Job control in theory and practice

by ‘Turbot Street’

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The following article, which is reprinted from The Movement, the journal of the Workers' School of Social Science, Brisbane, has a definite intrinsic value apart from any historical significance it may have. An intriguing point about the article is who wrote it. In order to suggest an answer and perhaps, thereby, enhance the article's significance, it is necessary to examine some of the history of the Workers' School of Social Science.

The WSSS was one of three similar institutions set up in Australia between 1917 and 1919, modelled on the Central Labour College which had its origins in the revolt at Ruskin College, Oxford, in 1909; the other two were the Victorian Labor College and the Labor College of New South Wales, in both of which W. P. Earsman, a principal founder of the Communist Party, played an instrumental role. In the case of the WSSS (and the name suggests this), an additional example may have been the Rand School of Social Science, New York, especially as an American journalist, Spencer Brodney, who worked on the Brisbane Daily Standard, was the first secretary of the WSSS, and its main inspiration.

The idea of a Labor College in Brisbane had developed at the end of 1918, partly due to the formation of a Socialist League after a visit by R. S. Ross. Three people who were later prominent in the WSSS—Norman Freeberg (later Freehill), Ed. Turner and J. B. (Jack) Miles, were all associated with the Socialist League from its beginning. The WSSS, which was set up in a similar way to the Labor Colleges in the other states, was formally founded in March 1919 and, by the end of 1919, there were several affiliates—building unions, the Meat Industry Union, and the Queensland Railways Union being among the more important. The report of the first annual Conference noted that the school had its origin in a feeling that it was necessary to create a system of education for the workers under their own control.

Towards the end of 1919, it became possible to employ the founding vice-president of the School, J. B. Miles, as a full-time assistant secretary and manager of the book and literature department because, in the words of the First Annual Report, “... the honorary secretary ... was unable to give his personal attention to the rapidly increasing activities of the school.” Then, from the beginning of 1920, the WSSS began publication of a monthly bulletin and magazine — The Movement. It was here that the following article (and several others by the same author) appeared.

First, to try to dispose of the mystery of the authorship. There is no direct evidence, and there are two or three possibilities, but the circumstantial evidence suggests strongly that the writer was J. B. Miles. As a full-time (later half-time) official of the school, he was in a position to act as editor. The topics selected point to somebody like Miles. They have an...

1 Turbot Street, Brisbane, was the location of the old Trades Hall in that city.
2 J. B. Miles, Interview, Jan. 12, 1965.
J. B. Miles was the general secretary of the Communist Party from 1931 until 1948, i.e. during the period of the Party's greatest political impact on Australian life. He was born in 1888 in the southern Scottish town of Hawick, the son of a building worker (probably a bricklayer), who became a builder on his own account. After a board school education in Edinburgh, and minor boys' jobs, J. B. Miles became an apprentice stonemason. He spent only two or three years cutting stone and then joined his father briefly as a bricklayer on cottage work in the English north-east town of Middlesborough. Miles left the family at 17-18 years and went to Consett, County Durham, where he worked first as a bricklayer, then in the town's steelworks.

An interest in socialism was first aroused by his father whom Miles described as a 'socialist-of-a-kind'. The son belonged to the Newcastle Socialist Society and the Consett Independent Labour Party before migrating to Australia in 1913, although he had not been really active in either organisation. At this stage his socialism was of the Clarion, Labour Leader variety. He certainly had no systematic knowledge of marxist ideas — either theoretical or tactical.

J. B. Miles' subsequent development is quite remarkable. Apart from an initial brief introduction to the Brisbane political scene on first landing (through Consett acquaintances who met him at the boat), he spent the next five years cut off from Brisbane's social and political life. In his own words, until 1918 he was confused about the war, which presumably means that he didn't whole-heartedly oppose it. In 1918, in order to find a better place to live, he moved closer to the city. He found employment (previously in his own words he had been odd-jobbing as he couldn't get a start in his trade) in a workshop of a Brisbane River shipyard, which enabled him to join the Amalgamated Society of Engineers. From there he went into the Cannon Hill meat works and the Amalgamated Meat Industry Employees' Union, which had the character of an industrial union. At about the same time there was the beginning of some clarity about the war through attendance at an anti-war meeting addressed by a visiting interstate pacifist speaker. Soon after

Miles proved himself in the various vicissitudes of the party from 1922 to 1929. In 1928, after several years as an active trade unionist (after 1924 as a stonemason again) and communist spokesman (especially during the 1927 Queensland

6 When I interviewed Miles in 1965, I was completely unaware of the existence of the journal or the articles, hence did not seek to clarify the identity of 'Turbot Street'.


8 Alastair Davidson is wrong in putting Miles at the Sydney foundation conference. On the night before the conference opened, he was at a council meeting of the WSSS where an important decision was made about a change in the conditions of his employment as assistant secretary of the WSSS. Alastair Davidson, The Communist Party of Australia, (Stanford, U.S., 1969) p. 11; The Movement, Vol. II, No. 1 (Feb. 1921), p. 15.

9 Australian Communist, March 4, 1921; The Communist, June 3, 1921, Aug. 5, 1921.

10 International Communist, Sept. 24, 1921; The Communist, Sept. 30, 1921.

11 The Communist, Jan. 5, 1923.
land rail strike), he first worked full-time for the party in connection with the forthcoming Queensland State election. This was the occasion of the ‘Queensland Resolution’ which became the crux of one of the most important inner-party debates in the party’s history; and in the final resolution of the struggle, eventually, in 1931, Miles became one of the national leaders of the Communist Party.12

The article reprinted here can largely stand on its own but a few comments may help towards a greater understanding. Miles, writing on the eve of the formation of the Communist Party, is dealing with what has been most commonly referred to as ‘workers’ control’. It is almost certain that, at the time of writing, he had not had access to the various theses of the Third International’s Second Congress which were really the first elaborated treatment of the Bolshevik doctrine of the party and Bolshevik tactics to reach Australia.13

Prior to the publication of the Comintern theses in 1920 and 1921, the main strategy of militant workers had been revolutionary industrial unionism and the tactic (slogan) which came to be the most succinct expression of this strategy was ‘job control’. In the extremely fluid ideological and organisational situation, particularly in 1918 and 1919, this concept seemed to express the revolutionary position.

This is not the place to attempt a full exploration of the subtleties of the question, but for the most definite supporters of ‘job control’, it assumed the character of both tactic and strategy. For M. (Mick) Sawtell, who wrote the most refined treatment of the subject, it meant everything up to and including the full exercise of working class power in society, i.e. more or less a synonym for socialism.14 Sometimes the term ‘workers’ control’ was used in this way, too, but, as today, often a distinction was made. Here Miles conceptualises ‘workers’ control of industry’ — ‘workers’ control’ — more or less in the way the idea ‘self-management’ is used often today, while ‘job control’ means what is often termed ‘workers’ control’ today — control of the conditions of employment through job meetings, job action, job (or shop) committees, etc.15 Sawtell expressed an attitude which became common after the ‘Big Strike’ of 1917, when he contrasted the virtues of ‘job control’ with ‘starvation’ strikes (long, extended strikes).16 Miles is obviously dealing with this point at the beginning of the article.

Apart from this, the most outstanding feature of Miles’ article is how fluently he finds his way into the subject, warning against theoretical and practical over-simplification. Perhaps he underestimates the scope of job (workers’) control in one or two places, but he sees difficulties in pushing the idea too far. Otherwise, the remark he makes about the differences between Russian developments and the likely course of events in more industrialised countries is highly suggestive, written as it was in the middle of 1920. But finally he stresses the great educational value of the tactic in creating a feeling of self-reliance and independence in workers fighting for a new state of society — the beginning of a socio-political hegemonic class consciousness.

Roger Coates.

The ultimate objective of the workers is to take control of and carry on industry themselves.

This statement has been made a thousand times. What the workers want to know is how it is to be done. For a long time the favored weapon has been the strike. But the workers have found it a weapon that more frequently injures themselves. For that reason the gospel of job control is finding an increasing number of advocates. Job control is a sounder line of action because it points in the same direction as the ultimate objective, the ownership and control of industry by the workers.

But the idea of job control has also to be translated into concrete and practical propositions. Its possibilities have to be fully explored, and its manifold difficulties overcome.

Let us suppose that the workers do institute job control wherever possible, that they set up shop committees and all the rest of the necessary machinery. What, then, will lie in the power of the workers? They will be able to resist speeding-up, prevent overtime, and generally secure redress for the many grievances which arise out of working conditions imposed by employers.

Yet, there will still remain a wide gulf between such achievement and the ultimate objective of the complete control of industry. Job control, as understood today, is a far smaller thing than control of industry. Consider a large factory, for example, one producing boots. The workers on the job may control the job in so far as their own conditions are concerned; but they have no control over the factory as an element in the industrial life of the community. They are not in a position to estimate the productivity of the plant nor to regulate the output. The owner does that. He conducts the factory as seems fit to him in the light of market conditions. At one time, when trade is good, he demands a large output; and when the market becomes oversupplied, he dismisses workers or even closes down the factory. The workers have no control over these actions. The one fact of power to dispense
with labor, when, according to the employer, it is not wanted, is enough to show the limitations of job control.

Let us say in passing that these limitations must not be urged as an argument against job control. Job control should be developed as far as it can, but the workers must also look beyond to the bigger thing — control of industry itself.

One of the greatest obstacles in the way of securing control over industry is the attitude of the comparatively small but very important class of workers who do not regard themselves as workers, but as members of the ruling class. These are the professional workers, the men of education, who do the more highly specialised work of a technical or administrative character. Most of them, while the servants of corporate or individual employers, enjoy a very considerable amount of job control and personal freedom, besides much higher incomes which permits them to live comfortable and easy lives. The average manager of an industrial establishment can, so long as he shows the necessary amount of profit, do his work in his own way and largely in his own time. The real control of an industry, as distinct from the financial overlordship, rests for the most part in the hands of managers, organisers, and technical experts of all kinds; and it is against them directly that the workers have to carry on their struggle. If they threw in their lot with the workers, decided to co-operate with the workers, the establishment of industrial democracy would be a very simple matter. But it is most unlikely that the managerial and technical controllers of industry will desert the capitalist class, so long as there is a capitalist class.

Although this is a problem for which there is no ready solution, the facts as stated should arouse the workers to learn how to become capable of assuming the technical and administrative functions in industry. In some cases the acquisition of the requisite special training may be out of the question, but there are many industries and branches of industries in which the workers should be able to prepare themselves as organisers and administrators.

What happened in Russia is instructive, for that is the one country where so far the issue came to a head. There, it will be remembered, the professional and educated classes resisted the taking over of industry by the workers. The “intelligentsia”, as they were called, went out on strike and did all in their power to sabotage the new system of industrial control. Many of them had to be bribed by enormous salaries, and only with great difficulty were the workers able to secure their co-operation. The Russian solution is not of very much value as an example to other countries where industry is more highly developed and where the professional workers consequently constitute a far more numerous and more influential class.

When we have to consider that the workers not only have arrayed against them the professional class, but also the whole army of parasitic retainers of the capitalist class, and further, the apathetic, “bonehead”, and even treacherous elements in the working class, it will be seen that job control can have only limited results.

The line of reasoning we have followed would seem to lead to a very discouraging conclusion. But other facts must also be taken into consideration, and the greatest of these is that the capitalist system is doomed to break down as the result of its own inherent defects. The machinery of capitalist production can no longer do the work it is called on to do. When the collapse comes, those who do the actual work of industry will have to take control, and in this connection the workers will mean all whose labor is productive or necessary to production, including the professional workers. Because of the latter’s preconceived ideas there will be trouble and confusion, but the whole basis of production having been changed, they will in time come to co-operate with all the other workers. For example, the engineer who directs operations will find that he has to co-operate with the men formerly under his orders, because there will no longer be a capitalist whom he serves.

For the workers themselves, the idea of job control has enormous value in teaching them self-reliance and independence, not only of the capitalist rulers and their salaried subordinates, but also of union officials. The new conception of industrial organisation involves the practice of the workers on the job dealing with grievances and difficulties that arise there instead of relying upon the union officials to come along and settle matters. From this standpoint job control has the greatest possible value in the education of the workers, just as in a more general sense the whole group of ideas we call industrial democracy is part of the necessary preparation of the workers for the new social order. The theory of job control is valuable as part of the education of the workers, even if its practice, while capitalism prevails, is restricted in the manner we have indicated. The more fully the minds of the workers are seized of the necessity of industrial democracy, the better able will they be to step in when the time comes for them to take control of industry and prevent the breakdown of capitalism from becoming the breakdown of civilisation.

The human race is passing from one stage of social evolution to another. Like all periods of transition, the time is full of doubts and perplexities, troubles and difficulties, but we must be of good cheer and seek to march along the paths of progress and freedom. Job control is undoubtedly one of the roads to emancipation. Do not let us miscalculate how far it will lead, but also let us be quite decided that we shall go as far as it does lead.