

Workers' Control in the Modern World

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This pamphlet is published by the London League for Workers' Control as a useful expression of a point of view along the lines of the League's thought, but the League is not committed to all the opinions or principles it contains.

THE traditional lie used to justify the acceptance of the capitalist system was the idea of the **unavoidable necessity** of profit and profit-making—private profit was held to be the motive power of any economy, the *sine qua non* of any civilisation. Launched on its career by the brilliance of Adam Smith, this fallacy was discredited only when the growth of government-controlled industry had proved the theories of the once “impractical” collectivist economists.

But the death of this lie is being followed by the birth of another, equally grandiose in conception, equally effective as a justification for the exploitation of the many by the few. The new fallacy is the **unavoidable necessity** of the function of **management**; the claim is that a communal economy **MUST BE CONTROLLED, CENTRALLY AND LOCALLY, BY A HIERARCHY OF INDUSTRIAL AND POLITICAL MANAGERS**, whose unquestioned dominance is deemed essential if efficiency is to be achieved or social chaos avoided.

To-day, a public impressed by the doctrine of “scientific management”, accepting the morality of the Almighty State, greets any proposal for Workers' Control as, at the best, idealist nonsense, and, at the worst, as downright blasphemy. To challenge the right of bureaucrats to control industry is now as heretical as it once was to challenge the sacred rights of property.

Underlying this fallacy is a failure to realise that any **functional** control of the economy develops into a **social** control. The pure economic function of investment in the capitalist era gave the capitalist a dominant position in the political and social life of the community. Similarly, minority control of the modern state economy must develop, as its context, minority control of the society. Democracy cannot be introduced into such a pattern.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF BUREAUCRACY

If this is so what will be the outcome of the widespread growth of bureaucratic hierarchies controlling economies via the apparatus of the State? In outline:

1. in the **economy** a machine system, revolving on the axis of **pure economic efficiency**. This glorification of technical

efficiency is so complete that if slave labour is found to be more useful than free labour—because of its greater malleability—then slave labour will be used. Hitler and Stalin have proved that is no mere *reductio ad absurdum*.

2. in the **society** a **new ruling class** of industrial and political organisers possessing the power, the wealth and the glory.
3. in the political sphere the **totalitarian state** in which human personalities are physically and psychologically crippled to fit the desired political mould. The controllers cannot tolerate the possibility of strikes, social opposition, political disagreement or even men's individuality which cannot be fitted into the rigid economic and military plan which is the basis of their operations.

If the experience of Nazism, Stalinism and their variants have convinced us that this analysis is not melodramatic fear-mongering, what changes are needed if we are to re-orientate ourselves in this "Brave New World"? The task facing the revolutionary is no longer to bring about the theoretical transference of ownership from a capitalist class to the community but to find the means whereby the legal fiction of common ownership can be clothed with economic and social reality.

THE DEMOCRATIC ALTERNATIVE

The means lie in some form of Industrial Democracy. The phrase "some form of" is deliberately used. To draw up a detailed blueprint of what is, in essence, the basis of a new society may be an interesting intellectual pastime but it cannot constitute a serious guide to action. But the direction can be indicated and the essential conditions defined.

There are three conditions which must exist before Workers' Control can be successfully introduced. They are:

1. the building of a political force seeking, as its main objective, to establish Industrial Democracy. The failure in Britain of the National Building Guilds which sought to develop co-operatively-controlled undertakings among the building trades workers in the 1920's and the tragedy of the British General Strike of 1926 proved the ineffectiveness of industrial action divorced from any political counterpart. To-day, when the government official and industrial manager are allying under the guidance of the State Board, it is more than ever essential for those who seek to change the quality of their society to oppose this power by harmonising political and industrial action.
2. the existence of common ownership. Workers' Control must inevitably violate the autocracy of the capitalist

private owner or monopoly in the same way that it must infringe the authority of the State bureaucracy.

3. the creation of organisations and philosophies in the industrial world based on the central theme of Workers' Control. In action this implies the supersession of the Craft and General Trade Union by the democratic industrial union, organised on a workplace basis and thus providing something in the nature of a ready-made instrument for the operation of Industrial Democracy. Psychologically it would imply that these organisations are motivated by a belief in the dignity and responsibility of the ordinary worker. One of the few successes in the struggle for Workers' Control was the running of the Barcelona Transport system by the workers during the Spanish Civil War—their achievement being, ironically enough, acknowledged by the British capitalist owners after the military victory of Franco had restored the *status quo*. The vital factor here was the strong syndicalist influence in the Spanish trade union movement which, with all its faults, had led them to consider the problems of Workers' Control and to reject the concept of the trade union as either a mere irresponsible bargaining machine or a docile part of the State apparatus. The failure of equivalent attempts in Russia and Italy shortly after the first World War can, in some degree, be traced to the lack of any deep-rooted, working-class understanding of a revolution in industrial control, which was being undertaken largely as a political tactic.

ELECTION AND RESPONSIBILITY

Within this atmosphere and framework, along what lines would a system of Industrial Democracy develop?

Running through it, in direct contradiction to the managerial principle of arbitrary authority, would be the principle of election and responsibility. Thus the over-all policy for the economy (such matters as water and power supply, large-scale industrial development and so forth) would be guided by bodies representing the community or federation of communities as a whole. This might mean the election of a House of Industry working parallel to the political parliament, and elected on an industrial franchise. Here, as at regional level, the aim would be to represent the views of the workers, the immediate consumers of certain products and the community as a whole.

At the point of production (i.e., in each plant or factory) Works Councils would be elected whose authority would not be

arbitrary or definitive, but their purpose would be to act as a "chairmanship body" of the workers in that plant. Even this "chairmanship" would not have that element of **irremovable continuity** which leads to factory dictatorship.

THE SHARING OF POWER

Industrial Democracy, however, is in no way a system of electing one's bosses. This is an idea which fatally draws its terms of reference from the present system. The basic purpose is not to elect individual workers up to some continuing managerial level where decisions are taken but to bring those decisions themselves down, to be made on the level of the workers. The ideal is that "all who are affected by a decision share in its making".

This demands the regular holding of workers' conferences, and referenda where the issues involved are clear-cut. Deriving from this central practice is the use of discussion and workers' right of interview with representatives which, with the abolition of separate canteens and similar devices and the practice of all representatives spending some time regularly as ordinary workers, will help to break down that snobbery which is a marked and by no means unimportant feature of the present managerial system. The right of immediate recall of representatives, full access to all books and records and so forth, are all vital adjuncts to a system which relies on spontaneity and voluntary co-operation for its success.

The form, though not the democratic content, of control may vary in different undertakings, thus achieving an adaptability which the present pattern of structural regimentation does not allow. Voluntary co-operatives might run bakeries, theatres and so forth; self-administrative groups of artists, workers and technicians might run film-producing companies; local government teams could undertake building projects, while sub-contracting to co-operative groups (along the lines used in French government printing undertakings) might well be a practice in all types of productive and distributive activity.

The organisation would in all cases be decentralised and co-ordinated by common agreement rather than central directives.

THE DANGER OF TOTALITARIANISM

In political circles to-day objections challenging the whole idea of Workers' Control are raised long before the outlines are sketched, even as incompletely as has been done here.

Each objection tends to hinge on one of a series of single assertions. One is the assertion that Workers' Control is

unnecessary since parliamentary control of nationalised industries will safeguard democracy. Socialists have long argued that bourgeois political democracy was a sham, since it rested on class control of the economy, and the society took its tone from this fact. This argument is not now publicly applied to nationalised economies, though its significance is still as great as ever. Control by Parliaments is remote and tenuous and depends always on the goodwill of a class of industrial controllers who have their grip on the actual key to social power—the means of production. The inevitable result is the replacement of the parliamentary system by one which suits the economy, namely a totalitarian system in which the political leaders become members of the controlling class and their differences are merely divisions of labour. The Head of the State Board for Coal sets the output demand per miner and the Minister of the Interior and Police chiefs deal with recalcitrants who refuse to accept the plans laid down for them.

Then comes the assertion that the whole idea is impossible because of the unfitness of the workers who, it is claimed, have neither the knowledge nor the co-operative and responsible attitude necessary to create such a system. Apart from the arrogance of the implied paternalism, this outlook is dangerously paradoxical. To say, as many politicians are saying, that the workers cannot be given control until they are fit for it is to forbid people to go near the water until they can swim. The workers will not develop the necessary understanding as a result of the badgering of politicians but only through the practice of responsible control. The concealed power philosophy which expresses itself in contradictions such as the acceptance of parliamentary elections, with its implied respect for the worker's judgment on complex political questions, yet sternly denies him a voice in industry, of which he has first-hand continuous experience, fails to take into account the inherited craftsmanship and interest which workers possess already and the potentialities latent in a new environment.

A NEW SOCIAL FORCE

As the trend to State control and Managerialism, with its accompanying political forms and social ideologies, increases attention will be focussed on its contradiction — Workers' Control. Much polemic will rage, scorn will be poured on the idea, fake substitutes such as "Consultation" will be thrown as a sop to industrial workers and an uneasy general public, terrorism and repression may well be the answer given to those who refuse to accept the *Führer Prinzip* in any sphere, including

industry. But once the ideological and political opposition to totalitarianism finds its counterpart in the economic sphere—Industrial Democracy—then this crystallizing opposition will have the strength and the creative powers to grow into a community which regards the human personality as of value in itself and not merely as an adjunct of the State.

THE MOVEMENT FOR WORKERS' CONTROL IN BRITAIN

There is no **large or powerful** movement for Workers' Control in Britain to-day—neither in the political nor the trade union world, nor is it understood or desired by the general public. No political daydreaming must blind us to this fact.

Politically the idea of Workers' Control derives support only from the small parties of the "extreme Left". The Labour Party, which organisationally and ideologically dominates the British political scene, has never had as part of its philosophy any fundamental concept of Workers' Control. Its nationalisation of basic industries has been carried through on the lines advocated by the Fabian Society—"the men with big heads and little hearts". The pattern of authority from above has been repeated in each case: the government-appointed State board, the Regional boards, the local plant managements; at no level does the worker encroach upon their power. At local level the much-praised practice of "consultation" sometimes occurs. A consultative committee is elected. It has no executive powers whatsoever, and the management can ignore its advice if they feel so inclined. This "consultation", it is now clear, is designed to divert attention from the question of control rather than give any tangible measure of control to the workers. All this is part of the new apotheosis of efficiency, what Herbert Morrison calls "businesslike leadership". However, the best expression of this outlook has come from Hugh Gaitskell, formerly Minister of Fuel and Power and then directly responsible for the nationalised coal industry. On April 13th, 1949, he expressed it tersely thus:

"The most important contribution which nationalisation makes towards Socialist aims is in the direction of improved efficiency." Workers' Control implies the creation of an individualist society. The Labour Party is engrossed in the construction of an impersonal machine.

The older capitalist parties, as might be expected, show no sign of making industrial democracy an item in their policies. The Tories regard it as anathema, while the Liberals made a well-meaning but pathetic attempt to allow for it in their

"Ownership for All" programme, which stopped short at co-partnership, while ignoring almost completely the problem of financial monopolies under private enterprise and saying nothing about the nationalised industries.

To the Communist Party no idea is more alien than that of Workers' Control. Alien, because it has no place in the Soviet Union and since it is incompatible with the Party Dictatorship they seek to establish. They occasionally attempt to exploit the idea in order to gain working-class support, but the most profound thought they have yet produced on the topic is a reformist appeal for trade union representatives on State boards—not an alteration in the State board system itself.

THE TRADE UNIONS

In the trade unions there is little conscious support for the idea among the rank and file and definite opposition from the executives. In the Trade Union Congress Interim Report on Post-War Reconstruction issued in 1944 the position of the trade unions in relation to nationalised industries was laid down, the basis being that the trade unions should have no share in control and that governmental and state-industrial executives would be the unquestioned masters. It is precisely this line that the Labour Government have followed. Admittedly there has been much discontent with the running of nationalised industries. The Grimethorpe mining strike in the South Yorkshire coalfield in 1947 was a protest against the arbitrary increase in stints by the National Coal Board, and a Commission of Enquiry appointed after the strike was over vindicated the miners' claim that the increase was exorbitant. In the summer of 1949, during the work-to-rule campaign by British railway workers, the Paddington Branch demanded the discharging of the whole of the Railway Executive. Shortly after, the London dockers demanded the replacement of the entire Dock Labour Board, and district groups of the Electrical Trades Unions protested vigorously at the appointment of Sir J. Hallsworth as Chairman of the North-Western Electricity Board. Early in 1951 the miners of Knockshinnoch Colliery in Ayrshire refused to return to work following a mining disaster for which they felt the negligence of the management was responsible.

But such cases are largely isolated and sporadic and often kicking against the **results** of bureaucratic control, not consciously opposing the system itself or proposing to replace it by any other.

Most people are accepting the new managerial ideology—the

THE GENERAL PUBLIC

superstitious reverence for "scientific management", the dogmatic scorn for the idea that the workers are anything but hired hands, unfit for any responsibility, the conviction (given a sharp edge by the inconvenience of strikes) that co-ordination can be achieved only by central coercion, never by co-operation.

BUILDING THE NEW MOVEMENT

In the midst of this sea of conscious and unconscious opposition what is being done?

In November, 1948, a Conference, initiated by Common Wealth and the Independent Labour Party and sponsored by a number of the more far-seeing trade union leaders, was called to discuss the question of Workers' Control. Out of this Conference was formed the **London League for Workers' Control**, with membership on an individual basis, specifically devoted to the propagation and study of the idea of Workers' Control. **This is the first organisation with such an aim since the eclipse of the old Guild Socialist Movement in the 1920's.**

The aim in framing its policy statement was to lay down the broad principles which would command general support while distinguishing Workers' Control from such reformist concepts as Profit-Sharing, Co-Partnership, and Joint Production Committees. Thus the workers (Policy Statement of April, 1949) must be given ultimate responsibility for appointments and dismissals at all levels of the productive and distributive process. The lines along which electoral machinery, workers' conferences, study of records and guidance of representatives by workers must be carried through, were laid down. Finally it renounced the possibility of affiliating to any political party or taking part in electoral activity or wage disputes as such, since it was realised that, at this stage, what was urgently required was some organisation which would bring the whole question of industrial control before the people. These early efforts are the most hopeful sign since the interest in Workers' Control, aroused by the Shop Stewards' Movement during the war, died.

Out of the confused political scene, the din of battle between the old capitalist and the new bureaucrat as to who shall be master, out of the blind kickings and protests against rigid authority in industry, are coming small groups with a clear and conscious understanding of Workers' Control, claiming that it must be achieved if the dignity, responsibility and freedom of ordinary people is to be made a reality. If these groups and their ideas can grow then the struggle for a free world community of workers is not ended, it is only just beginning.