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COMMUNISTS AND WORKERS' CONTROL

The following article is based on a report made to the National Executive of the Communist Party in October. Following the report a resolution was carried unanimously supporting the concept of workers' control and calling on communists to promote it in unions and workplaces.

THE RECENT DISCUSSIONS on workers' control in Australia reflect a general revival of interest in the demands of workers' control in modern form. There have been widespread debates among socialists in Western Europe on some of the theoretical and practical questions involved in such concepts as workers' control, participation and self-management. The discussion reflects a deep feeling of the need for social control, for workers' rights and for an effective voice, for grass roots democracy.

The purpose of this article is to focus attention on the demand for workers' control as an important medium for a socialist strategy in advanced capitalist countries. It is based on the estimation that the factors which have brought this demand to the fore in other countries operate increasingly in Australia and provide favourable conditions for propagation of workers' control. The revival in the demand for workers' control is due to several factors:

1 The changed conditions in industry, due to the scientific and technological revolution. This has lead to greatly increased production, often with fewer workers, to changes in working conditions, to greater mobility, to job evaluations, often to increased intensity of work, to the loss of some jobs and to a growth of the need for skilled workers. These are changes which have a far-reaching effect on the workers, but in which they have no say. It leads to a growth of the feeling and the demand that they ought to have a say in developments which directly affect their lives.

2 The development of the modern, "mass society", the growth in size of institutions and of bureaucratic structures leads to an increasing feeling of insignificance among ordinary people, of being unable to be heard, of being ineffective in this society. The demand for forms of direct control can be seen as revolt against the big institutions, against the increasingly depersonalised character of the mass society. Such things as take-overs and far-reaching technolo-
gical changes often leading to decisions affecting the future of workers involved being made from afar, seem to have an irresistible, over-powering character. It seems too big, too overwhelming and the individual appears powerless before it. The big and bureaucratic structures are often (precisely because of their very size and bureaucracy) not able to cope adequately with the requirements of a rapidly changing society. They even become obstacles in the way of necessary changes. This is a complex and growing problem for all mass societies.

3 The experiences of the socialist countries have added to the search for suitable forms of working class control. The socialist countries too face the problems of the mass society, the dehumanizing aspects of the industrial system, the lack of involvement, alienation and non-participation. The deformations of socialism and the developments which flowed from them gave rise to a new search for suitable forms of social control. One of the stated goals of the economic reforms in the socialist countries is to achieve greater participation by the workers in various forms of local management as distinct from the centralised directive form of management of the industrialisation period, though the results so far achieved are not very great.

4 As many of the pressing economic problems have been partially met, other, and often new needs come to the surface. The May '68 events in France which gave rise to various forms of self-action and local initiative, and which revealed a latent revolutionary potential, brought a new impetus to the discussion on rank and file control, direct democracy and workers’ control as part of a socialist strategy for advanced capitalist countries.

In Australia these questions are not yet on the agenda to the same extent partly because large-scale retrenchment, unemployment, retraining of big sections of the work force, intensification of work (which exist, of course) have not yet assumed a mass character in our expanding economy, which can still absorb some of these problems better than other comparable countries. In addition socialists have been tardy in introducing these matters into the organised working class. However the trend is in the same direction. The problem is clear enough, but solutions differ. Even the terms “workers’ control”, “participation” or “self-management” have different meanings to different people. Broadly there are four types of responses, or solutions offered to these problems:

1 There are those who say that workers’ control is an illusion without first establishing a socialist system and that Socialism is workers’ control. That means that the demand for workers’ control is identical with the demand for socialism. This view is based on a double misunderstanding. Firstly workers’ control does not mean
workers “taking over” under capitalism. The ruling class would certainly not stand by and watch that. Workers’ control is a means of gradually preparing the conditions whereby social change is placed on the agenda.

Secondly, it is surely a simplistic belief that socialism automatically solves these problems. Lenin in *The Threatening Catastrophe And How to Avert It* written in September 1917, before the October revolution speaks of “Control, supervision, accounting . . . encroaching upon the omnipotence of the landowner and capitalists . . .” He certainly did not see workers’ control as identical with socialism, but as the means of preparing the conditions for the socialist transformation.

2 There is the utopian reaction which revives some of the old anarchist ideas, which ignore political struggle and political power. They often counterpose workers’ control to political struggles, political parties and the trade unions, in some cases to all trade unions irrespective of policies and attitudes.

3 The reformist approach is orientated towards “partnership” with the owners, towards reducing workers’ dissatisfaction by giving them (or rather some of their representatives) a voice, a feeling of participation, at the same time preserving the sacred rights of the owners of industry. “Participation” gives the workers’ representatives responsibility without substantial rights when essentials are involved. It is a method of integrating the workers’ organisations into the capitalist system, of adapting them to the needs of capitalism. In West Germany where a good deal of practical experience in participation exists, many workers’ representatives have been “absorbed” on the Boards of the big concerns.

This is an element in the new strategy of the ruling class, which has found that it can now absorb a great many workers’ demands that previously seemed fundamental, and which it had to reject. The scientific and technological revolution has provided it with new opportunities for adaptation. This is shown in wage struggles. It is possible for the ruling class to “give” increases and wages and higher living standards in the shape of more consumer goods without in any way altering the division of income.

Certainly in the post-war years there has been no notable change in the distribution of wealth. Studies in Britain have established that, contrary to popular belief, there has been no change in the distribution of income during the last century. (Between 1870 and 1950 wages’ share of the national income in Britain has varied between 36.6% and 42.6%). This occurred despite economic expansion and higher living standards in terms of more consumer
goods. Where there have been changes, they have, on a global scale, not been in favour of the working class. In West Germany, where much has been made of the new “prosperity for all”, 305,000 families (1.7% of households) own 35% of all private fortunes and approximately 70% of all means of production. In addition to the above, where necessary the ruling class can recoup wage increases by a variety of devices such as price rises, taxation policy, decline of social services, or the rising cost of some social services.

It is interesting to note that whereas in the past many employers regarded participation as a dirty word, today it is the conscious policy of the more “enlightened” employers and their industrial psychologists to encourage workers’ participation, to give a feeling of “belonging” and of course, to prevent them from taking a revolutionary path.

All this does not mean that militant struggles for economic demands have lost their importance. It does mean that the ruling class seeks to channel all workers’ demands into avenues that the system can absorb. This capacity for absorption is considerable, certainly much greater than many socialists believed. This means that in present conditions militancy on economic questions can generally be contained. Of course the employers prefer docile trade union leaders, but they can cope with the militants that confine themselves to economic demands. What they really fear are demands that go beyond this, demands that challenge and encroach upon their sacred rights of decision making, of undivided control, of ownership and non-accountability. The same applies to areas of war and peace, of defence and foreign policy.

4 A revolutionary approach to workers’ control

We are dealing here with workers’ control as an issue under capitalism. After the ending of the capitalist system this problem takes on new forms, centring around workers’ self-management.

Workers’ control does not mean workers running industry under capitalism. It does not even mean workers controlling industry. It means workers having some control over the way in which the capitalists run industry, over their decisions, and having a growing measure of control, which encroaches more and more on the sacred domain of the ruling class. It means controlling the controllers. It is not participation as described above, although what many workers understand by participation are in fact measures of workers’ control. It should not be counterposed to the trade unions, although it has a distinct role to play, which gives full scope to the knowledge, initiative, and creative ability of the workers on the job.
The demand for workers' control has revolutionary implications, it is an important means of advancing the fighting capacity and revolutionary orientation of the working class. Correctly approached it is a demand that cannot be fully absorbed, yet which is realistic, sensible, and which can gain mass support. The demand for workers' control has only real significance if it fits into and is part of a wider revolutionary strategy. It will only get accepted and succeed in its aims if it is seen in this light.

In Australia the prospects for a fundamental change in society, for a social transformation are not short-term, they are rather long-term. A revolutionary is one who works towards realising such a perspective, preparing it step by step, that is, creating the preconditions for such a radical change. It can hardly be claimed that all those who aim at a fundamental change in society are consciously and systematically working towards it. There is certainly no consensus or even a systematic conception of how to achieve it, and work towards it.

Socialism as a goal will never be achieved unless some of its values are demonstrated and practised now. In a society where other values predominate (lack of concern for others, the ethos of the "consumer society", apathy, lack of involvement, etc.) the need for socialism will not be felt and understood in a mass way, unless its values contest and successfully contest the established values of the present society. Workers' control has this feature — it is a vision of the future society, it prepares the worker to run society, it acts as a safeguard that socialism will become the kind of society that we are aiming for.

Capitalism rules in Australia today not by force, but because its ideas and values dominate society, because of its hegemony in ideas. The workers, by and large, accept this. A viable socialist strategy must be based on an objective analysis of the Australian working class and its ideas and attitudes as it is today, and of the likely trends of development. There have been two significant changes in Australian working class attitudes in recent years.

Firstly, a notable growth of militancy among significant sections, especially the younger and more highly skilled workers, including some white collar workers. This is generally confined to economic questions and is often associated with views of the trade unions as successful pressure groups. This militancy is growing, whilst of course, a large number of workers are not yet involved in militant struggles of any nature.

Secondly, along with greater militancy there has also grown a greater acceptance of capitalist values and of the capitalist system, socialist ideals have dimmed, there is a growth of preoccupation
with material things and a wider penetration of the ethos of the consumer society.

The growth of the technical intelligentsia, and the more highly trained and better educated workers, with their widening horizons has led to a growing feeling of alienation among these generally better paid workers. They feel the contradiction between the role they play in the process of production and their lack of power in decision making. They feel disfranchised and the need for a voice. It is these workers who exert pressure for trade union democracy, and the modernisation of the trade union movement. This is an important leverage point for revolutionary activity.

A viable socialist strategy for Australia must be based on contesting the hegemony of the ruling class. It must prepare the ground by challenging capitalist values with socialist values. This can not be left until after the socialist revolution, for there will be no socialist revolution unless and until this contest is won. This calls for a total challenge to all the bourgeois values of our society. The old strategic concept which was largely based on a major economic breakdown, now increasingly felt to be unrealistic, has not been adequately replaced. Such a vacuum helps the spread of bourgeois ideology. Certainly there will be political and social crises of different kinds in the future but unless socialists' ideas achieve dominance we will not be able to take advantage of such crises.

The problem is to find suitable forms of counter-hegemonic activities. Workers' control is such a form. Designed to restrict the bosses' powers step by step, it prepares the working class for the ultimate contest. For workers' control to be part of such a counter-hegemonic strategy it must be based on some of the following considerations: It is no substitute for political action, or for other revolutionary struggles. It should not have an anti-trade union edge, particularly where the official trade union supports and encourages it. It should include such demands as restriction and control over the bosses' right to hire and fire, speed-up, work organisation, allocation of jobs, safety on the job. It should set out to transform participation into control by such measures as full and regular reporting back on all discussions and negotiations with the employers to mass meetings on the job; the right to recall by workers of representatives they are not satisfied with; no responsibility of workers' representatives for decision arrived at jointly (which is designed to restrict the workers' freedom of action). The demand for no secrecy of any negotiations is also vital for this purpose. "Opening the books" is another important demand of workers' control.
As part of such a strategy many long-standing trade union demands assume a new content. This includes such demands as — right of job organisations and of trade union representatives, the right of entry, the right to meeting on the job, changes in the ACTU Charter on Shop Committees, abolition of penal powers and other restrictive legislation, which ties the trade union movement to the Arbitration System. The struggle for industrial unionism assumes a new significance in these conditions.

All this will inevitably be resisted by the employers, as it challenges the basis of the capitalist system in the workplaces, and trains the working people for the challenge. It is an offensive strategy, which seeks to bring about structural reforms, which the ruling class is forced to accede to, but which changes and undermines its domination. Structural reforms as we understand them, are anti-capitalist reforms of structures within the capitalist system. Here much depends on how these reforms are achieved, the aim with which they are carried out not only what they are.

We should put forward such demands and policies and encourage such action around them as will further our socialist aim and will weaken class collaboration while strengthening workers' control; will weaken preoccupation with limiting defensive issues while strengthening the trend towards action on wider issues; will weaken the trends to confine the workers' attention to economic questions and will lead them to interfere more and more in the sacred domain of the employers and their government — the political questions. Workers' control will help to build the bridge between the immediate and long-term questions. The more radical atmosphere in the country, the growth of dissent, and anti-authoritarian sentiments, the shift to the left in the ACTU all combine to create favourable conditions for the development of the movement for workers' control.

CORRECTIONS

In Harry Gould's contribution in the last issue of ALR, the word "placemen" on page 32 inadvertently appeared as "policeman". The error is regretted.

An unforgivable error crept into my review of Poverty in Australia in the last issue of ALR. The activist whom I called "Garrie Henderson" was in fact Garrie Hutchinson, a former president of the Melbourne University Labor Club. I was not referring to Gerard Henderson, a former president of the Melbourne University DLP Club and a leading "threat expert" on the New Left. I apologise to Mr. Henderson for any pain or distress that may have been caused by my mistaken praise of him.

John Playford