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NOTEBOOK / CARNET

Andrew Parnaby and Richard Rennie

THIS ISSUE OF *Labour/Le Travail* contains the second instalment of the re-designed Notebook/Carnet. The Notebook/Carnet now welcomes short essays, thought-pieces, and commentaries on issues relating to labour and the working class. Politics, popular culture, current events are all fair game. The ideal length for submissions is 1,000 words or less. The snappier, the more opinionated, the more unconventional the better. Of course, we still welcome calls for papers, conference announcements, and other such notices, so keep sending them in. Submissions should be sent c/o Rick Rennie and Andy Parnaby, Notebook/Carnet, *Labour/Le Travail*, Memorial University of Newfoundland, St. John's, NF A1C 5S7. Or e-mail them to rrennie@plato.ucs.mun.ca

FILM REVIEW

Land and Freedom

Directed by Ken Loach. Screenplay Jim Allen. Score George Fenton. Production Rebecca O'Brien, Parallax Pictures Cooperative. 1995. 110 minutes.

IN ANY DEBATE OVER revolution versus reform there's no doubt about where Ken Loach stands. As Tommy, a character in Loach's *Raining Stones* (1993) shouts while mooning a police helicopter, "You know what you want? A bloody revolution!" *Land and Freedom*, Loach's first period feature, is both a celebration of the Spanish revolution of 1936 and an indictment of Stalin's betrayal of it. The plot and political perspective will be familiar to anyone who's read George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*, but in keeping with Loach's focus on working-class people, the central character is David Carne (played by Ian Hart), a young unemployed communist from Liverpool. Inspired by a party meeting where a Spanish comrade appeals for help against Franco's insurrection, David volunteers for the Republican cause. On the train to Barcelona, he joins up with Bernard (Frederic Pierrot), a

French volunteer for the Workers' Party of Marxist Unity (POUM), a small left-communist party.

After some sketchy training, Carne finds himself serving with the POUM militia on the Aragon front. There he learns that the war was more than a fight against Franco and his fascist allies from Germany and Italy: it was also a struggle to consummate a revolution begun in July 1936 when workers armed by the anarchist trade union and left-wing parties had crushed the fascist revolt in Catalonia and central Spain. Within weeks experiments in libertarian communism had blossomed throughout the Republican zone as workers occupied and collectivized factories, shops, and rural estates. Loach vividly portrays the revolutionary atmosphere in the fall of 1936. A unionized train conductor overlooks David's lack of a ticket and embraces him as a comrade in the struggle against Franco. At the training depot Maite (Iciar Bollain), a former maid-servant to rich ex-patriots, steps out of the ranks and argues with the training officer. Arriving at the front, David is sharply disabused of his initial impression of the role of the women he finds there, when Blanca (Rosana Pastor) makes it clear that the women fight on equal terms with the men. The arrogance of a smartly groomed fascist officer captured during a reconnaissance patrol provides a sharp contrast to the informality and absence of hierarchy in the militias.

In the central sequence of the film, the POUM unit liberates a village and convenes a meeting at which the peasants vote to confiscate and collectivize the local landowner's estate. But when a tenant farmer objects to the inclusion of his own land in the collective, the debate turns to how to fight fascism. Did a revolutionary movement that alienated the middle classes and foreign capitalist powers endanger the objective of defeating Franco? The position of the Spanish Communist Party (CPE) was that it did. Marginal at the beginning of the war, the membership and prestige of the CPE jumped dramatically as a result of Soviet aid and its insistence on a cross-class popular front alliance. Reflecting the party line, an American volunteer, Gene Lawrence (Tom Gilroy), argues that the Spanish workers must moderate their radicalism in order to retain allies at home and attract them abroad. Bernard and Blanca respond that the communist position is unrealistic: power is in the hands of the people and any attempt to roll back the revolution will destroy the mass enthusiasm that is the republicans' main advantage.

The question is posed again in the spring of 1937 when the republican government calls for the integration of the militias into the new Popular Army, with its traditional command and disciplinary structure. After some debate, the unit votes to retain its revolutionary organization even though this means it will be denied the modern weapons controlled by the communists. David reluctantly sides with the majority, but soon after an injury from a malfunctioning, obsolete rifle underlines the strength of the communist argument. After convalescence in Barcelona, David decides to transfer to the International Brigades. But before he can leave for training, he's drawn into the May street-fighting that marked the final confrontation

between the communist-backed republicans and the anti-Stalinist left. The experience convinces David that the communist strategy amounts to a sell-out of the revolution. Tearing up his party card, he rejoins his POUM comrades on the Aragon front, where defeat and betrayal at the hands of the Popular Army soon follow.

Loach clearly intends his film to be both a correction of the historical record and a comment on left politics in the 1990s. Traditionally soft-pedalled or ignored in liberal and communist accounts of the civil war, the July revolution and its suppression have received the attention they deserve only in the last twenty years. The current relevance of the events depicted in the film is emphasized through its narrative structure. David's story is told in a series of flashbacks as his granddaughter reconstructs his Spanish experience from a cache of old photos, newspaper clippings, and letters home. As the young woman retraces her grandfather's political road, we realize that the radical alternative provided by the heroic Spanish anarchists and Marxists of 1936 is not dead. The message is particularly welcome at a time when the left is rushing to shed its socialist principles in favour of neo-liberalism. Released during Tony Blair's campaign to gut Labour's traditional commitment to public ownership, *Land and Freedom* offers an implicit critique of "New Labour" and similar developments in other left-wing parties.

Those familiar with Loach's earlier films will recognize his distinctive style in *Land and Freedom*. Filmed on a budget of only \$5 million, Loach's careful recreation of situations and reliance on improvisation give *Land and Freedom* a spontaneity usually lacking in period features. Most of the cast, including the villagers in the film's central scenes, are non-professionals, and Loach made a point of seeking out working-class anarchists and left radicals to play the Spanish, British, Italian, and French militia volunteers of the POUM. It is choices such as these that make the film work, as cinema, as history, and as politics. Five red stars.

Lawin Armstrong
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PROJECT: REMEMBERING THE MAC-PAPS

THE ASSOCIATION OF Veterans and Friends of the MacKenzie-Papineau Battalion, in co-operation with the British Columbia Federation of Labour and the provincial government, is hard at work raising money in order to erect a monument to the BC veterans of the Mac-Paps and the International Brigades. The Association hopes to place one memorial on the grounds of the provincial legislature in Victoria and another at the CPR station in downtown Vancouver — the place where many began their journey to Spain — to commemorate the volunteers' contribution to the fight against fascism. The association's fundraising goal is \$75,000 — of which \$25,000 has already been secured. If you or your union/organization would like to make a donation to this project or require additional information, please contact Tom Kozar