An exchange on Michael Moore’s Sicko

By David Walsh
14 July 2007

A number of readers have written in to the WSWS expressing disagreement with the comment we posted on Michael Moore’s new documentary film, Sicko. “Michael Moore’s Sicko: very limited conceptions, very limited results”.

The following letter perhaps best sums up these views:

Dear David Walsh:

I have not seen Sicko yet, but I thought your criticisms were off base. Your main objection seems to be that Moore emphasized the mass entertainment aspect too much for your tastes, and underemphasized the larger social and historical context of the healthcare issue. Here is the problem: If Moore had made his film the way you suggest, it would have a tiny audience, rather than the millions who will watch and appreciate Sicko. The WSWS is excellent in substantive terms—but how many people read it every day? Compare that with the numbers that watch Moore’s films...

My entire adult life (and I suspect yours too) has been consumed with the simple question: When will the left come up with something that works? When will it find a formula that appeals to a genuinely mass audience in the USA? Watching Fahrenheit 9/11, I left with the impression that Moore may have finally done it. It appears Sicko will have a similar impact. Why be so vituperative in criticizing this success?

For what it is worth, I enjoy your reviews, and read them regularly. Sincerely,

DG
11 July 2007

This letter raises a number of important questions related to the political situation in the US and the development of popular consciousness, as well as problems in filmmaking.

DG may not be aware of it, but I find it significant (and ironic) that he—and several other critics of the WSWS review, as a matter of fact—defends Moore and Sicko although he hasn’t seen the film. What does this suggest? That he believes, and probably correctly, that one can gain a fairly accurate idea of its themes and approach minus an actual viewing.

At that point one is clearly speaking about something other than a significant work of art. A film, even a documentary, establishes its truth not as a series of formal concepts, summarized in a few sentences or images, but as a dramatic and intellectual experience. Serious filmmakers struggle with their material and in some fashion the viewer reproduces that effort in watching the final product and responding to its challenges.

Moore’s film, DG implies, is something else, essentially the “left” lowest common denominator. And he’s right in that. We know more or less what we will see and hear before we take our seats.

But how could such a film have a deep impact? In fact, I think there is less challenging material in Sicko than in some of Moore’s previous efforts, for example, Roger & Me and Fahrenheit 9/11, with all their weaknesses. And, as far as I understand, it has not had the same impact as those films, at the box office or anywhere else.

This has to do both with the content and the form of his work.

The assumption of Moore, and the assumption of some of our critics, is that a film must make matters simple for the American public either to gain a wide audience or have a significant influence. We reject this notion. In fact, we think the opposite is the case.

No one at the WSWS idealizes the present level of consciousness; we are well aware of the political difficulties that exist. Unfortunately, those who adapt themselves, or half-adapt themselves, to the present state of confusion very rarely want to consider its historical background or their own role in perpetuating it. They say, ‘People have very little knowledge about politics or history, so we have to tailor our arguments to what people will currently accept.’ If no one tells the public the truth, and very few have in America in recent decades, then how is it to learn anything?

DG says, “My entire adult life (and I suspect yours too) has been consumed with the simple question: When will the left come up with something that works? When will it find a formula that appeals to a genuinely mass audience in the USA?” That isn’t how we see it at all. The development of a mass left-wing movement in the US is not a matter of finding something, as every garden variety pragmatist would argue, “that works.” It is, first and foremost, a question of the maturity of the crisis of American and world capitalism. The task of Marxists is to engage in a struggle to raise political and cultural consciousness, confident that such a struggle will meet, under certain conditions, with a massive popular response.

Moore’s continued prominence, frankly, is itself an expression of the political immaturity of wide layers of the population, including its “left” elements.

Honestly, which aspects of Moore’s film genuinely rise above the level of individual segments aired on CBS’ “60 Minutes” or other similar television programs, done every week and sometimes more effectively? Much of Sicko has that quality, of an extended broadcast news item, with all their weaknesses. And, as far as I understand, it has not had the same impact as those films, at the box office or anywhere else.

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For example, another of our reader-critics, JW, asserts that “there are several points that the film makes that are stunning” and includes under this category the scene of for-profit hospital patients “taken by cab to the downtown [Los Angeles] ‘skid row’ area, and dumped still wearing thin hospital gowns and no shoes!”

In fact, on July 13 CNN broadcast an extended item on this practice, noting pointedly that it had been covering the story for “two years.” The cable channel may have felt incentive to promote its coverage of the hospitals’ malfeasance as a result of Sicko’s release, but this merely underscores the essential point: exposés of this variety, which fail to trace social atrocities to their general source in capitalism and the continued disenfranchisement of the working class within the two-party system, are not unusual, certainly not “stunning,” and represent no threat by themselves to the status quo.

Why are our critics so certain that American audiences could not have understood something more complicated? Why do they ask so little? Moore spends a few misleading minutes on history in Sicko, blaming Richard Nixon for the present state of healthcare and referring to Ronald Reagan’s role in the anti-“socialized medicine” campaign of the Cold War years.

The US has powerful political and ideological traditions. The revolutionary democratic ideas of Tom Paine and others swept the
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(396)
(298)
(320)
(343) colonies in 1776. The number of copies distributed of Paine’s Common
Sense is a matter of controversy, but it apparently totaled at least 150,000
(396)
(298)
(320)
(343) and perhaps as many as 600,000), within a population of only a few
million colonists. In the 1850s, which also witnessed an American
Renaissance in literature (Melville, Whitman, Hawthorne, Thoreau and
others), the US population found itself riveted by complex political and
constitutional issues.

Historian James McPherson, in an interview with the WSWS in 2003
(See “A conversation with historian James M. McPherson”), noted that
during the famed 1858 campaign between Democrat Stephen Douglas and
Republican Abraham Lincoln, candidates for the US Senate in Illinois,
“People traveled miles and waited for hours to hear the debates [each of
which lasted at least three hours], on critical political issues. The
population was aware of the issues, there was great political interest and
intensity. Big ideas were advanced, and policies arose from these big
ideas.”

The muckrakers of the Progressive Era, including Upton Sinclair (The
Jungle); novelists like Dreiser, Dos Passos, Fitzgerald, Hemingway;
commentators like Mencken—all of these figures, and many more, had
wide audiences for substantial and artistically presented conceptions.

Is the American population now stupid and indifferent? If our critics
think so, they should say as much and explain how this has happened.

Moore is a filmmaker, who has demonstrated a degree of courage and
independence in the past. He has shown a certain commitment to the
working class population and attempts to picture its difficulties.

Politically, however, Moore belongs to the liberal left in the US, whose
aversion to theory, political laziness and unseriousness are among the
factors hindering a genuine mass political development. Such people
always excuse themselves by blaming the population. “They” would be
“ready” to break with the Democrats, of course, but the “people” aren’t.
“They” are for very “radical” policies, but Americans are so “backward.”
“They” are even “socialists,” in the privacy of their own homes, but the
so-called “S” word is “unmentionable” in the US. Such people fail to see
that their own half-heartedness and fear of principled struggle play an
objective role in helping to prop up the existing political set-up.

Grasping the present problems in social consciousness requires, among
other things, a historical evaluation of the role of the various parties and
organizations that have claimed in some way to represent the interests of
broad layers of the population: the trade unions, American liberalism,
the civil rights leadership. This is not the place for such an evaluation, but
we are convinced that any objective observer would conclude that the US
population has been abandoned to the tender mercies of a rapacious ruling
elite by all of these social elements, which have moved sharply to the
right.

It is, one must repeat, verging on the dishonest of Moore to treat the
question of healthcare without any reference to the refusal of the Democratic
Party in the 1940s (under Roosevelt and Truman), at its social
reformist height, to enact deep-going social measures. The easier
participation of the AFL and CIO bureaucracies in the purging of socialist
and left-wing forces during the McCarthy era meant the subsequent
political strangulation of the labor movement and its unwavering
commitment to pro-capitalist policies. It is impossible to understand the
absence of universal healthcare in the US or struggle for such a measure
today without considering these historical issues. Moore chose not to
discuss any of this.

In a friendly review of Sicko in the Nation magazine, Christopher Hayes
writes that Sicko is different from Moore’s last two efforts. Not just
because of an absence of gimmicky gotcha moments, or a reduction in
screen time for Moore himself, but because its topic isn’t fundamentally
polarizing in the way his previous works were.... Moore’s solution is
simple: Get rid of the health insurance companies. Don’t just tinker with
the healthcare system, banish profit from the delivery of healthcare
altogether. Socialize it. Make it a public good.”

Moore proposes “simple,” easy, unchallenging answers to extremely
complex questions. He advocates alleviating the healthcare crisis in
America while leaving untouched the foundations of the profit system,
through the medium of the Democratic Party. This “practical,” “realistic”
approach is the most fantastic and deluded. The Democrats represent the
Corporate-financial elite. For holidays and election campaigns they
mobilize a few populist phrases and arguments.

Moore has associated himself, critically or otherwise, with the various
healthcare plans advanced by the leading 2008 Democratic presidential
hopefuls, while acknowledging that former vice president Al Gore, who
has yet to announce his entrance into the race, is the candidate closest to
his heart. Let’s not forget that in 2004 Moore initially supported retired
General Wesley Clark, commander of the NATO bombing campaign
during the brutal Kosovo War in 1999, in the Democratic Party
presidential nomination process.

Why, contrary to our critics, should we be grateful for small mercies,
such as Sicko’s attack on the private insurance carriers? One of our
critics, RL., argues that “You don’t try to fight the greed-ridden nature
of privatized medicine for profit with nuanced intellectual analysis, which,
of course, has its place.” Then with what? Vague populism, which
remains attached to the Democratic Party? With vulgar and, to be blunt,
incorrect depictions of the Canadian and European healthcare systems?
What would be the reaction of Moore and our reader-critics to slashing,
left-wing exposés by Canadian and European filmmakers of the
healthcare systems in their countries? Would they argue that such things
are “unhelpful” and that the critics should keep their mouths shut because
the stupid Americans might be confused otherwise?

On the contrary, we believe the population needs far more, ten times
more, “nuanced intellectual analysis.” There is hardly anything in such
short supply in America, and the political, social and cultural
consequences of its absence should be clear for everyone to see.

The development of a broadly based socialist movement in the US and
globally depends on the cultivation of complicated ideas among masses of
people. Simplification, “dumbing down,” even “left mythologizing,” help
no one. As the noted French left-wing writer Daniel Guerin explained in
the 1930s in Fascism and Big Business, unlike the extreme right,
socialism “appeals more to intelligence and reason than to the senses and
imagination. Socialism does not impose a faith to be accepted without
discussion; it presents a rational criticism of the capitalist system and
requires of everybody, before his adherence, a personal effort of reason
and judgment. It appeals more to the brain than to the eye or the nerves;
It seeks to convince the reader or listener calmly, not to seize him, move
him, and hypnotize him.”

Moore is indulging in a variety of left-wing tabloid journalism, for
which a number of commentators have commended him.

Jonathan Cohn, writing in the New Republic, observes: “I spent plenty
of intellectual dishonesties and arguments without context—enough,
surely, to keep right-wing truth squads (and some left-wing ones) busy for
weeks.... Still, by the time the final credits ran, it was hard to get too
worked up about all of that. Because, beyond all the grandstanding and
political theater, the movie actually made a compelling, argument about
what’s wrong with US healthcare and how to fix it. Sicko got a lot of the
little things wrong. But it got most of the big things right.”

Chicago Tribune columnist Clarence Page is even more explicit: “It’s
hard for the public to make an intelligent choice when only one side’s
view gets the big megaphone. Moore evens things up a bit. He uses the
same big-screen pop culture that brings us Paris Hilton and ‘American
Idol’ to summon our eyeballs to something truly valuable: a vision of
how much better America’s healthcare system could be.”

There is a relation between form and content. The sloppiness and
inaccuracy of Moore’s film speaks to the half-baked conceptions behind
it. Critics like Cohn, from the right-wing, anticommunist New
approve of Sicko because the film neither fundamentally challenges the
economic and political status quo nor seeks to elevate the American
population in a profound way. For the same reason, the film has been
hailed by sections of the Democratic Party and Moore has been feted by a
host of charlatans, Rep. Dennis Kucinich among them.

Is Sicko an enduring and important work of art? American cinema has
produced extraordinary works, socially probing and artistically complex.
In the 1930s and 1940s, and even beyond, filmmakers influenced by
socialist ideas, Orson Welles and others, offered serious pictures of life
within the limited confines of the studio system.

What indication is there that Moore has paid the slightest attention to
the history of his art form? His flair, his willingness to ask embarrassing
questions, his opposition to the biggest corporate and political villains
have sometimes made it possible to overlook his artistic failings. There
were genuinely affecting segments of Bowling for Columbine and
Fahrenheit 9/11, and such moments are not lacking in Sicko, but, in the
long run, the weaknesses far outweigh the strengths. And the truth is that
popular opinion has largely caught up to and surpassed Moore. He is not
telling anyone very much that he or she doesn’t know by now. On the
contrary, he is beginning to belabor the obvious, which is always a
dangerous sign.

Sicko is a poorly constructed film. A series of loosely strung together
sequences, it has no central thrust or impulse. Moore points his camera in
one direction or another, and sometimes gets it right. He relies on his
political instincts and his ability to improvise. Those qualities have
sometimes yielded valuable material, but they have their definite
limitations. Those limitations have been reached. Moore could only
advance by deepening his analysis of contemporary life.

The film relies, as we noted in the original review, on personal
anecdote. Why couldn’t a right-wing director make a film composed of
interviews with thoroughly satisfied health insurance company clients in
the US and thoroughly dissatisfied Europeans and Canadians? What
would that prove?

Crude is never excusable. “A pockmarked art,” it was pointed out
many years ago, “is no art and is therefore not necessary to the working
masses. Those who believe in a ‘pock-marked’ art are imbued to a
considerable extent with contempt for the masses” (Trotsky).

And there is a specific history of documentary filmmaking, both
American and international. Is Moore familiar with the work of Robert
Flaherty, or the “Direct Cinema” of Richard Leacock, D.A. Pennebaker,
Albert Maysles and Frederick Wiseman? Not for the sake of his personal
edification, but to render his images more precise and elegant. Form has
an impact on content. If Moore began with a serious approach to cinema
he could not be satisfied with such careless and sometimes manipulative
results.

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would have a tiny audience, rather than the millions who will watch and
appreciate Sicko. The WSWS is excellent in substantive terms—but how
many people read it every day? Compare that with the numbers that watch
Moore’s films ...”

A different, more challenging film might have reached a smaller
audience, but if it provided genuine direction, depth, its impact would, in
the end, have been far greater. Muddy, quasi-socialist, populist notions
will rally around them a vague, unclear and unfocused political movement
that the Democratic Party will have no difficulty in bringing under its
sway. The WSWS has a different conception and perspective.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

http://www.wsws.org