

68th Berlin International Film Festival—Part 8

***Brothers* (1929) and *Comradeship* (1931): Two films dealing with the workers movement**

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This is the eighth and final part in a series of articles on the recent Berlin International Film Festival, the Berlinale, held February 15-25, 2018. The first part was posted March 14, the second on March 16, the third on March 20, the fourth on March 22, the fifth on March 26, the sixth on March 29 and the seventh on April 3.

The retrospective program at this year's Berlin International Film Festival, "Weimar Cinema Revisited," presented numerous films that have fallen into oblivion in recent decades.

Addressing the German labor movement of the 1920s inevitably means coming to grips with the political paralysis and betrayals that ultimately enabled fascism to seize power. Two feature films screened in Berlin this year reflect the angry, militant mood among German workers in the late 1920s. Their determination, and in particular the striving for a common struggle and international solidarity, stood in stark contrast to the policies of the two major workers' parties, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Communist Party of Germany (KPD).

One of the most interesting discoveries of the Weimar retrospective was the silent film *Brothers* (*Brüder*, 1929) directed by Werner Hochbaum (1899-1946). The filmmaker was politically close to the SPD and he shot two election spots for the party during the Reichstag [parliamentary] elections in 1930. Both the SPD and the German Transport Workers union backed the production of *Brothers*, and the opening credits name the "Film and Photo Service" of the SPD as film distributor.

The work is Hochbaum's conscious attempt to create a "German proletarian film" based on the model of Soviet revolutionary cinema. His film looks back to the fierce strike of Hamburg dockworkers in 1896-97, which ended in defeat after 11 weeks, in place of the suppressed sailors' uprising in Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925).

In *Brothers*, a dockworker, weighed down by a heavy sack, becomes the catalyst of the mass movement in

Hamburg. When the workers' demands for higher wages are rejected, they walk out. The strike committee reluctantly accepts the will of the workforce. Its members are of the opinion that the chance of success is small, the organisation is too limited and there is too little support to wage a struggle. Winter is just around the corner. When the strike breaks out, the police protect the scabs hired by the company and search for the strike leaders. Ultimately, hardship forces the workers to yield. The militant initiator of the strike lands in jail. Despite the defeat, he insists, the strike was necessary.

The subject matter of *Brothers*, made with a non-professional cast, was highly topical in Germany in 1929. Employers in a number of industries went on the offensive immediately prior to the economic crash that autumn. A 14-week-long shipyard workers' strike, demanding a cut in hours from 52 to 48 per week, had just ended with a defeat for the workers. SPD Minister of Labour and trade union leader Rudolf Wissel ended the strike, much to the consternation of the workers.

"The SPD and trade unions had a legitimacy problem in 1929," the Weimar film retrospective catalogue understatedly notes.

The SPD-organised strike settlement stipulated a 50-hour week, although in 1918, when revolution loomed in Germany, the provisional SPD government led by Friedrich Ebert introduced the eight-hour day and a 40-hour week. Ebert had made the concession because he feared—along with the rest of the German bourgeoisie—the establishment of a Soviet-type republic in Germany. Widespread public anger in 1929 was also fuelled by the fact that the SPD, which fought the 1928 Reichstag elections on the basis of opposing German rearmament, voted during the subsequent "grand coalition" national government under Hermann Müller (SPD) to finance a new battleship.

The opening of *Brothers* cites the famous passage in the *Communist Manifesto*, "The history of all hitherto existing

society is the history of class struggles,” and clearly intends to place the strike in a revolutionary tradition. The film affirms on a number of occasions the need to “keep going” and concludes with the defiant appeal by German revolutionary Karl Liebknecht: “Despite everything!” The film clearly speaks to the outrage and bitterness felt by workers regarding the shift to the right by the SPD up to 1929.

There is also, however, an attempt to transform the Hamburg defeat into some sort of moral victory and place a victorious revolution in the indefinite future. Images of the brutal state intervention against the workers recall the fact that there was no right to strike in 1897.

The two-brother back-story is also unconvincing and rather clichéd: one brother is a militant striker, the other a policeman. After the killing of a worker by a police bullet, the latter comes to his senses and aids his brother. Thoughtfully, he places the insignia of state power, his helmet and sabre, down on a desk. The reality of police conduct was entirely different.

When Communist workers defended their right to demonstrate on May Day 1929, a number of workers were shot dead in a large police operation ordered by the Berlin SPD police chief Karl Zörgiebel. This happened only a few weeks after the premiere of *Brothers*.

G.W. Pabst's *Comradeship*

The German-French feature film *Comradeship* (*Kameradschaft*, 1931, also known in French as *La Tragédie de la mine*—“The Tragedy of the Mine”) represents a high point in the career of renowned Austrian filmmaker G.W. Pabst (*Pandora's Box*, 1929; *Diary of a Lost Girl*, 1929; *Westfront 1918*, 1930; *The Threepenny Opera*, 1931).

The inspiration for the film was the Courrières mine accident in 1906. With 1,099 fatalities, it remains Europe's worst mining catastrophe. The accident became known worldwide, partly because—despite the tense relations between the German and French ruling classes—a team of rescue volunteers from the German Ruhr region rushed to assist the trapped French miners.

Pabst shifts the action in his film to 1919. In so doing, he consciously contrasted the international solidarity of workers with the Versailles Treaty agreed by the victorious powers after World War I, which was dictated by predatory nationalist interests.

The war is still very much alive in the minds of the population. After German miners enter a bar on the French

border, old hatreds flare up briefly when the French girl Françoise refuses to dance with a young German, although for personal reasons. A nightmarish scene takes place during the mine disaster itself, when one of the trapped French miners, gasping for air, imagines he is at war again. He fights against his supposed enemy, who in reality belongs to the German rescue team.

Pabst's film differs favourably from certain earlier films about the working class milieu, such as the Weimar retrospective film *Children of No Importance* (1926), directed by Gerhard Lamprecht. The latter portrays child poverty in Berlin, but depicts the working class merely as an oppressed, suffering class. There are realistic images of tenements, impossible living conditions, illness, hunger and brutality, which caused a sensation and aroused pity at the time, but Lamprecht's film essentially ends up appealing to the generosity of the wealthy.

In *Comradeship*, on the other hand, workers take the initiative without asking questions. They roar across the border to France in a lorry without a pass, and tear down the barrier in the tunnel that separates French from German miners.

The power reflected in this demonstration of internationalism is not only due to the authenticity of the scenes, in which Soviet cinematic influences are unmistakable. Above all, *Comradeship* shows the strength that lies in a common struggle of workers across borders. This helps give the film its power and relevance today.

Equally authentic (and painful), however, is *Comradeship's* conclusion. After the rescue operation, the old order is carefully and bureaucratically restored underground. The customs officials repair the torn-down barrier. The film goes beyond the pacifist dream of brotherhood found in Pabst's film *Westfront 1918*.

The Berlinale's “Weimar Cinema Revisited” provided a fascinating glimpse at the social and cultural contradictions of a historically critical period.

Concluded



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