two Days, One Night*, Sandra (Marion Cotillard) is employed at a small solar panel factory in the town of Seraing (a municipality in the Province of Liège). Sandra returns to work after a leave for depression only to find that her workmates, after having picked up the slack in her absence, have voted for a 1,000 euro (\$1,200) bonus in exchange for the elimination of her job.

After Sandra pleads her case, the plant manager (Batiste Sornin) relents and allows a re-vote. The stakes are high for all the workers, including Sandra. She and her husband Manu (Fabrizio Rongione, a Dardenne regular) and their two children will be forced out of their home onto public assistance if they lose her pay-check. Essentially for all the workers, however, the word "bonus" is a euphemism for a long-awaited pay boost that will be used for the most basic necessities.

Manu, a restaurant employee, urges Sandra to visit each of her co-workers over the course of one weekend and convince them to vote against the bonus. Bolstered by her ultra-supportive spouse and some anti-anxiety pills, she embarks on the distasteful and demeaning odyssey, knowing full well that the others have earned and are in desperate need of their bonuses.

Tentative and stressed out, Sandra goes from one home to another, reeling when her plea is rejected and rallying when she finds support. Each encounter is tension-filled, as the margin for maneuver narrows. The responses of the workers are for the most part sympathetic. As one says, "It would be a catastrophe for me if they vote for you, but I hope they do."

In one jarring scene, Timur, an immigrant (Timur Magomedgadzhiev), bursts into tears and begs forgiveness because he had voted against her and has been haunted by his decision. Another compassionate contract worker from Africa movingly explains his plight. Sandra's humiliating task is worsened as the plant supervisor (Olivier Gourmet) continues to intimidate and threaten the employees, attempting to ensure her dismissal.

Even though Sandra has her defenders, a moment of despair prompts her to attempt suicide. The attempt fortunately fails when one of her workmates, Anne (Christelle Cornil), leaves her abusive husband to join Sandra's side. In the course of her travails, an initially weak and unstable protagonist becomes empowered, ready to tackle the inevitable future challenges.

As its psychologically and economically hard-pressed heroine, Cotillard is a tremendously appealing performer who basically carries the film. A harsh social environment is the main culprit, in which "heartless bureaucrats" seek to ensure a dog-eat-dog culture and the survival of the fittest.

As the actress explains in the movie's production notes: "In one scene she [Sandra] even says, 'I am nothing.' This feeling of uselessness lives deep inside her, as it does for a lot of people who don't know how to deal with their work or the lack of it. Several months before we shot the film, I had been deeply shocked to read articles and reports about work-related suicides, people who'd rather end it all than endure this feeling of being useless. The film echoes with some of these events that had struck me so."

To their credit, the Dardenne brothers remain, unlike many others, concerned by the social and economic conditions of modern life. They clearly evoke a level of commitment from cast and crew members, and they have a following among moviegoers starved for some degree of realism and sympathy

for the oppressed.

The Dardennes' undoubted sincerity notwithstanding, however, the outlook that shapes their films, an amorphous "leftism" that has been hollowed out by decades of political stagnation and worse, is a very limited one and renders them vulnerable to impressionistic and even reactionary responses to vexing contemporary problems.

In the name of being "down to earth" and remaining close to their characters, the Dardennes claustrophobically train their camera (literally) on the immediate and particular, in the process setting aside the big, historic problems that confront the population. In *Two Days, One Night*, as in a number of their other films, the overall social and political crisis tends to recede into the background.

By default, the focus then becomes the individual moral response of this or that worker to the difficult conditions. By a process of intellectual sleight of hand, of which the filmmakers may not be entirely conscious themselves, the population turns out to be responsible for its own circumstances.

In an interview with Cineuropa, Jean-Pierre Dardenne explains that in *Two Days, One Night*, "Every person who Sandra meets is faced with a choice. Solidarity is also an ethical matter; it's a personal choice. In spite of peer pressure, it remains a personal choice. Sandra imposes her morals as well. Obviously, the issue when tackling ethical or moral matters is to not indulge in the task."

The Dardennes oppose the pitting of workers against one another by the employers. But what do they envision? By implication at least, *Two Days, One Night* makes the case that, in an inevitably declining and shrinking economy, workers should demonstrate solidarity and civility in dealing with the unpleasant consequences. This defeatist strategy is promoted by trade union officials and pseudo-left activists around the globe.

The filmmakers stack the deck so that voting for the bonus, and against a cut in their pay, in other words, is a vote against Sandra and her family. The viewer is emotionally blackmailed by Sandra's suffering (skillfully dramatized by Cotillard) into reacting with hostility to those who choose to keep their bonuses. Entirely absent is any notion that the workers should oppose both the loss of jobs and the loss of the bonus, and that the working class has the power and ability to change society from top to bottom.

The WSWS has written extensively about the Dardennes, including about the fact that their "left" political "history plays a role today, unhappily, more in giving the weakest aspects of their work a 'progressive' coating than in anything else." (See previous comments on *L'enfant* and *Lorna's Silence*, along with an interview with the directors on the latter)

Born in the early 1950s in Liège, their childhood would have been impacted by the massive 1960 Belgium general strike that reverberated globally. In fact, the region has a lengthy history of working class and socialist struggle. In 1886, for example, an uprising by workers in the area had to be suppressed by 6,000

troops in an "almost military campaign."

However, the betrayals of the trade unions and Social Democracy, responsible for the closing down of steel mills and coal mines in Seraing, have never been a topic in any Dardenne film. The filmmakers are rightfully disturbed by "the lack of solidarity today" and the rise of anti-social behavior, but they never examine the forces that have thrown and continue to throw the Belgian working class into the jaws of global capital.

Several years ago, Jean-Pierre Dardenne told an interviewer for *Cinéaste*: "The working class is no longer the working class. It is no longer structured as it was at the beginning of the last century. We are truly at the end of an age, of industry, of what we have known for a hundred years. Perhaps in an immediate sense, it is because we have lived a good part of our lives within this time that we choose to film it and to anchor our stories around these de-classed people." Without a worked out perspective and historical grasp of the changes, the Dardennes view the present-day supposedly "de-classed" population with pessimism and skepticism, perhaps expressed most sharply in *L'enfant*.

The WSWS commented in 2006 that "the Dardennes don't offer a way out of the present artistic impasse; rather, their films are another expression, in an admittedly sophisticated form, of that same crisis. In the final analysis, their popularity within certain circles stems from their ability to combine a 'social realist' look and feel to their films, which suggests (and perhaps intends) social criticism and opposition, with quite conformist themes and moods entirely compatible with official moralizing and complacency. The brothers' sincerity is not at issue here, their art and their ideas are."

With *Two Days, One Night*, the Dardennes continue to take the path of least resistance, never asking how the working class has arrived at this state of affairs, and therefore, whether they like it or not, ending up as apologists for those who tell workers to behave politely as their slice of the pie gets smaller and smaller.



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