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Lucien van der Walt

Anarchists-syndicalists sidelined

Film review: Land and Freedom, directed by Ken Loach

1997

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“Land and Freedom,” the new film [1995] by Ken Loach, provides a moving account of events in the Spanish Civil War. Loosely based on George Orwell’s “Homage to Catalonia,” it is the story of a young British working class communist militant who goes to Spain to fight fascism. Once there, he finds comradeship and romance in the militia of the POUM [Workers’ Party of Marxist Unification — an independent Marxist group later repressed by the Communist Party] and discovers the revolution within the struggle against fascism.

The film is especially notable for its portrayal of the social revolution which swept Spain after the attempted fascist coup by General Franco in 1936. For example, when the POUM militia liberates a village in the film, the villagers organise a meeting to discuss what to do next. After a heated discussion, they decide to collectivise the land and work it in common, a process repeated countless times in those areas controlled by anti-fascist forces.

On the other hand, "Land and Freedom" does not clarify for its audience the distinction between nationalisation and collectivisation. At the beginning of the film, a Spaniard showing films from the revolution explains that industry had been "nationalised" when in fact it had been collectivised through workers' self-management.

Additionally, by choosing to focus on the activities of the POUM militia, Loach provides a misleading picture of the events and actors in the revolutionary struggle in Spain. In particular, the film gives no sense of the central role played by the anarchist-syndicalist worker, women and youth organisations in making the revolution, despite the fact that they comprised the vast bulk of the revolutionary Left. Although anarchist-syndicalist colours appear throughout the film in red and black flags and neckties, and whilst the POUM militia sings the anthem of the giant anarchist-syndicalist union ["*A Las Barricadas*"], the CNT (National Confederation of Labour), no attempt is made to put across the Anarchists' point of view. For example, the events sparked by the Communist Party's attempts to commandeer the CNT-controlled telephone exchange in Barcelona [in 1937] are confusingly shown and leave the audience none the wiser.

However, notwithstanding these faults, "Land and Freedom" remains worth seeing. Fittingly, the film ends with a quote from libertarian socialist William Morris, reminiscent of the words of Nestor Makhno:

We will not conquer in order to repeat the errors of past years, the error of putting our fate into the hands of new masters; we will conquer in order to take our destinies into our own hands, to conduct our lives in accordance with our own will and our own conception of the truth.

Go see "Land and Freedom," a vivid celebration of the Spanish Revolution and the ideas that inspired it.