

The 75th Berlin International Film Festival—Part 10

The Settlement, a highly topical film from Egypt dealing with the working class

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This is the 10th in a series of articles on the recent Berlin International Film Festival. Part 1 was posted February 20, Part 2 on February 27, Part 3 on March 2, Part 4 on March 6, Part 5 on March 9, Part 6 on March 10, Part 7 on March 16, Part 8 on March 21 and Part 9 on March 25.

Some of the more than 230 films shown at the recent Berlin international film festival are true discoveries, but receive little attention from the mainstream media and fail to find their way into cinemas or streaming services due to a lack of financing and marketing opportunities.

One such film is the Egyptian film *The Settlement* (*Al mosta'mera*) by Mohamed Rashad, which was shown in the new Berlinale section Perspectives and described as a “workplace thriller.” This is Rashad’s debut fiction feature.

The film’s protagonists are factory workers at a metal processing company in the city of Alexandria, the director’s birthplace. Rashad, who also wrote the screenplay, based the plot on a real incident. Non-professional actors and factory workers play parts.

After the death of Hossam’s father as a result of what was presumably an accident at work, the factory management offers the physically disabled mother, who is unable to work, a deal: they will employ her sons to ensure the family’s upkeep. In return, no investigation into the cause of the accident will be initiated. Hossam (Adham Shoukry), 23, is unemployed and has a criminal record for drug-related offences. The other brother, Maro (Ziad Islam), is just 12. He doesn’t want to let go of his brother and goes with him, despite Hossam’s loud protests, to the factory where he carries out child labor, sorting out sheet metal parts and

running errands.

The scene of the action is a real factory floor. The camera rides along in a bus full of workers that jolts across a dusty terrain in the morning. We see faces, lined from hard work, packed close together. They react with surprise and also offer to help when Hossam, along with his little brother, gets on the bus and looks for a seat. Inside the factory, they are greeted by dirty air, loud machines and flying sparks, with individual workers going about their work without protective clothing or safety helmets.

The break room is also cramped, and workers exchange crude jokes and stories while they eat. One worker entertains the others by joking about the dead father of the two boys, an orthodox Muslim who insisted on doing the will of Allah at work. He repeats a rumor spread by the head of security that the father had a fight with an older mechanic named Mostafa before his death. “It was an accident,” Mostafa (Mohamed Abdel Hady) insists indignantly, supported by his colleagues.

The two newcomers are eyed suspiciously. Are they being hired to make the workers feel partly responsible? During Hossam’s job interview, the management assigns Mostafa, of all people, to train the young worker.

Hossam prepares himself for the job, breaking off contact with the drug dealers and doing his best to protect his little brother. Hossam begins to re-establish a loving relationship with his sick mother, who has suffered so much at his hands in the past few years, rubbing healing ointment onto her swollen leg.

He develops a relationship with a young female worker via his cell phone, and even manages to meet

her during a break. A few words are enough to establish a connection with Hossam: “I’ve been working here since middle school,” she replies when he asks her how she came to be there. “My mother died in this factory when I was two years old.”

The catastrophic safety situation in the factory quickly becomes apparent, and the worker who was allegedly complicit in her father’s death turns out to be a particularly thoughtful and helpful colleague to the two boys.

The drama, however, takes its course. One day, the plant manager calls Hossam to his office and demands he get him drugs. When Hossam initially refuses, the manager threatens to sack him. Reluctantly Hossam reestablishes his old drug contacts. On the drive to the drug handover, the manager nonchalantly admits that his father’s death was probably an accident. But “there are problems like that in every factory here,” he adds, as if it were hardly worth mentioning.

Shortly thereafter, the boss wants another large delivery of drugs. At the handover in a remote, gloomy square, Hossam’s former drug buddy warns him: this large quantity in such a short time can only mean that the plant manager is buying the drugs from them cheaply and selling them on at an exorbitant price on the internet.

The actual and biggest drug criminal turns out to be the boss! The camera shifts to the glass-walled office in the middle of the factory building. We see the managing director and the head of security surfing online, slapping their thighs and bursting into laughter.

Another kind of encounter takes place outside the hall. Maro yells at his older brother: “Why don’t you get the security chief and we’ll mess him up!” And further: “You’re a coward. You never used to do anything for us, and now you play poodle for the people at the top.” Hossam winces, and wants to beat his brother up, but stops himself. “You won’t fight back,” his brother adds angrily.

Shortly afterwards, there is another accident—the head of security is found lying dead on the ground in front of the office, a block of metal near his head and Hossam is seen running away. Mostafa, along with other colleagues, is supposed to catch him, but returns without success and reports where he lost him. A slight smile crosses his face.

Hossam’s mother is waiting at home, but only Maro

arrives. “Where is your brother?” Maro doesn’t answer, goes into the bedroom, searches behind Hossam’s clothes in the closet and pulls out his switchblade. Finally, he lies on the bed, looking at the ceiling with a stony expression, clutching the knife.

One senses that a plan for a coming fight is maturing.

The Settlement is a gripping film, without nostalgic working class romanticism or “proletarian hero” pathos, and also without the moralistically tinged tone of petty-bourgeois intellectuals, which some other socially critical films adopt. Rashad’s sober, realistic portrait of a modern industrial plant is characterized by respect for the working class and recognises something new: an increasing determination, especially among younger workers to strike back against the criminality of the ruling class.

It recalls the revolutionary struggles in Egypt in 2011 that brought down the long-term dictator Hosni Mubarak in which industrial workers, including those from Alexandria, played a decisive role.

To be continued



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