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Britain

"The Navigators"

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KEN Loach is Britain's best-known independent filmmaker. He became known in the 1960s through 'social realist' TV dramas like *Cathy Come Home*, about homelessness, *The Lump* about the exploitation of casual workers in the building trade, and *Kes*, the moving story of a working class boy and his love for his pet kestrel. In the 1970s he made, together with leftwing scriptwriter Jim Allen, the monumental series *Days of Hope* about the 1926 British general strike. In the early 1980s, at the high tide of Thatcherism, Loach was virtually blacklisted by TV bosses and unable to work.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/gif/loach.gif>]

But at the end of the decade he started a prolific stream of independent movies which continues to this day. These include *Hidden Agenda* about Northern Ireland, *Carla's Song* about Nicaragua, *Land and Freedom* about the Spanish Civil War, and *Raining Stones* about a working class community in Manchester. All have caused controversy, none more than *Land and Freedom*, which followed closely Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*, and was hotly debated by former participants in the Spanish revolution. His most recent film is *The Navigators*, about the British railways after privatisation. Loach also directed the Socialist Alliance TV broadcast for the 2001 British general election. Alan Thornett spoke to him following the release of *The Navigators*.

Your movie shows a very thorough knowledge of the rail worker's background. How did you get it?

The script was written by Rob Dawber who was a railwayman, a track worker for seventeen years. I hope the film reflects his knowledge and experience. Also, many of the parts are taken by people who are, or were, rail workers. There were always experts on hand to put me right.

Can you explain how the railways in Britain got to this point?

The railways were the last major industry to be privatised by the government of Margaret Thatcher and John Major. Their belief was that only private capital and the disciplines of the market would make for efficiency and high productivity. The consequence, as with all privatisation, has been disastrous. In a rational society there would be a balance between society's needs and its ability to satisfy them. There would be a thoughtful and ordered use of resources. There would be proper training and working conditions with fair pay and job security. The needs of private capital are quite incompatible with such requirements.

The railways were divided into separate units while still in public ownership. Different buyers were sought for the track and train operation. Working conditions were attacked. Safety procedures were changed. Many thousands of experienced workers left the industry. The railway culture of safe practices, built up over generations, was consciously attacked. The consequent mess, predicted by railwaymen, seems to be a surprise to the Labour government. They are ideologically committed to privatisation, like their predecessors. Despite an unusual degree of popular support, the government refuses to take the railways back in to public ownership and develop a properly funded transport system using the most advanced technology. Instead, the subsidy to the private owners has increased and the chaos continues.

The new extension of global capitalism is destroying even the idea of workers' solidarity, it's not very promising. What do you think?

You're right, the facility to transfer capital around the world in an instant, searching for the fastest profit, is a challenge

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to the workers' movement. The bureaucratic leadership of most unions in Britain seems incapable of meeting this. But the fight against casualisation, so-called flexibility, privatisation and redundancies calls for a new internationalism. If we are to have any chance of getting a few victories, particularly in the new integrated Europe, we must make and develop contacts at grassroots level. Whenever I've had the chance to see these contacts made, I'm always surprised at the immense good will and sense of solidarity that is waiting to flower.

The end of your film is a terrible and dark end for the workers... Is it because you think there aren't any other perspectives possible today?

The end of the film is dark, because we didn't want to encourage any false hopes. Unsafe working practices and poor working conditions are a necessary consequence of privatisation, not a bit of individual bad luck. There is only one way out, in the end: a publicly owned and accountable railway run by those who work in it, in partnership with the community it serves.

If you hadn't any constraints, what would be the movie of your dreams?

The movie of my dreams is the next one. The cinema of my dreams is something else. Maybe run on the same principles as we would like to see the railways operate!