Paul Greengrass' *The Uprising*: Revolt against intolerable conditions in the past—and present

Paul Bond
3 November 2026

In 1381, following the devastation of the Black Death and in a war-driven economic crisis, peasants in southern England rose in rebellion against the imposition of a poll tax. The Peasants' Revolt was crushed by military repression after being lulled with false promises by the king.

Pandemic, war, economic crisis, the machinations of the ruling class, revolt—these are timely matters. To find a film echoing them is significant.

To find those contemporary echoes so explicitly stated is even more noteworthy. Veteran filmmaker Paul Greengrass began writing *The Uprising* in 2020, two days into the first COVID lockdown. His script is sympathetic to a population devastated by a pandemic and draws clear links between the advisory Council to King Richard II and today's oligarchs.

Greengrass could not initially get his film made but has explained that "it started becoming more and more relevant. It felt very strongly contemporary when I wrote it, and it became only more contemporary as the years went by."

Greengrass deserves credit for this, and for his continued attention to contemporary conditions. It reflects well on a successful director of Hollywood action movies that he continues to come back to the injustices of the world around him.

He has repeatedly addressed contemporary and historical issues, like *The Murder of Stephen Lawrence* (1999), *Bloody Sunday* (2001) on the 1972 massacre of unarmed civil rights protesters in Northern Ireland, and *22 July* (2018) about the neofascist murder of 77 social democratic students in Norway.

With whatever limitations, he continues to be angry at oppression and the oppressors. His determination to continue exploring this puts him in a minority of directors. It reflects well, too, that he has turned to a moment of British revolutionary history that deserves to be better known than it is.

The Uprising follows historical events reasonably closely. The leaders of the Peasants' Revolt—Wat Tyler (Cosmo Jarvis) and radical preacher John Ball (Jamie Bell)—are here. To underscore the identification with the mass of the oppressed, Greengrass's central character is a fictional but representative Essex labourer, Ploughman (Andrew Garfield). He is humanity identified as labour: "I am what I do," he says.

Comparing his historical epic with Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* (2000), Greengrass asked himself, "Who's my central character going to be? It's going to be the simple farmer, not Maximus."

The Black Death devastated Britain in 1348, killing 30-45 percent of the population. The result was super-exploitation on two fronts.

The labour shortage, which led to a Europe-wide drive for better wages and conditions, saw the aristocracy intensify its demands on labour. The feudal economy was based on serfdom, agricultural labourers tied to the landed estates of the aristocracy by debt bondage.

The abundance of land and shortage of labour after the Black Death created competition for employment. Workers were becoming more mobile in the quest for living wages, breaking from the tied land and beginning to move to towns. It was the first step towards their proletarianisation.

In response, the English monarchy froze wages to force more labour from their reduced workforce.

The monarchy was also trying to finance wars in France. The wars had resumed in 1369 when Edward III of England, now King of France again, attempted to regain previously held French territory.

To finance these wars, Edward's parliament in 1377 imposed a poll tax, a fixed levy charged per person which fell most heavily on the poorest. On Edward's death, his 10-year-old grandson became King Richard II (Woody Norman).

Richard's court imposed a second poll tax in 1379. A third, in 1380, was the final straw. Ploughman says "The land is broken. We are forced to work beyond what our souls can take."

Peasants in Kent and Essex resisted the commissioners sent to enforce the tax in 1381, assembling and marching on London under Tyler and Ball.

Initially just petitioning for relief, the peasants mounted attacks on the paperwork and individuals embodying their oppression. They killed Archbishop Sudbury (Stephen Dillane) and Treasurer Robert Hales (Tom Hollander). They torched Hales's palace, destroying the law books and contracts legally imposing their exploitation.

The king negotiated, agreeing to annul contracts and draw up new conditions of employment. This bought the aristocracy time to prepare the full force of repression against peasants disarmed by their false promises.

Tyler was killed by London's Mayor Walworth (Jonny Lee Miller), and Richard reneged on his pledges. Ball was executed (Greengrass has him falling in battle) and the uprising crushed.

The portrayal of the pent-up fury of the oppressed finally erupting is compelling. Garfield conveys the mute swelling of this

© World Socialist Web Site

anger and frustration brilliantly as the tax officials plunder and degrade his community. His explosive cry of “We’ve given you enough!” gives life to Lenin’s description of “the exploited and oppressed masses [realising] the impossibility of living in the old way.”

This rings true for audiences. As Greengrass has said, “It’s how people feel today a lot of the time: we’ve had enough.”

Greengrass sometimes almost over-explains Richard’s self-serving Council as an oligarchy. But there are worse problems to have. He lets the audience share the peasants’ belief that Richard will act for them, to show more clearly how the aristocrats exploit the poor and manoeuvre against them.

This shows the tensions within the ruling class. But whereas a ruling class struggling to rule in the old way may have those within its ranks that dislike changes in its ranks, it will overcome that resistance for the sake of maintaining its rule. The resort to different layers of the ruling class capable of implementing ever more brutal repression also rings true today.

Hales tells Richard the tax burden must fall on the poor, because “If we tax the merchants they will expect a seat at the table.” Walworth says he will only provide his militias to defend London if they are paid for and he gets such a seat.

Richard is tormented by nightmares of anger from the fields, asking, “Can you not hear their rage?” This makes more horrifying his transition from scared boy, through statesmanlike negotiator, to brutal despot shouting “Am I not Messiah?”

Ploughman’s Essex movement joins Tyler’s Kentish contingent and Ball. They advance various positions. Ploughman urges only petitioning the king for aid. Tyler, who speaks of himself as a “patriot,” agrees. The Council are described as “traitors,” with Ploughman saying they hold the king “hostage.”

They demand a return to the previous arrangements of the Domesday Book and an end to the poll tax. When Richard agrees and orders renewed charters, his mother (Katherine Waterston) says approvingly, “Without words there is only chaos … and fear.” The charters are written even as Richard prepares a massacre.

Tyler, who warned that “Once we draw blood, we open the gates of hell,” attempts to keep the crowd under control until the charters are written. However, London is sacked and the contracts representing oppression are burned. Tyler blames this on a London mob who have been accusing Flemish tailors of “stealing our jobs.”

The most interesting historical figure is John Ball, and Bell is superb in the role. He captures brilliantly the class anger and revolt Ball prefigures.

Ploughman says, “There will be no peace until we are free,” meaning restoration of their previous existence. Ball is looking to something else: “All will be well when the poison of wealth is removed.”

Historically, Ball was condemned for preaching articles contrary to the faith of the church, a precursor of the proto-Protestant Lollard movement. This religious utopianism became the radical voice of a developing working class, finding expression across Europe in peasants’ revolts—Thomas Münzer in Germany, Jan Hus in Bohemia—and later in the bourgeois revolutions that finally overthrew feudalism (the Levellers and Diggers of the English Revolution).

Ball is most famous for a sermon during the Peasants’ Revolt. Its opening lines have continued to echo through later revolutionary movements, and we hear them from Bell here:

> “Whan Adam dalf, and Eve span,
> Wo was thanne a gentilman?”
> [When Adam dug, and Eve span, who was then a gentleman?]

Contemporary chronicler Thomas Walsingham reports that Ball’s historical sermon continued with the argument that “From the beginning all men were created equal by nature, and that servitude had been introduced by the unjust and evil oppression of men, against the will of God, who, if it had pleased Him to create serfs, surely in the beginning of the world would have appointed who should be a serf and who a lord.”

He concluded with a call for “uprooting the tares [a weed that looks like wheat] that are accustomed to destroy the grain; first killing the great lords of the realm, then slaying the lawyers, justices and jurors, and finally rooting out everyone whom they knew to be harmful to the community in future.”

There existed no material basis for effecting this yet, and Ball was giving mystic expression to the anti-clerical revolt of the working class emerging from feudal society. It became a harbinger. As Frederick Engels explained of the 1524-25 Peasants’ War in Germany, “The anticipation of communism nurtured by fantasy became in reality an anticipation of modern bourgeois conditions.” (Engels’ book, *The Peasant War in Germany*, is available here)

Greengrass retains some optimism about that anticipation nurtured by fantasy, at the level of continued individual revolt. *The Uprising* was briefly marketed as a Robin Hood origin story, as Ploughman’s name echoes William Langland’s *Piers Plowman*. Langland’s poem of the 1370s contains the first mention of the Robin Hood tales in its social commentary and was mentioned in Ball’s sermons.

The unsatisfactory coda shows Ploughman in 1382 having effectively become Robin Hood, giving expression to an individualist protest rather than a collective revolt. “We rule ourselves now,” he tells Richard, saying “every night we’ll come in your dreams and you’ll never have peace.”

Even with these limitations, Greengrass film recognises a significant moment of revolutionary history that merits study. It deserves a popular audience.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site