

72nd Berlin International Film Festival—Part 2

Miloš Pušić's *Working Class Heroes* from Serbia: A call to battle

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Smaller, low-budget productions often provide greater insight into current realities than the multimillion-dollar projects feted at the annual Berlin International Film Festival (the Berlinale). This year, in particular, a striking contradiction was apparent.

Taking its initiative from the German government, the Berlinale management insisted on in-person festival despite record levels of COVID-19 infections—thereby putting the lives and health of the film-going public, filmmakers, distributors, publicists, media and other industry personnel at risk. Behind the worse than hollow phrases proclaiming a “signal for culture” (Culture Minister Claudia Roth, Green Party) and the victory of “freedom and democracy” (Berlin Mayor Franziska Giffey, Social Democratic Party, SPD) lie the very real financial interests of large media and entertainment corporations—as the WWSW pointed out prior to the start of the Berlinale.

At the same time, serious filmmakers are opposing the official complacency and indifference toward working class life. This certainly applies to *Working Class Heroes*, a Serbian film by Miloš Pušić featured in the Berlinale's Panorama programme, which was made available to the WWSW online.

Working Class Heroes is no nostalgic look back at past struggles but rather, from beginning to end, grounded in today's reality. The viewer is drawn into the middle of the action on a large construction site in Novi Sad, Serbia's second largest city, where a group of illegally employed workers are viciously exploited by a property speculator. The events are taking place 30 years after the dismemberment of the former Yugoslavia and the restoration of capitalism in the Balkans and Eastern Europe. With a mixture of docudrama and suspenseful thriller elements, we witness how the daily abuse of the workforce leads to increasing resistance, eventually assuming explosive forms.

“F...ing mud”—this expletive spit out by the main protagonist Lidija Jaković (superbly played by Jasna

Žurić)—provides a fitting opening. She exchanges her high heels for rubber boots and goes to a still inhabited part of a building complex that is being converted by the bombastically named “Magnus Domus Building” company to evict a family from its flat with the help of security guards. “You fascists,” the mother shouts. Lidija is the chief secretary, PR representative and confidante of the dubious building contractor (Filip Žurić). She helps him enforce his illegal deals round the clock, occasionally shares his bed and accompanies him on drinking sprees in a seedy club.

With the help of foreman Braco (Predrag Momčilo), she supervises the construction crew, who is forced to make superhuman efforts, sometimes with open threats, sometimes with small bribes. For weeks, the workers receive little or no money. For a few extra dinars, they work nights and Sunday shifts. Their situation is so desperate that one older worker collapses. He mutilates his own hand and shouts the old partisan song “Bella Ciao,” sung in the past not only by Italian Resistance fighters but also by ex-President Tito's Yugoslav Partisans. Another worker allows his leg to be run over by an excavator—to ensure he doesn't have to continue working. Lidija delivers the worker's outstanding wages at his hospital bedside along with his notice of termination.

The real estate company employs these methods to meet its deadline for the presentation of the construction project to the media and public. Also invited is the local bishop (Radoslav Vojnović), who is supposed to bless the project as “social housing.” Workers are given shiny new yellow safety helmets for the presentation, which they have to give back afterwards. The scaffolding work at the site takes place without any protection.

While they stand in line with their helmets, the pompous company boss struts in front of the cameras. With a patronising gesture and the cynicism typical of the new upstart capitalists in Eastern Europe, he proclaims: “Here you see our working class heroes!”

With an artificial smile and lots of make-up, Lidija praises

the “great investment” of the Magnus Domus team in front of television journalists. “I have to say, we expect German partners,” she stresses, and this means: “This project is to be completed according to EU [European Union] standards, meaning the highest quality.” She also stresses the importance of this “social housing project,” which in future will “accommodate young married couples.”

Lidija herself is a victim of the miserable conditions. In the canteen, workers declare they know she has to “talk like that.” Her flat is a rundown, one-room dwelling where she lives with her unemployed husband and child. To make ends meet, she allowed herself to be bought off by the corrupt contractor. On the construction site, however, she is confronted with growing resentment, led by a worker called “the professor” (Boris Isakovi?) by his workmates. Increasingly, Lidija doubts her own status. When a young worker, “the kid” (Stefan Beronja), suffers life-threatening injuries after a fall at night, Lidija makes a decision. The boss seeks to cover up the incident, and Lidija comes to an important decision.

At the end of the film, the “working class heroes” have fought back. There is no reconciliation, no individual solution, no complaining about conditions. It is the portent of a fight to the death. The final shot of the film unobtrusively hints at the red colour of revolution. A transparent reddish mesh fence appears in front of the apartment building with its empty window frames. “The Internationale” sounds softly in the background.

Working Class Heroes is a remarkably invigorating film by a director who was born in 1980, just 10 years before the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Thirty years of capitalist restoration in Eastern Europe and the Balkans have shattered many illusions in Western democracy, rising living standards and peace. The EU and especially Germany have made use of Eastern Europe for brutal exploitation. Pušić’s film heralds a new period, reflecting a growing wave of anger and rebellion on the part of the workers of these countries.

The title *Working Class Heroes* is presumably an allusion in part to John Lennon’s 1970 “Working Class Hero.” Lennon commented about the song, “I think it’s a revolutionary song. ... I think it’s for the people like me who are working class, who are supposed to be processed into the middle classes or into the machinery. It’s my experience, and I hope it’s just a warning to people.” The title also recalls the efforts by the former Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe to invoke the “heroes of the working class” to falsely portray themselves as representatives of socialism.

Pušić, whose short film *Lullaby for a Boy* (2007) gained an international audience and who has made two other feature films, *Autumn in My Street* (2009) and *Withering*

(2013), explains in his director’s notes: “We wanted to portray a worker’s life without any decoration, such as it is. ... Our heroes are ordinary people that we pass by each day without noticing them. They are building our towns, our streets and our flats. Without insurance, medical care and a secure salary they don’t know what follows tomorrow. ... They are people forgotten by society, which in turn projects a false image of caring for everyone.”

He presents his protagonists as people with normal needs for love, for football games or for holidays by the sea. Following the breakup of Yugoslavia, the “professor” tells the “kid,” he never saw the sea again. The “kid” has just fallen in love and wants to travel to Sutomore, a popular resort on the Adriatic coast in Montenegro.

Above all, the film presents its protagonists not merely as victims of oppression but ready to fight back with growing self-confidence.

The “new era of liberal capitalism that we craved so much” is characterised by the fact that workers are “the tiniest cogs in the infernal machinery of politics and greed,” according to the director. Workers are the “collateral damage” of past decades. Some have become wealthy, but the majority are been forced to struggle for their existence, he said, adding he has recently felt “that a lot of movies dealing with social themes are too polished and fake.”

The immediate trigger for the film was the number of fatal accidents on construction sites reported in the newspapers—accidents for which no one was held responsible. But the construction site is only a “microcosm” for today’s social values, Pušić says. In fact, it demonstrates that the maxim “profit above all” is destroying the lives of workers all over the world.

The illusions fueled by capitalist restoration in the 1990s have suffered severe blows. Instead of democracy, prosperity and peace, the European powers and the US have generated vast social inequality, brutal exploitation, authoritarian regimes and the danger of war.

Working Class Heroes is a very topical film, resounding like a call to battle for imminent uprisings. It deserves the widest possible audience.



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