



[Heat Vision](#) [Box Office](#) [Reviews](#) [Archives](#)

i We have updated the list of services that we support on this site. You can review and update your [consent settings](#), or find out more about the [services we support](#). [x](#)

MOVIES

How Ken Loach's Cannes-Winning 'I, Daniel Blake' Sparked a Political Movement

2:33 AM PST 12/13/2016 by Alex Ritman



Courtesy of Cannes Film Festival

I, Daniel Blake

[Heat Vision](#) [Box Office](#) [Reviews](#) [Archives](#)

Backed by a unique grassroots marketing campaign, the acclaimed film, which launches in the U.S. on December 23, has been adopted by politicians and activists to highlight the injustices in the U.K.'s benefits system.

On Nov. 16, 1966, around 12 million people – approximately a quarter of the British population at the time – tuned in to watch a drama called *Cathy Come Home* on BBC TV.

Directed by an up-and-coming 30-year-old, this heartbreaking story of a young couple's descent into poverty and homelessness amid a failing welfare state offered an early glimpse into a new style of gritty, kitchen-sink filmmaking that would later be defined by the name of the man behind the camera, as well as having a profound effect on the society it sought to criticize. Support for the homeless charity Shelter, which coincidentally launched a few days after the broadcast, got a dramatic boost thanks to the issues the film raised. The public reaction and a subsequent publicity campaign led to another charity to fight poverty and homelessness– Crisis – being formed in 1967.

Fifty years (almost to the day), two Palme d'Ors, one BAFTA Fellowship, and a (rejected) Order of the British Empire later, Ken Loach seems to have done it again.

I, Daniel Blake—which earned the now 80-year-old the second of his Palmes at this year's Cannes and has become Loach's biggest box-office hit in his home country—has arguably entered the public consciousness and sparked a political debate more than any of his films since *Cathy Come Home*.

Instead of a young mother falling through the gaps of a housing crisis, in *I, Daniel Blake*, the focus is on a middle-aged blue-collar worker attempting to navigate the precarious and bureaucratic

[Heat Vision](#) [Box Office](#) [Reviews](#) [Archives](#)

As in *Cathy Come Home* (and much of Loach's output), the arguments raised are topical, hot-button issues. The director and his longtime writer-collaborator Paul Laverty did extensive research at Job Centers across the U.K. The film also arrives amid a growing mountain of controversy surrounding the British government's Department for Work and Pensions. Statistics released last year showed that between 2011 and 2014, an average of almost 90 people a month had died within weeks of being told they were healthy enough to work. Numerous individual cases have hit the headlines, most recently a 59-year-old suffering from early-onset dementia, alongside fibromyalgia and osteoporosis in his knees and with a full-time caregiver, who received a letter saying his allowance was being cut off unless he returned to employment.

READ MORE

['I, Daniel Blake': Cannes Review](#)

While it's not unusual for a Loach title to pack a powerful political punch (it would be more shocking without one), the momentum that gathered steam behind *I, Daniel Blake* was unlike anything expected from your average arthouse release.

Backed by an inspired and unique campaign by distributors eOne, turbo-charged thanks to the Cannes victory, the film has become more than just one of the cultural talking points of the year. For campaigners and political parties, *I, Daniel Blake* has been a rallying cry to action. The film has been referenced several times in Parliament (where leader of the opposition Jeremy Corbyn of the Labour Party urged Prime Minister Theresa May—whose Conservative Party has overseen major benefits cutbacks—to watch the film). November 17 was even renamed *I, Daniel Blake* Day to raise awareness and to help fight against further cuts.

Almost two months after the release, producer Rebecca O'Brien – who formed Sixteen Films with Loach in 2002 and has produced most of his films since working on 1990's *Hidden Agenda* – tells *The Hollywood Reporter* that the requests for press regarding *I, Daniel Blake* have “only just started” to die down.

"The rollout and the arrival of the film into the public conscious has just been fantastic," she says.

O'Brien says it was the response from Cannes – where the world premiere saw countless teary eyes across the Palais, followed by a 15-minute standing ovation – that kick-started the promotional campaign.



[Heat Vision](#) [Box Office](#) [Reviews](#) [Archives](#)

says EOne — spearheaded by its U.K. chief Alex Hamilton, who vowed to make *I, Daniel Blake* his cause for the year — adopted a new approach, employing five regional marketing managers to work with local communities on a grassroots level to get the conversation going long before the film was set for release (which, unlike most of Loach's Cannes-bowing titles, was pushed back to later in the year).

For the U.K. premiere, rather than going with the obvious choice of October's BFI London Film Festival, *I, Daniel Blake* was taken up to Newcastle, where it was filmed (and where its lead actor Dave Johns is from).

"Take a film home, and people take cultural ownership, it's theirs," says O'Brien, adding that people whose stories resonated with those of the characters were invited to the pre-screening press conference. "There was no shying away from the fact that this is a political film."

Other screenings were held coinciding with political party conferences (and in the same cities), while at the London premiere, alongside politicians from the Labour Party as special guests, a demonstration was held outside the cinema by those whose loved ones had died after being told they were ineligible for benefits and should return to work.

"It was very sad. But they asked us if they could do it, and we were delighted that they did," says O'Brien.

Elsewhere, there were stunts such as beaming the film's title and one of its most stirring speeches onto the side of the House of Parliament; putting its message across 200 sidewalks using a method known as "clean graffiti," where a high-pressure hose and stencil was used to scrub the words into the dirty pavement; and a concerted social media push that included recording videos of people reading out the speech alongside messages from those also hurt by the injustices of the benefits system.

Backed by a £300,000 (\$381,000) distribution grant from the BFI, *I, Daniel Blake* also became one of the year's biggest free-to-watch films in the U.K. EOne teamed with both trade unions and the media to put on hundreds of free cinema screenings up and down the country, most taking place several weeks before the film's official release date and with attendance levels rising each time, topping 80 percent on many occasions.

READ MORE

[U.K. Box Office: Ken Loach Lands His Biggest Opening to Date With 'I, Daniel Blake'](#)



Heat Vision Box Office Reviews Archives

itself as far more left-leaning than its rival, *The Sun*). The paper offered free tickets to its readers and even changed its logo for a day to use the film's graffiti-style font.

The free ticket tactic meant that, by the time *I, Daniel Blake* hit cinemas on Oct. 21, it had already been seen by thousands of people across the U.K.

"It was a very shrewd move by [eOne]," says O'Brien. "On the budget they had, word of mouth was essential."

And word got out. *I, Daniel Blake* became Loach's biggest U.K. opening of all time with \$540,000, topping his previous Palme winner *The Wind That Shakes the Barley*. While that 2006 hit about the Irish War of Independence may still be his biggest box-office success in the U.K., 90 percent of its \$4.9 million came from Ireland. *I, Daniel Blake* – currently at \$3.8 million but still packing cinemas – is by far his most successful film taking into account just England, Scotland and Wales.

The press campaign would continue for weeks after the release, with the writer, producer and actors giving talks alongside screenings and Loach making regular TV and radio appearances (including on BBC's *Question Time*, where he would attack the government for the "conscious cruelty" of the benefits system, a phrase he first used at the Cannes press conference). In response, Conservative politicians accused Loach of creating a work of fiction, although one of Loach's loudest critics admitted to not having seen the film.

But by then, *I, Daniel Blake* had already developed a life of its own.

Copying the actions of the title character, one individual reportedly spray-painted "I, Daniel Blake" on the side of a U.K. Job Center, while at an anti-austerity demonstration in France—where the film has so far taken in 860,000 admissions and looks likely to topple the box-office take of *The Wind That Shakes the Barley*—someone was seen carrying a banner reading "Moi, Daniel Blake."

One of the film's most shocking scenes from a food bank also inspired a charity movement on Twitter called "A Bag for Katie" (named after one of the film's other central characters), encouraging people to donate sanitary towels and toiletries. And in perhaps the most significant sign of its influence, rising Scottish politician Mhairi Black used *I, Daniel Blake* as a campaign tool for her Private Members Bill attempting to revamp one of the more contentious elements of the benefits system, using lines from the film in her speech (she also has the hashtag

[Heat Vision](#) [Box Office](#) [Reviews](#) [Archives](#)

As awards season gears up, the noise around *I, Daniel Blake* continues. The film won best actor for Dave Johns and best newcomer for Hayley Squires at the British Independent Film Awards, both using their time on stage to address its political nature (Squires highlighted how the script was based "completely on truth" and spoke out for "young single mums who want to do their absolute best, while others want to do their absolute best to tear them down.") Less than a week later, it claimed top honors at the Evening Standard film awards, winning best film, best actress and most powerful scene. On collecting the award for an absent Loach, O'Brien said the film depicted "the absolute truth of what's happening to millions of British people in this country."

The Oscars could be a step too far, but if *I, Daniel Blake* picks up anything at the BAFTAs (and eyebrows will certainly be raised if it doesn't earn any nominations) then it's unlikely whoever makes the acceptance speech is going to miss the opportunity to say something political on such a major platform.

Whether *I, Daniel Blake* leads to any real change remains to be seen (Loach argued that *Cathy Come Home* actually had little direct impact on homelessness). However, O'Brien says that in addition to raising the profile of the issues at hand, the film has given those affected the strength to talk about a subject they might have been too embarrassed about before.

"So many people have seen the film and found they're not the only one," she says. "I think many people have found their voice through the film."

I, Daniel Blake next opens in the U.S. on Dec. 23, with IFC's Sundance Selects distributing. Copying the grassroots campaigning might be a more difficult task over the Atlantic, but given the success it has found thanks to the support of left-wing politicians in the U.K., there is one person who could give it a publicity boost of seismic proportions.

Says O'Brien: "If they had any sense, they'd give it to Bernie [Sanders]."

READ MORE

[Cannes: Ken Loach Slams "Conscious Cruelty" in Welfare System, Urges Against Brexit](#)

Cookie Settings