

70th Berlin International Film Festival—Part 5

***Strike or Die* and several shorts: *Filipiñana*, *Union County*, *Huntsville Station*: A renewed interest in workers' lives**

Verena Nees
30 March 2020

This is the fifth in a series of articles on the Berlin International Film Festival, the Berlinale, which took place February 20–March 1. Part 1 was posted on February 28, Part 2 on March 11, Part 3 on March 18 and Part 4 on March 24.

To mark the 50th anniversary of the founding of its “Forum” section, this year’s Berlin International Film Festival (the Berlinale) presented a number of films dealing with militant workers’ struggles of the 1960s and 1970s, including films by Chris Marker and the Sochaux Medvedkin Group treating the workers’ occupation of the Peugeot factory in Paris in June 1968.

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 in particular and the subsequent bourgeois triumphalism, which convinced or intimidated many artists, the working class has hardly figured in modern cinema. The focus has largely been on the problematic relationships of middle class individuals, with scant attention paid to society’s class structure. Workers have mainly been shown as “socially weak” or at best as the passive victims of injustice.

A number of recent films primarily by younger directors indicate this viewpoint is beginning to change. There were movies this year at the Berlinale featuring workers and their families as central characters who, despite difficult living conditions, exhibit self-confidence, pride and a degree of rebellious spirit. Instead of viewing events from afar, the director and the camera in these cases participate in the lives of their characters and families.

The WSWS has already commented on *Kids Run* (Barbara Ott) from Germany and *Running on Empty* (Lisa Weber) from Austria. Similar films dealing with working people include *Garage People* (Natalija Yefimkina) and *Automotive* (Jonas Heldt), both from Germany, plus the German-American film *One of These Days* (Bastian Günther), set in Texas, and the Serbian film *Father* (Srđan Golubovic). This review concentrates on one French effort and a number of short films that are unlikely to be seen in German or other cinemas.

Strike or Die (*Grève ou crève*) is a French documentary by Jonathan Rescigno. Born in 1980 in Forbach, France, in the coal-mining region of Lorraine near the German border and the grandson of a miner, the director contrasts two generations in his first full-length film—two generations dominated by intense

struggles, then and now.

The documentary focuses on a boxing club. Young men and women are trained there by a former miner, Toumi. They sweat profusely, are taken to the limit of their physical endurance and stoically endure Toumi’s taunts about how “they’ve been pampered their entire lives.” The same tough coach shows his sensitive side when, immediately prior to a boxing tournament, he encourages his young charges: “Don’t worry, you are not alone!” It is the old form of solidarity in a new period.

For Rescigno, the boxing club is a metaphor for the coming together of generations. Today’s youth are also preparing for a “fight of body and soul,” in a rebellion against an unjust world and for a decent future.

Previously unshown video recordings from December 1995 commemorate a violent strike by miners in Forbach against pension cuts. Over a thousand workers with pickaxes, shovels and other implements run through the streets, chased and beaten by the police. Clouds of tear gas hang in the air. Rescigno recalls how he and his friends didn’t really understand what was at stake at the time. What stuck in his brain, however, was “the energy of the masses and the determination of the people.”

A married couple in *Strike or Die* quarrel after the husband is sacked from his building job because of an accident. He is now vainly fighting for a disability pension. The wife, from a family of miners, accuses her husband of lacking fortitude in regard to the building contractor and draws a comparison to previous miners’ battles: “If I’d been you, I’d have grabbed the boss by the collar.” He was responsible for the accident, which could have been fatal. “He should go to prison for that,” she scolds.

The young generation has almost no notion of past struggles. The city’s official mining museum distorts what took place, says Rescigno. The former employers who built the museum were not interested in showing the “dangerous working conditions” and the sometimes bloodily fought “victories of the workers.”

When two boys visit the museum and look, half-giggling, half-puzzled, at old photos, one hears a public address system in the background praising the social progress made by miners. Is that true, they ask the museum guide, have the miners ever received

fair wages for their dangerous work? No, he replies, but when they went on strike it was always for a long time. Today, the former miner adds, all that happens is at most a two-hour walkout between 6 and 8 am.

This is the only reference made in *Strike or Die* to the trade unions. Unlike the situation 50 years ago shown in the film, the trade unions and parties such as the French Communist Party are no longer regarded as allies of the workers.

Despite the younger generation's ignorance of past struggles, a "fighting spirit and determination are inscribed into collective unconscious," Rescigno says.

However, the lessons drawn from past struggles and the degeneration of the old workers' organisations are especially important for this new generation. *Strike or Die* does not directly address this question, but the film could provide an impetus.

Berlinale Shorts: *Filipiñana* (Philippines), *Union County* (US), *Huntsville Station* (US)

Filipino director Rafael Manuel, 30, received the Silver Bear Jury Prize for short films for his 24-minute *Filipiñana*. Along with his young Filipino-British film team, who raised some of the money for the production via the internet, Manuel is refreshingly concerned with the extreme forms of social inequality that affect not only the Philippines. The setting for the film is an exclusive golf course—a microcosm of the overall social situation.

At the club, Isabel (Jorrybell Agoto) works as a "tee girl." Tee girls collect the golf balls, fish them out of the pools covered with water lilies, wash them, sort them and arrange them for the golfers. Sometimes they have to massage the feet of the golfers' spouses. For this they receive a pittance. They sleep crammed together on the floor of a changing room in the midday heat. A manager is responsible for disciplining the girls and sits in the administrator's office, where she stuffs herself with cake.

According to the film's press release: "In the golfing milieu, the various social classes that comprise Philippine society come into friction with one another to reveal an everyday violence that has become normalised and gentrified."

When Isabel sits on a low stool in the dust all day and stoically passes the balls to the golfers, we see her face in a close-up. She looks in our direction, while the golf clubs swing threateningly near to her face. "Everyday violence" up close, and one ducks involuntarily.

Isabel, however, is not prepared to play the role of submissive slave. She lies down on the lawn, although only guests of the club are supposed to do so. She nibbles on a cake on the reception table set out for a golf club party and sits down at one of their tables. When the girls are supposed to cheer guests up by singing in the bar in the evening, Isabel sings a song about a poor fisherman.

Isabel is "the silent sand in the gears of the lush green," the Berlinale program floridly remarks. She opposes a capitalist elite that denies the working class the right to life and happiness. She isn't prepared to accept that.

At the end of the film, one sees Isabel in the distance, in the middle of the huge, green golf course, dancing wildly and joyfully.

Union County (14 minutes) is where Cody (Zachary Zamsky), a young Ohio lumber mill worker, lives in his car. His former girlfriend finds him there and spends the night with him in the back seat. The next morning she leaves, her knees shaking, betraying her drug addiction. She needs a fresh hit.

During Cody's appointment at the local welfare office, we learn he has only been clean for 45 days. Because he hasn't had a drink or done drugs in that period and also found a job, the social worker offers him the prospect of a place to live in a supervised facility, but it will take a little time.

We see the young man in his car again when his girlfriend returns in the morning. But this time he doesn't open the car door. She shouts increasingly loudly and kicks the car. His face turns red, is strained and tearful—the tension hurts and is almost unbearable. The viewer is left with the feeling this tension will discharge at some point, perhaps soon, and as part of a collective outburst.

The same tension can be seen in another short film, *Huntsville Station* (also 14 minutes), directed by Jamie Meltzer and Chris Filippone. Their work focuses on the American prison system, where millions are locked up for minor offences—in the end—due to their poverty.

Every weekday, Texas' largest prison, Huntsville State Penitentiary, releases dozens of inmates on parole. They are handed a bus ticket voucher, and a \$100 check.

Huntsville Station sensitively observes the different individuals waiting at a bus station, a moment caught between incarceration and freedom. Some talk to relatives on the phone, others buy small gifts from passing vendors. Still other are lost in their thoughts. Some remain behind—nobody is waiting for them. A cleaner sweeps up the cigarettes and bus tickets lying on the floor.

The camera captures faces of normal people, different ages, different skin tones, the faces of working class people. The filmmakers can only question one black prisoner. He is taciturn and repeats only one sentence: "I have to stay here for 30 years, you see, then I am an old man. 30 years to go..." In the end, tears roll down his cheek. It makes one's throat close up.

To be continued



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact