
TAKING A CLOSER LOOK AT WORKERS' CONTROL

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It is undeniable that worker possession of the means of production will only be achieved after a revolution that dismantles the bourgeois state and boots out the present owners. However, notwithstanding this, can workplace reforms under present conditions facilitate the achievement of this primary goal of the revolution, and can they be the object of immediate demands by workers?

Such reforms or advances include changes in management methods and work organisation that give workers at least some say over the production process, the development of better job design and the establishment of worker owned and managed enterprises.

The main concern of radicals is that these are just a con to get more work out of people and to make them feel they have a stake in the system. On the other hand the introduction of these changes can be seen as a response by capitalists to the fact that advances in the productive forces require a more motivated and able workforce. This could be one of the ways in which capitalism creates the conditions for its own supercession - a central tenet of Marxism. The system is giving workers some of the skill and abilities needed to take over, and attempts by capitalists to motivate workers could backfire on them by awakening the slumbering mass.

Somewhere in all this we have to find part of the answer to the problem of linking the revolutionary objective of taking over the means of production with struggle in the here and now. To date radicals have been totally hopeless in this area. They have generally ended up in the bog of trade unionism.

In this paper I will only come to tentative conclusions. The issues will need to be subject to protracted study and discussion before we can come up with a useful analysis and guide to action.

However, before coming to conclusions, tentative or otherwise, an overview of what we are talking about is in order. I will start by looking at the range of management and work practices within capitalist firms that, for want of a better term, can be called industrial democracy. I will then look at worker cooperatives.

Industrial Democracy

Industrial democracy is essentially about rank-and-file workers within a capitalist firm playing some part in decisionmaking. It can take the form of co-management where representatives of the workers (or union officials) sit on the managing bodies of the enterprise. This is big in a number of countries including Germany. It can also take the form of workers having a say in how their work is done and its reorganisation on more human lines.

Co-management would appear to be of marginal interest. It mainly involves union officials 'representing' workers and is generally confined to traditional trade union issues. So we will dwell no further on it.

Direct worker involvement is of far greater interest. Curiously most developments in this area are driven more by the actions of management than the prompting of workers. There are a number of much discussed 'management innovations' that have an industrial democracy flavour about them. Bosses are finding that increasing productivity requires workers to think about their work and to take an interest in it. Programs have been developed whereby teams of workers are given greater responsibility for determining how the work is to be performed and for ensuring the quality of the final product. This generally involves flattening the management structure, including the elimination of the first layer of supervision (ie foremen) and partially breaking down the division of labour by giving the individual worker a greater range of skills and allowing them to make decisions as a group on certain matters.

I do not know how widespread these developments are because I am not well read in the relevant management literature. However, there are a number of highly publicised cases that I am aware of. One that has caused something of a stir is Semco in Brazil. The boss, Ricardo Semler, is a major figure in Brazil and last year he published *Maverick!* a book that tells the story of the change in his company's work culture.¹ Other prominent examples are Johnsonville Sausage and NUMMI. These are examined in turn.

Semco

Semler inherited Semco from his father in the early 1980s. The company is a medium sized company producing a range of products including marine pumps,

¹ Ricardo Semler, *Maverick!*, Century, London, 1993.

digital scanners, commercial dishwashers, truck filters and mixing equipment for everything from bubble gum to rocket fuel.

He was dissatisfied with the way the firm operated. In particular he wanted to tap people's enthusiasm and abilities, and eliminate bureaucracy and red tape. The changes he introduced to achieve this transformation can be summarised as follows.

- Workers have access to the company books and certain big decisions, such as buying another company or moving location, are often subject to a vote.
- In each business unit there is a committee comprising non-management members. Initially these simply looked at working conditions and facilities. Then they began to spontaneously spawn various groups that looked at such matters as the redesign of products and the formulation of marketing plans. These groups are made up of shop operatives, technicians and management and their decisions do not need approval further up the line.
- Teams produce the complete product. Nearly all workers have mastered several jobs. Jobs that were considered particularly dead-end have been eliminated. Consequently there are no receptionists, secretaries or personal assistants. With the development of these teams a lot of middle management has been eliminated.
- Subordinates interview and approve the appointment of their immediate boss. This is followed by six monthly evaluations. Team members also hire and fire their own members.
- There is a degree of flexibility in hours of work. Workers no longer have to clock on and off or undergo security checks.
- While Semco does not guarantee employment, workers who have been there for more than three years can only be laid off as a last resort and ex-Semco employees are given preference for vacancies. The company also helps employees set up their own businesses as sub-contractors.
- Workers receive 23 per cent of the profits of their division. How the money is distributed is decided at the work area, although invariably it is shared equally.

