

72nd Berlin International Film Festival—Part 7

For the Many—The Vienna Chamber of Labour : The situation facing Austrian workers

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This is the seventh and final part of a series on films available online from the recent Berlin International Film Festival. The first part was posted February 16, the second February 20, the third February 22, the fourth February 26, the fifth March 16 and the sixth on April 3.

For the Many—The Vienna Chamber of Labour (Für die Vielen—Die Arbeiterkammer Wien) was one of a number of films at this year's Berlin International Film Festival (Berlinale) that examined, to one degree or another, workers' living and working conditions today. In his documentary, director Constantin Wulff examines the Chamber of Labour in Vienna—the institution responsible for legally representing workers' interests in Austria.

Wulff clarified his concept of documentary filmmaking in a statement about his new movie: “For me, there is nothing more annoying in the field of documentary than ‘scripted reality’ or the notion of a documentary as a ‘theme film,’ where the film merely shows what was already widely known. For me, documentary is the exact opposite, i.e., a confrontation with reality.”

The film confronts the viewer with the reality of the modern world of work and the limits of national forms of worker representation in a globalised world. The viewer is provided with a detailed insight into what problems workers face, the type of advice and legal support the Chamber of Labour provides but also insight into the inner workings of the Chamber itself. The film, however, remains on the surface and fails to draw any conclusions about the work of the Chamber of Labour, which neither seeks nor is capable of fundamentally improving the situation of workers.

The first part of the film gives an unvarnished portrait of workers' exploitation, including the withholding of wages, unspeakable working conditions and arbitrary dismissals. One worker is to be dismissed during her maternity leave. Another worker reports that he had taken a full-time job with a subcontractor and worked full-time but was only registered and paid by the employer for 20 hours per week. He had also not received a pay slip. Many of the workers come from Eastern and Southeastern Europe, and their ignorance of the language and Austrian law is exploited by companies.

Wulff's film also makes clear that the situation for workers has sharply worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, a group of women workers reports on their working conditions in a company where they put “Made in Austria” stickers on masks produced in China. They were forced to work faster, forbidden to drink water outside break time and paid too little. In the end, the company was declared insolvent, and the workers made redundant.

The Chamber of Labour has a 100-year history. The documentary chronicles the preparations for the chamber's centenary in 2020. It was legally established on June 9, 1920 as a counterpart to the big business chamber of commerce and, like the works councils introduced by law the year before, was a key element of the policy of “social partnership” with corporate management adopted by the Social Democratic Workers Party of Austria (SDAPÖ—now known as the Social Democratic Party of Austria, SPÖ).

Today, most workers are compulsory members of the Chamber of Labour. Through the Chamber of Labour levy, 0.5 percent of their gross salary is automatically collected. The 3.7 million members then have a legal right to apply for support in matters regarding labour and social law.

The Chamber of Labour works closely with the Austrian Trade Union Federation (ÖGB) and, together with the Economic Chamber (WKO) and the Chamber of Agriculture, forms the basis of the Austrian “welfare state.” Within the Chamber of Labour itself there are various factions that stand for election every five years. The larger factions maintain close relations with the various Austrian political parties. The Chamber does not represent workers' independent interests, against both the employers and government but rather is fully integrated into the state apparatus.

Wulff's film team is present when the new promotional film for the chamber's 100th anniversary is shown at an internal screening. In this clip, charged with pathos, the Chamber of Labour is symbolised by a young woman who runs through a futuristic setting and ends up fighting the “windmills” of digitalisation in the form of an army of robots.

The Chamber of Labour's alter-ego describes her own story with the words: “All my life I had to fight. They wanted to make me small. To silence me. And fight me with all their might. But no matter how dark it was for my future, I always saw the light, because I was never alone. I am justice, and I have come to stay.”

However, instead of identifying the roots of workers' problems in the capitalist system, the promotional video lays the blame on technical progress. News of layoffs and increasing work pressure is linked to news of automation and robots taking workers' jobs.

This political disorientation is also reflected in the attitude of the Chamber of Labour towards the COVID-19 pandemic. At a Chamber press conference, the question arises: How has the distribution of wealth in Austria changed during the pandemic? In response, a spokesperson for the Chamber does not denounce the massive cash handouts by the government to the corporations at the beginning of

the pandemic or the profits raked in by stock market speculators during the health crisis. Instead, the spokesperson opposes a real lockdown. The poorer layers of the population would not be able to survive such a “pause button” financially, because they rely on their monthly income, he says. When it comes to the pandemic the principle of “justice” is pitted against the health and lives of workers.

Wulff was born in Hamburg in 1962, grew up in Switzerland and studied directing at the Film Academy in Vienna. *For the Many* is his third documentary feature film, following *Into the World* (2009) about a maternity clinic and *Like the Others* (2015) focused on a child and youth psychiatric ward. All of these films are in the tradition of direct cinema, a form of documentary film that emerged in North America in the 1950s.

Using as small a team as possible and using mobile, unobtrusive technology, the film crew seeks to fade into the background, making it possible to capture reality through pure observation. Since the filmmakers do not provoke situations and refrain from intervening in events, such productions take a correspondingly long time. *For the Many* had 55 shooting days and was filmed between September 2019 and October 2021.

Due to this labour-intensive method, Wulff was able to observe the Vienna Chamber of Labour over a long period, but nevertheless the end product remains superficial. In the first half of the film a succession of workers provide moving insight into their everyday lives, while in the second half the functionaries of the Chamber of Labour increasingly dominate and seek to gloss over their own activities.

Through its seemingly neutral approach, the film remains at the level of observation. It provides mere impressions and leaves untouched the role of the Chamber of Labour as an institutionalised mediator between the opposed interests of companies and workers under capitalism.

In a statement, Wulff explains why he made the film about the Chamber of Labour in this manner: “I became aware of the Chamber of Labour at a time I recall as very oppressive in socio-political terms. It was the years 2018-19, when the ÖVP [Austrian People’s Party] and FPÖ [Freedom Party] formed a governing coalition in Austria: an alliance of a radicalised conservative ÖVP [led by Sebastian Kurz] and an extreme right FPÖ. ... In my opinion the only perceptible opposition came from civil society and in political reality from the trade unions—and more precisely from the Chamber of Labour.”

This, however, is far from the truth. As early as 2016, the president of the ÖGB trade union federation, Erich Foglar, declared that the social democratic SPÖ “cannot rule out government cooperation with the FPÖ from the outset.” Foglar also clearly positioned himself against immigration, which had resulted, he claimed, in “less and less control over the labour market.”

The Austrian unions did not and do not form an opposition “in political reality” but, in fact, are part of the general political shift to the right. In January 2018, the ÖGB explicitly refused to back protests against the government. The news magazine *Profil* commented: “Also in the Chamber of Labour and the trade unions, contact is maintained with FPÖ functionaries.”

Ultimately, Wulff’s “confrontation with reality” ends up whitewashing reality. Neither the trade unions nor the Chamber of Labour are bulwarks against the danger of fascism, nor against the increasingly aggressive attacks on workers by the ruling elite.

In its 100 years of existence, the Chamber of Labour has pursued one aim above all—the suppression of the class struggle and the

prevention of a revolutionary development, based on a policy of corporatism with big business and bourgeois governments.

In Austria, violent strikes developed in the wake of the 1917 Russian Revolution, with the spontaneous emergence of factory committees and councils. When the revolt began to spill over into the military—most notably with the famed sailors’ uprising in the Adriatic port of Cattaro (today: Kotor, Montenegro) in February 1918—the Social Democratic leadership of the Vienna Workers’ Council organised the ending of the strikes. In the spring of 1919, the situation radicalised again, parallel to the proclamation of the Hungarian and Munich soviet republics. Revolutionary workers besieged the parliament in Vienna on April 17 and set it on fire. The government led by the Social Democrat Karl Renner moved immediately to suppress the workers’ revolt.

Even prior to World War I, the SDAPÖ explicitly advocated the theory of Austro-Marxism elaborated by Otto Bauer, according to which workers could not come to power through class struggle but only on the basis of parliamentary majorities. After the war, the SDAPÖ enmeshed the working class, as Leon Trotsky once put it, “in its net of political, trade union, municipal, cultural and sporting organisations” aimed at pacifying workers and securing capitalist rule.

In the period of Austro fascism from 1933-34 onwards, the Dollfuss government, with the help of some leading officials, used the workers’ chambers to control the working class and eventually paved the way for their dissolution after the annexation of Austria by Nazi Germany. The workers’ chambers were revived after the Second World War and once again played their traditional role of paralysing the working class.

In light of the current global crisis of world capitalism, glaring levels of inequality, war and dictatorship, there is no longer any room for social concessions and organisations that act, as the Vienna Chamber of Labour describes itself, as “economic stabilisers.”

In order to fight the shift to the right and the massive attacks on living standards, jobs and democratic rights, workers need new, independent organisations fighting for an end to the profit system all over the world.

Concluded



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