



Is 'Doing Your Best' Ever Enough When You Are Working Class?

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In 2016, I wrote about how Ken Loach's film *I, Daniel Blake* illustrated the impact of the draconian British welfare system on working-class people. Watching that film was a visceral experience, so much so that I still can't bring myself to rewatch some scenes, such as one in a [food bank](#). Loach's latest film, *Sorry We Missed You* (2019), produced the same response; I left the cinema feeling angry and sick in the stomach. Once again, the characters could be members of my family. And Loach's new [film](#) again confirms the terrible mess created by years of Tory rule, austerity measures, and neoliberalism. *Sorry We Missed You* is heartbreaking to watch.

Loach has created another uncompromising story that works as a parallel piece to *I, Daniel Blake*. They are set in the same city, and the story worlds could easily coincide. Whereas *I, Daniel Blake* focused on the absurdity and cruelty of the rules around claiming government benefits (welfare), *Sorry We Missed You* highlights the exploitation of workers in the so-called '[gig economy](#)' and the impact of funding cuts and privatisation on local council services and the National Health Service. The film follows Ricky (Kris Hitchen), Abby

(Debbie Honeywood), and their two children, Seb (Rhys Stone) and Liza Jae (Katie Proctor).

As they often say, they are trying to do their best. They work 14-hour days, have no time together or for the family, and are struggling to stay afloat. Ricky has left the building trade due to the downturn in available work, and he decides to 'go it alone' by working as a parcel courier for a fictional dispatch company. The idea is sold to him as a way of starting his own business as a franchisee, to be his own boss and control what he earns. The work requires a van, which he can either hire for £65 a day from the company or buy himself. He takes out a loan to buy his own after selling Abby's car to meet the down payment. He starts the job in debt, and the debts increase when he has to skip work for family reasons and is fined by the company, who hold him responsible for the value of goods that are stolen and for broken company equipment. Instead of working for himself, he realises he is beholden to the company's rules, without any of the benefits of being an employee. He gets no sick or holiday pay, and he is responsible for his own insurance (both for himself and his vehicle). Ricky's plight is terrible – he is forced to work long hours to simply repay his debt before he can actually start earning. The hours lead to fatigue and unsafe working conditions. But as the manager of the parcel depot makes clear, the customers don't care whether the drivers are so tired they'll fall asleep at the wheel. They are only interested in how quickly their delivery will arrive. Ricky is exhausted and unable to think clearly, and the toll on his health builds throughout the film.



Sorry We Missed You

Meanwhile, Abby's day starts at 7:30am, when she begins her rounds as a carer – preparing breakfast for elderly and disabled 'clients' (a term she hates) and getting them washed and dressed. Her day ends at 9pm after she has helped her clients get ready for bed. By the time she is home, it is too late to spend any time with her own family. The scenes depicting Abby's work are particularly heartbreaking. As a contract carer, she works for an agency on a zero hours contract and is allocated limited time to spend with each client. Abby wants to

help the elderly and vulnerable people, but the only way she can give them the care she thinks they need is to sacrifice time with her own family – using her unpaid breaks to spend more time with clients. All of this affects her wellbeing, and it reflects the impact of budget cuts to local authorities and the push to privatise and outsource. Local authorities' budgets have been slashed to the bone, so they cannot provide the in-home care required by elderly and disabled people in the community. Abby's clients are sometimes left soiled and in distress as they wait alone between carer visits.

I experienced this first-hand when my mother became infirm prior to her death in 2018. She was too frail to take care of herself, and she relied on neighbours (I live on the other side of the world). Despite being completely reliant on government benefits and having no assets (she lived in public housing), the only care available would have required her to pay a local outsourced provider for help with preparing meals, getting up in the morning, and going to bed. The service cost £15 an hour – money she didn't have. After she experienced several hospital admissions and worsening health, I spent hours calling and emailing the local social services. An in-home care package for her was approved a few days before her final admission to hospital (where she passed away).

All of the carers who visited my mother were wonderful. Just like Abby, they did their best. They were paid minimum wage and did all they could to make my mother more comfortable. They listened to her stories and brought in treats from the shop, but they were working in a system that relies on unpaid caring (from family and neighbours). When a family cannot provide the necessary 24-hour care, like Abby's clients and in my mother's case, the over-stretched carers cannot provide the levels of care needed to maintain dignity and quality of life.

Like Loach's earlier film, *Sorry We Missed You* provides another punch in the guts. It's hard to imagine how much longer people like Ricky and Abby will be able to continue 'doing their best'. Millions are suffering due to austerity measures and unfettered neo-liberalism. Hopefully, Loach's film will spark some change.

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