

Review

Days of Hope

A portrayal of workers' struggle

Recently film director Ken Loach contrasted the BBC of the 1960s and 70s, which allowed a degree of political commitment and artistic freedom, with today's conservative, commercially driven programme making. Of course it should be pointed out that even in that 'golden era' political censorship existed,

indeed Loach himself suffered from it. Nevertheless, the recent release of the drama Days of Hope as part of the DVD box set, Loach At The BBC, does indicate a very different TV environment than that which exists today. Roger Davey reviews the series.

It is impossible to believe that Days of Hope would have any chance of being shown today.

Even when it was screened in 1975 it caused a stream of controversy and condemnation from the rightwing press. The reason for this outrage was that the series, written by Trotskyist Jim Allen, dramatised from a Marxist perspective the bitter struggles that erupted in Britain after World War One, which culminated in the 1926 General Strike.

It challenged the dominant historical narrative of a united Britain, and instead portrayed a society riven by a fierce class struggle, between an increasingly politically conscious working class and an utterly ruthless ruling class determined to defend its power and wealth.

Furthermore it provoked anger with its attack on the Labour and trade union leaders who are shown consciously betraying the great struggles of that period.

Period of conflict

Another important reason for its massive impact was that it was shown during a period in the 1970s of major industrial and political conflict. It was an era that witnessed the huge power and confidence of the working class movement as it sought to defend its living standards as the post-war boom came to an end.

The series then is clearly not just an account of the struggles during the 1920s, but also a commentary on events during the 70s, particularly regarding the leadership of the trade unions. It is also equally relevant today, as it explores many of the issues that confront socialists today in what will again be a time of great social upheaval.

The series itself charts a tumultuous period in history through the lives of a small group of mainly working class political activists. We see how these characters react and are shaped by the huge industrial and political struggles of their time.

It begins during World War One, showing the courage and idealism of husband and wife Philip and Sarah as they sought to defend their



The background of working class communities



Paul Copley as Ben Matthews

Quaker pacifist views in the face of violent state persecution. We also meet the younger brother of Sarah, Ben, who enthusiastically joins the army to fight in the war.

He gets posted to Ireland and it is his experiences there, combined with his regiment's deployment to occupy a Durham striking pit village, that leads him to desert. This is symbolised by the smashing of his army rifle. During the long and bitter miners' strike of 1921, the state in effect

declared martial law on the working class. But Days of Hope depicts miners and their families fighting back, and in the process being politicised by the repression they face.

However, it is episodes three and four which I think are the most interesting and relevant for today's struggles. 1924 saw the election of the first minority Labour government, one that was little different to the previous Conservative administrations. By now Philip is a newly-elected Labour MP,

believing that through parliament this government, headed by Ramsay MacDonald, could achieve socialism. Also indicative of Philip's political direction is that he is used by Ernest Bevin to undermine the dockers' strike and thereby attempt to sideline the growing Communist Party.

Philip inevitably comes into conflict with his brother-in-law Ben, who has now joined the Communist Party (CP). The film explores with some skill the conflict between reformism and Marxism as personified by Philip and Ben.

The episode also makes clear the huge impact of the Russian Revolution had on political developments in Britain. The growing bureaucratisation of the Soviet Union is also hinted at with, incredibly for the BBC, a discussion on the effects of the New Economic Policy, the Lenin Levy, and the struggle of the Left Opposition.

Episode four concentrates on the betrayal by the Trades Union Congress leaders of the 1926 General Strike. It also shows how the CP, now increasingly reflecting the interests of the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union, fails to prepare the working class for the betrayal of the so-called lefts on the TUC.

Councils of action

The only small criticism I have of the episode is there is perhaps too much concentration on the negotiations between the TUC leaders and the government.

However, we do see the establishment of Councils of Action, bodies set up by the rank and file to run the strike. These councils were organised throughout the country and represented a threat to the trade union leaders who feared losing control of the strike. The film concentrates on London although the councils were actually most developed in other areas. Under the impact of these events Sarah becomes active in one of these councils, much to Philip's horror.

The series ends with the sell-out of the strike. Ben and Sarah, reflecting the frustration and disgust of millions of workers, bitterly attack

Philip and the Labour and trade union leadership for this historical betrayal.

Days of Hope is not just a great series politically, but is also a fine dramatic piece of TV. The political lessons and ideas are superbly interwoven with the lives of the principal characters.

The programme also reflects the brilliance of Loach as a film director. In particular what struck me was his skilful use of long takes, which allows ideas and arguments to develop in a realistic and natural way. Unlike today's TV, where each scene seems to last about a minute, presumably because nobody believes working class audiences are capable of concentrating anymore.

Loach and writer Jim Allen had more regard for viewers than that, indeed they had more respect for the working class who simply do not just suffer but are shown resisting the attacks of the ruling class and at the same time becoming attracted to the ideas of socialism.

We are entering a similar period to that covered in this series. Again we will see mass working class struggle but, unlike the 1920s, this time let's make sure we get the leadership we deserve.

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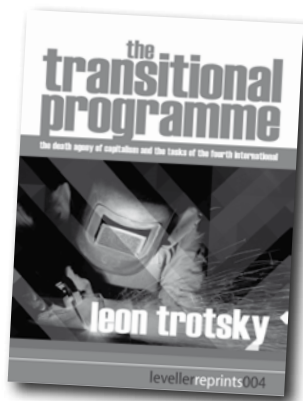
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