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Towards Workers' Control

1971

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“Anarchists must recognize the usefulness and the importance of the workers’ movement, must favor its development, and make it one of the levers for their actions, doing all they can so that it, in conjunction with all existing progressive force, will culminate in a social revolution which leads to the suppression of classes and to complete freedom, equality, peace and solidarity among all human beings. But it would be a great and fatal illusion to believe, as many do, that the workers’ movement can and must on its own, by its very nature, lead to such a revolution. On the contrary, all movements founded on material and immediate interests (and a mass working-class movement cannot be founded on anything else), if the ferment, the drive and the unremitting efforts of men of ideas struggling and making sacrifices for an ideal future are lacking, tend to adapt themselves to circumstances, foster a conservative spirit, and the fear of change in those who manage to improve conditions, and often end up by creating new privileged classes and serving to support and consolidate the system which one would want to destroy.”¹

The above was written by Malatesta in October 1927 and refers to the situation existing in Italy at that time. However its description and analysis are applicable to this country in present-day circumstances.

It is certainly true that the present role of trade unions has created a privileged class of bureaucrats whose functions are to serve and consolidate the present economic system. Any change in this system will have to have the support of those who are at present organized within these unions. It is not a case of changing the leadership of the trade unions to one of men who believe in revolutionary action, but rather one of changing the outlook of the members.

At certain periods in the history of the trade union movement, some unions have adopted a revolutionary approach to their problems. In Britain during the years 1910 through 1922, railwaymen, miners and engineers formally adopted resolutions which either demanded a share in the control of their industry or the complete take-over under workers’ control. These periods may be the exception rather than the rule but they nevertheless indicate the desire of workers, in certain situations, for revolutionary change.

Nationalization, No Answer

Many of the dreams for workers’ control, like those put forward in the “Miners’ Next Step”² for the taking over and running of the industry, have ended in disillusionment under nationalization. Instead of giving the control of an industry to

¹ Malatesta, *Life and Ideas*, by V. Richards, pp. 113–114.

² “Miners’ Next Step.” A pamphlet written by the South Wales miners in 1912.

the workers who are employed in it, nationalization has made these industries larger, more rigid and more remote. Far from investing the ownership with the community, it has strengthened the State. Nationalization is a political concept which has given the State industrial power and this, coupled with social and political power, gives the State enormous authority over all aspects of our lives. The idea that nationalization was a step towards eventual workers' control has proved not only wrong but disastrous. Those industries that have been nationalized have also been those in decline and the resulting program has meant that huge numbers of workers were made redundant. Rather than giving workers more control, nationalization has made management more remote, more powerful and therefore more able to resist the demands made on them by the workers.

Man's desire for control over his own life runs very deep among his basic instincts. Nobody will admit that he or she enjoys being pushed around. Certain freedoms have been won and not given and these are more or less taken for granted. We have the freedom to change our political masters, we can express and generally propagate our ideas, but in present-day society industrial power is the most important thing. We spend nearly one-third of our lives at work creating wealth and power for a minority of employers and the State. During this time we have little or no say in the way the work is to be organized and carried out. We are hardly ever consulted or given any responsibility over the jobs we perform. When there is no work we are sacked and when there is an abundance we are expected to give up our leisure and work overtime. In return we receive a wage packet to enable us to procure the necessities to feed, clothe and shelter us and our families.

Little or No Say

The paradox is that those who actually produce the goods, distribute them and provide the necessary social services for the community have little or no say on how this is done, while those who cream off the wealth from the productive work have control over the work processes. Productive workers are the most important section of the community. Many workers perform useful jobs, such as bus conductors, but without the drivers and the mechanics to service the vehicles, the bus service would be non-existent. The position is that some of the most important workers who perform vital jobs are amongst the lowest paid in the country.

As producers and distributors of goods, workers are obviously in a strong position, but the average worker does not appreciate this. Most men are quite content with their present position as receivers of orders, but many also have a desire

to gain some control over matters which affect them at work. Trade unions are organizations of such a collective desire for control and regulation of conditions, but some mistake this job organization for workers' control. "Workers' control exists wherever trade union practice, shop stewards' sanctions and collective power constrain employers." (Participation and Control—Ken Coates and Tony Topham.) No one would deny that this control at job level is a desirable thing but it is not workers' control. However such job organization has achieved a high degree of control which fosters responsibility and initiative.

Reg Wright describing a form of job organization which operated in Coventry writes, "The gang system sets men's minds free from many worries and enables them to concentrate completely on the job. It provides a natural frame of security, it gives confidence, shares money equally, uses all degrees of skill without distinction and enables jobs to be allocated to the man or woman best suited to them, the allocation frequently being made by the workers themselves. Change of jobs to avoid monotony is an easy matter. The 'gaffer' is abolished and foremen are now technicians called in to advise, or to act in a breakdown or other emergency."³ Such a system of control in a mass product conveyor belt factory is obviously advantageous to workers, but it nevertheless remains a work method which only alleviates the inhuman and humdrum drudgery of modern car factories. The gang system ended when Standards found themselves in financial trouble and were absorbed into the lorry empire of Leylands.

Control of the Unions?

Workers' control is a 'term being used today to describe so many different situations and Ken Coates and Tony Topham would no doubt apply it to the gang system. But this was not workers' control but only a very good way of making a tedious job worthwhile. Some other advocates of workers' control stress that control of the unions as a first step is imperative. One such group or rather a potential political party is the International Socialists. Their aims have varied over the years from "public ownership under full workers' control"⁴ to "workers" power-democratic collective control of the working class over industry and society through a state of workers' councils and workers' control of production.⁵ Both the prominence of "public ownership" and, later, "a state of workers councils" does presuppose some form of state or state machinery. This acceptance of the state is also linked with the idea of a political party. One of their editorials stated:

³ Anarchy 2, "Workers' Control," p.50.

⁴ Labour Worker, June, 1967.

⁵ Socialist Worker, June 13, 1970.

“The urgent need is to develop a credible socialist alternative to the Tories and Labour. The International Socialists are committed to building such an alternative party.” Their final advice was to “Keep the Tories Out. Vote Labour and prepare to Fight.”⁶

This advice is basically the same as that proffered by the other fifty-six varieties of Trotskyist groups. It calls for support for a party which, if it were in power, would in fact become a new ruling class and would create new privileges for itself and subject the workers to the same basic alienation which is an integral part of capitalist production. Any form of State control of industry must inevitably mean that decisions which affect workers will be made by others who are not directly affected.

Russian Example

Malatesta, writing of the State, said that “should it survive, it would continually tend to reconstruct, under one form or another, a privileged and oppressing class.”⁷ There have been many examples to bear this out. Just such a situation arose at Kronstadt, fifty years ago, as well as during the preceding revolution of 1917. Emma Goldman had the following to say about these important events:

“The process of alienating the Russian masses from the Revolution had begun almost immediately after Lenin and his Party had ascended to power. Crass discrimination in rations and housing, suppression of every political right, continued persecution and arrests early became the order of the day. True, the purges undertaken at that time did not include party members, although Communists also helped to fill the prisons and concentration camps. A case in point is the first Labour Opposition whose rank and file were quickly eliminated and their leaders, Shlapnikov sent to the Caucasus for ‘a rest’ and Alexandra Kollontay placed under house arrest. But all the other political opponents, among them Mensheviks, Social Revolutionists, Anarchists, many of the Liberal intelligentsia and workers as well as peasants, were given short shrift in the cellars of the Cheka, or exiled to slow death in the distant parts of Russia or Siberia. In other words, Stalin has not originated the theory or methods that have crushed the Russian Revolution or forged new chains for the Russian people.

“I admit, the dictatorship under Stalin’s rule has become monstrous. That does not, however, lessen the guilt of Leon Trotsky as one of the actors in the revolutionary drama of which Kronstadt was one of the bloodiest scenes.”⁸

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Anarchy, by Errico Malatesta, p. 22. Freedom Press.

⁸ Trotsky Protests Too Much, by Emma Goldman, p. 3.

A Worse Subjection

Certainly the Communist totalitarian state has provided a lesson and has proved the anarchist case against the capture of state power for revolutionary aims. This has given workers new and more powerful industrial masters. The Communist state has taken over more and more functions of society together with economic power. This means that the State not only controls the economy by various means such as outlawing strikes but because it has become the political and economic master, it condemns workers to a worse subjection than its counterparts in the West by the very fact that the means to improve conditions of work are denied by law. The State in Communist countries has become all powerful and embracing. It decides on the distribution of raw materials, the type and distribution of goods, investments and the appointments of managers of factories. In a “workers’ state” all is decided upon from above.

The Communist Party makes no pretense of allowing workers’ control. Bert Ramelson, Industrial Organizer for the Communist Party, had this to say:

“While management have the responsibility to ensure safety and provide welfare, training and educational facilities, their enforcement and supervision is done by workers’ elected representatives and committees. Thus, because of the absence of a fundamental clash of interest between workers and management in a socialist state there is a tremendous expansion of industrial democracy. Nevertheless it would be wrong to assume that all differences between management and workers disappear or that ‘workers’ control’ or ‘self management’ exists or is theoretically possible, that is if by these phrases, is meant control over all aspects of production, e.g. including what to produce, pricing, investment, etc.

“Management, even under socialism, will tend to show greater concern for output and unit costs and, at times, this could very well encroach on the workers’ rights and interests. That is why trade unions are essential in socialist society and why basically their major function remains the same as in a capitalist society—the safeguarding of the workers’ interests and upholding them against all comers—including management and state.”⁹

Anarchists would claim that a fundamental clash of interests still remains in a Communist state for a worker’s position remains virtually the same, as Bert Ramelson has admitted in the sentence emphasised. He lays great stress on the role of trade unions to defend workers’ interests and yet it is these same organizations which are thoroughly integrated into the state machine. They are no longer independent and free organizations but a part of the totalitarian system and because of this Soviet workers are worse off than their Western counterparts.

⁹ The Debate on Workers’ Control, pp.14- 15. Institute for Workers’ Control.

Revolts by workers in Communist states reinforce the anarchists' contention that a fundamental difference divides the workers and the state. The official trade unions have not taken the workers' side in these conflicts and in such situations the workers have created their own organizations against the system that has ruled and dominated them.

Hungary, Poland and France

In revolutionary situations organizations of workers' and peasants' councils, representing the interests and aspirations of the working class have emerged. Such occurrences are not peculiar to the distant past for Hungary, Poland and France have been recent examples. In all these countries the power of the state and the government was overwhelmed by the opposition of the people. Workers' and peasants' councils were organized and the official trade unions and the party officials were ignored. The committees formed at the places of work were linked with similar committees in other factories, while these in turn were linked with other industries on both a district and national basis. This sort of organization, federated throughout the country, has often grown up very quickly, while the production of essential goods and the distribution of foodstuffs has continued.

During the Hungarian uprising in 1956 the Observer (25.11.56) commented:

"A fantastic aspect of the situation is that although the general strike is in being and there is no centrally organized industry, the workers are nevertheless taking it upon themselves to keep essential services going for purposes which they themselves determine and support. Workers' councils in industrial districts have undertaken the distribution of essential goods and food to the population, in order to keep them alive. The coal miners are making daily allocations of just sufficient coal to keep the power stations going and supply the hospitals in Budapest and other large towns. Railwaymen organize trains to go to approved destinations for approved purposes. It is self-help in a setting of Anarchy."

The opposition to the Hungarian Communist State and the Soviet invaders was not just a negative one of strike action but took a revolutionary initiative in creating a basis for a new free society. There are many examples of this where workers and peasants find that the hold of the state over society has loosened. There is an almost natural inclination to seize this initiative and take over the means of production. For those who work on the land this is made easier by the fact that all the necessary requirements are at hand and workers have only to continue planting and harvesting after the landowners or bureaucrats have fled. Industry, on the other hand, has to rely on raw materials and factories to enable these to be turned into the finished product. When the State's power is weakened

it has just had to accept the situation but when the authorities feel strong enough they legalize the situation. The State did this in Russia in 1917 and Spain in 1936. This legislation did not make workers' control and also succeeded in preventing any in existence from developing and spreading.

Where the factories and work places have been taken over, the workers have shown initiative and continued to produce, improvising to offset the lack of parts and materials. They have shown that they can run and control industry, even during the most difficult times. The failure to maintain this control and to consolidate the social revolution has not been a failure of an idea but rather because of the overall strength of opposition from those who eventually came to power and took over the state.

Ripe for Workers' Control

In this country, workers' control is once again being discussed. It has been described as an idea "looking for a movement,"¹⁰ and "an idea on the wing."¹¹ That idea is vitally needed today when workers throughout industrial societies are facing inflation and increasing unemployment. The time was never so ripe for looking beyond the sterile reforms of the social democrats, turning away from political action and the equally useless support for one trade union leader or another.

An increasing number of strikes reflect that workers are no longer satisfied to be just wage slaves. Many strikes are protests against the alien conditions under which a worker performs his job for he is considered to be just a mere cog in an enlarging wheel. The strikes are taking on a non-monetary nature as workers are seeking a larger say in their conditions and greater control of their work places. Just such a movement for workers' control grew up in this country between 1910 and 1922.¹² This movement was particularly strong among engineers and committees were formed in Sheffield, on the Clyde and in London. It not only had an industrial base but also extended to other matters affecting the working class. Although the committees were part of the engineer's union, they worked and organized on an unofficial basis. They not only sought greater control over their conditions at work but they also advocated the overthrow of the capitalist wage system. They declared their faith in revolution and workers' control of production and distribution.

¹⁰ Anarchy 2, 'Workers' Control', April, 1961.

¹¹ Anarchy 80, 'Workers' Control', October, 1967.

¹² See *The Shop Stewards Movement and Workers' Control 1910-1922*, by Branko Pribicevic.

A movement like this, built on the shop floor, is needed today and can grow from the organizations of shop stewards which exist throughout industry. The increasing number of stewards is a sign of the desire to organize and control some aspect of work conditions. It is a revolt against being continually told what to do by those in authority. It expresses a determination not to be dictated to about the way a job should be done and the conditions under which it should be performed. Organizations at this level are the main weapon in the struggle against the employers for it is the unofficial strike that is hurting and damaging them the most. The trade unions have a far too big stake in the present system of capitalist exploitation for their leaders to ever want to overthrow it. This can and will be done by the active participation of the working class.

Chances Today

What are the chances of such a movement developing out of the existing shop stewards' organizations? Unfortunately many stewards are members of political parties and see industrial action taking second place to political action and the capture of the State. Indeed it was this change of attitude after the First World War and the Bolshevik seizure of power that led shop stewards away from industrial action and workers' control and along the political path.

However there are certain parallels between the second decade of this century and today that give the idea of workers' control a chance of getting off the ground. The emphasis is moving away from the political representatives in Parliament towards industrial action. Workers are realizing that they can only defend the conditions by their own efforts. Wage increases over and above the rates set by national union agreements are gained by unofficial action and the center of activity for trade union affairs is fast becoming the place of work. In recent years the number of stoppages reported has risen from 1,220 in 1961 to 2,350 in 1968 with further increases in the last two years. They include industries where unions have not called out members on official strike since 1926 and unions like the National Union of Railwaymen who have only had one official strike of one day, on October 3, 1962, since that year.

Obviously this shift towards direct action has meant an increased number of shop stewards. They are the direct representatives of the men on the shop floor, delegated to carry out a job of work. They can be and are recalled if they do not fulfill that function. The Donovan Report estimated that there were 175,000 shop stewards in Britain and from the increasing number of strikes, it appears that more of them are taking an active and positive part.

There has also been a general disillusionment with all political parties who profess to support the aspirations of the working class. They particularly felt the effects of the Wilson Government's incomes policy on their living standards. We are now reaching a similar situation where increased wages are being swallowed up by higher retail prices and rents. At present there seems to be no end to inflation and the outlawing of unofficial strikes, together with the cuts in social services, will further depress living standards. The increase in the number of unemployed could cause further disillusionment with political parties and governments in general who have failed to solve the present economic recession.

We are still being told that the strike weapon is outmoded. Trade union leaders like Jack Peel of the National Union of Dyers, Bleachers and Textile Workers, have attacked strike action for political ends. He said that the battle against the Industrial Relations Bill "will be won by using our heads and getting public opinion behind us, winning the next election and repealing the Act." Despite these leaders, workers are turning to industrial action rather than relying on the politicians of the Labour Party or seeking out the aid of other political parties. Because of this the workers will become more aware of their strength and look beyond the present-day struggles towards workers' control.

Control, from the Bottom Upwards

In common with the rest of society, industry is at present organized from the top down. Workers' control is a revolutionary principle which would give workers the responsibility for the organization and control of their industries from the bottom upwards. In the past they have proved their ability to take such a step and make a success of it and that they do not need the State, the employers and governments. When these forces are weak workers naturally turn to workers' control. It is a desire for responsibility and control over their lives.

Obviously such a revolutionary desire for change would be opposed by the authorities and the government would take action on behalf of the employers to protect their ruling position in society. This would mean the use of troops and the full force of the State being turned against a revolutionary movement for workers' control, for such a movement would mean an end to the power of the employers and their profits and privileges. It would mean an end to the Wage system. The production of goods and the growing of food for needs would be the way of life, with the decisions regarding this being taken by people at their place of work or in their communities.

The capitalist society treats people as mere units of production. It creates shortages and wastage, pollutes our earth and makes wars. Anarchists want an

end to this insane society. Instead we want workers to have dignity at work with industry being run and controlled by the people at their work places for the benefit and welfare of the community.

NOTES

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July 23, 2014



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1971

Scanned from reprint in Contemporary anarchism edited by Terry M.
Perlin (Transaction Books, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1979) page 221 ff
Freedom Pamphlet number 7