

**WORKERS'  
CONTROL—  
WHAT NEXT?**

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This paper was written primarily for the Workers' Control Conference to be held at Nottingham on March 30th. & 31st. 1968. However, it was thought that it had a wider significance than the immediate conference. Therefore it has been produced for general sale.

## PERSPECTIVES AND STRATEGY OF THE WORKERS' CONTROL MOVEMENT

By Ken Tarbuck and Chris Arthur

This paper does not attempt to compete with any detailed analyses and proposals in respect of particular industries. Rather it attempts to put forward a conception of what the movement as a whole is about, and where it might go. It provides what we think is an essential backdrop to questions concerning particular cases.

### A Class Question

1. The first and perhaps most important point is that the idea of workers' control is a class question, and any discussions or proposals must be looked at in that light i.e. from the point of view of their class content. This is because the problem cannot be divorced from the antagonisms that are at the very basis of modern society. These antagonisms are raised especially sharply in the struggle for the surplus product, that is the question of wages versus profit. They also manifest themselves in all manner of other ways - working conditions, safety, etc, wherever the endless drive for profit runs up against the workers determination to resist exploitation, to resist being treated as a 'hand' at the complete disposition of the management, to demand his right to be treated as a human being. Men are not machines - but the capitalist class and its agents in industry, whether private or nationalised, very seldom recognise the fact.

The demand for workers control goes right to the heart of the basic antagonism in production. Only by a very clear understanding of this fundamental fact can one begin to appreciate the full significance of the demand for workers' control.

There can be no question, therefore, of accepting Liberal Party ideas that workers' participation in management is founded on the idea of collaboration of the two sides in pursuit of a common aim. Such a common aim does not exist. You cannot reconcile the aim of maximising exploitation with the aim of minimising it. Any compromise reached is always just that - a compromise, an essentially unstable

equilibrium expressing a particular conjunctural relationship of forces - where the capitalist is exploiting as much as he dare, for the moment, - and the workers have no strength to throw him back further, for the moment.

The demand for workers' control must therefore be seen as a heightening of class struggle, and proposals judged in that light. To see it in collaborationist terms will, (since in capitalism the workers will be the subordinate element in a 'partnership' whose goals are set by capital) only result in strengthening and maintaining the dominance of the bosses.

### Two Strategies

2. What kind of situation are we talking about when we talk of workers control? Two conceptions can be seen in the detailed papers presented at previous Conferences. Some papers start from the top and go down, so to speak. They assume that the first and essential prerequisite is to nationalise the industry and then you set up democratic forms of management. Other papers start from the rights and powers already won by the workers (the closed shop etc.) and attempt to carry these forward in ever expanding areas of control within the present forms of ownership, limiting the rights and powers of the owners and expanding the powers of the workers. Here the expropriation of the owners and the establishment of a workers' state is seen as the eventual aim, not the starting point.

Obviously one cannot say dogmatically which strategy is best - it depends on the nature of the circumstances we find ourselves in. Also it is quite possible to proceed on both fronts simultaneously - on the one hand working for a socialist government which would socialise industry, and on the other hand taking advantage of any upsurge in the workers' movement to fight for workers' control in the factory regardless of the existence of a pro-capitalist government.

What are the circumstances we find ourselves in? In spite of

throwing out the Tories it cannot be said that the workers are in power in the state. Instead we have a government of traitors to the Labour movement, whose only step in a socialist direction has been the steel nationalisation (at greatly over-generous compensation) and the dubious promise regarding the docks. Everywhere else, from the wage freeze to the increased prescription charges the Labour Government has carried out the orders of the monopolists and bankers. So far from increasing workers' power over capital the government has decreased it by introducing the infamous legislation that threatens trade unionists with jail for carrying out the functions of a trade union.

Such a pro-capitalist government will only be interested in the workers' control movement in so far as they can transform it into a device whereby some workers can be drawn into the process of carrying out the policies which will save the capitalists' bacon for them - rather as the T.U.C. have been drawn into the incomes policy dictated by bankers at home and abroad.

That is all we can expect from this government, as has been illustrated by the proposals for the new Steel Boards, which have been ably criticised by people in the workers' control movement.

So even if the state is your employer you face just as tough a fight for workers' control as the men in private industry. For a pro-capitalist government dare not allow a successful experiment in workers' control of a nationalised industry because the enormous impact of this example throughout the whole working class would lead to such an upheaval that the continued dominance of the capitalists would be in question.

If you are in private industry, such as motor cars, there is of course no chance of socialisation in the near future, under a Wilson type government.

Getting back to the two strategies then, on the assumption that we must wait for workers' power in the state so that we can socialise industry and kick the boss-class representatives off the nationalised

industries boards, nothing can be done about workers' control before that except to draw up plans of how a worker-run industry would look. This is extremely valuable as an exercise, because such propaganda can help to convince people that socialism is not just a vague notion but something that can be practical and human.

However, we wish here to leave this possibility on one side and examine in detail the other perspective. This perspective, which as we have said can complement the other, has the advantage that it starts with the situation in the factory and gives people a programme of action to implement on the spot. If the situation in the works is ripe for it, the workers' can enforce limitations on management prerogatives - either written or unwritten conventions which management dare not transgress. However it is important here to distinguish between the situation in which in spite of gains of this nature, the workers still remain the subordinate element, and the situation in which a qualitative transformation occurs to workers' control proper. In the first case within the given agreements the management retain the right to manage. As long as he keeps within the rules of the game, so to speak, the boss is the boss. Of course each time a new limitation on his power is introduced, a closed shop for instance, the manager will kick up a tremendous fuss about interference with management's right to manage. But normally after an agreement has been reached the situation is still that, within the rules of the 'game', management originates action and the workers passively accept his decisions. All the time the management's right to manage is taken by the bosses to be as self-evidently sacred as the divine right of kings used to be thought. In defence of this principle the bosses may even close a plant rather than give in, as happened at ENV and Roberts-Arundel.

Now the qualitative transformation we speak of occurs when we move from the situation in which, within given limits, the boss is the boss and the men do what they are told, to that in which the workers revolt against their subordinate status and begin to tell management

what can be done and what can't. We move from occasional negotiations setting new limits on managerial prerogatives to permanent supervision of managerial functions by a control committee responsible only to the workers. Workers' control thus defined means that the Control Committee of the workers (which might be a renamed Stewards committee if you have one) has, at a minimum the power of veto over the whole range of management decisions, be it hiring and firing, methods of work, speed up, or whatever - (that is, no worker obeys an order unless it is countersigned by the Control Committee) - or, more positively, it might include initiation of action by the Control Committee. The latter might become necessary if management refused to act at all if they were going to be supervised.

#### Dual Power

3. What can be said about the workers' control of production just described? How stable is it? Under what conditions can it arise?

Trotsky discussed the question of workers' control of production in the context of capitalist ownership and disposition of capital, in a 1931 article. He described this situation as "a sort of economic dual power in the factory, the bank, trading enterprise and so forth."

He also pointed out that:

"If the participation of the workers in the administration is to be lasting, normal, stable, it must rest upon class collaboration, and not upon class struggle. Such class collaboration can be realised only through the upper strata of the trade unions and the capitalist associations. There have been no few such attempts...yet, in all these instances, it was not a case of workers' control over capital but of the subserviency of the labour bureaucracy to capital. Such subserviency, as experience shows, can last a long time: as long as the patience of the proletariat."

"The closer it is to production, to the factory, to the shop department, the more impossible is this..., for it is a question here of the direct vital interest of the workers, and the whole

process develops before the eyes of the workers themselves. Workers' control through factory councils is conceivable only on the basis of sharp class struggle, but not on the basis of collaboration. Yet even this means dual power in the enterprise, in the trust, in the branch of industry, in the whole of industry."

So whereas the capitalists are quite happy to look round for a few trade union bureaucrats willing to sell their 'souls' for a peerage and a director's chair, at a local level workers' control can only be established with a struggle and involves the existence of two centres of power- the <sup>management</sup> hierarchy appointed by the owners (or the pro-capitalist state), and the shop, works, and firm committees responsible to the workers. This situation is inherently unstable. As Trotsky argued :

"...a bourgeoisie, which feels itself firm in the saddle, will never tolerate dual power in its factories. Workers' control, consequently can be carried out only under the condition of an abrupt change in the relationship of forces unfavourable to the bourgeoisie and its state. Control can be forced upon the bourgeoisie by the proletariat only violently, along the road to the moment when it takes away from it the power, and then also the ownership of the means of production. Thus the regime of workers' control, by its very essence provisional, a transitional regime, can correspond only to the period of the convulsing of the bourgeois state..."

One of the speakers at the 1967 Workers' Control Conference put the matter clearly when he said :

"Workers' Control I would say is about power, and the weakness and the misconception in the Labour Party document which has been discussed is that it misunderstands the nature of the state power and power in society."

In any struggle for workers' control the state will decidedly be on the side of the possessing classes . It will be impossible to take control of production in the factories and ignore the state. The bosses will appeal to the state to smash workers' control committees or at least



to ensure they only operate in the context of capitalist interest. For instance in the mining industry the workers could find themselves being faced with demands by the government to carry on its programme of pit closures. Such a situation would pose very sharply who controls the state and what is its character?

Again, even if workers' control in the plant meant that redundancies could be avoided and work-sharing introduced, it may be still the case that there is just not enough work for that plant to do. This would mean that workers control committees would be faced with the need to contact other industries to expand available work at that plant or elsewhere - in short the need for an economic plan would arise. This would be bound to conflict with the state because the essence of socialist planning is to dispose of the means of production in a way which satisfies social need most efficiently. This would certainly conflict with the interests of the owners - and in effect this disposition of resources by a workers' plan amounts to expropriation of the assets. No pro-capitalist state would allow this. It would be necessary to enter a struggle at the level of state power which would culminate in a workers state.

Therefore far from being mainly a trade union question, workers' control is a highly political demand, that must take its place at the centre of a complete socialist programme. The demand cannot be a substitute for politics because it raises the whole question of a revolutionary transformation of society.

Workers' control of production, a situation of economic dual power, is, then, a regime of crisis and can only be expected to arise when a deep-going crisis permeates society - where masses of workers are no longer prepared to tolerate the incompetence and injustices associated with the policies adopted by the capitalist class to solve the problems they have brought upon themselves.

No-one can deny that the British economy is a sick one and liable to get sicker. However, the awareness of the character of its ills

takes contradictory forms. The development of working class solutions to the problems occurs only in particularly advanced sectors. On the one hand we have the growing strength of the workers' control movement and on the other hand those who fall for the 'I'm Backing Britain' campaign.

However, as the rates of redundancy, speed up and victimisation increase it becomes more and more likely that the advance guard present at this conference will get greater opportunities to put to their fellow workers the case for not merely parrying each blow as it arises but for going over to an attacking strategy - for saying we have the right to this work, we have a right to control its form and pace, and we will owe allegiance only by those appointed by and responsible to, ourselves.

Given the collaborationist character of most of the Labour and T.U.C. leadership it is very possible that if an acute social crisis arises in the next few years the factories may be the first to move. If this campaign pursues correct tactics workers' control of production may become a reality.

#### Tactics Today

4. However that is in the future - how do we set about carrying the campaign forward today? Of course it goes without saying that we can raise the question of the campaign and its ideas amongst the activists in the shop stewards committees, T.U. branches, L.P. and C.P. branches etc.

But as for getting a response from larger numbers this can most easily be done by taking as the point of departure concrete grievances. Take the trawler disasters for instance. The campaign could have seen what the response was from the fishermen <sup>to the idea</sup> that no trawler leaves port unless a safety officer appointed by the union has inspected it. Or we can point out that not only should shop stewards be elected whether the owners like it or not but the crews should make clear that they won't obey an order if the steward judges it is going to lead the ship into danger. Further, that the steward can require the captain to take

safety measures such as radioing his position and intentions when bad weather is forecast.

Or if a case of victimisation or redundancy arises we could use it to make propaganda for the idea that not just this case should be fought, but that situations like it are inevitable unless workers' control of production is established.

In a wages dispute, 'Open the Books' is a good combative demand. It is important to point out that this campaign does not suppose that highly skilled managers can be replaced overnight by ordinary workers. The idea is that instead of such managers being supervised by boards of directors only interested in profits, they would be supervised by factory and firm committees representing the workers.

#### A Last Question

5. As already indicated, we do not suppose that the perspective discussed of establishing workers' control over production in the teeth of the boss-class and pro-capitalist state can be translated into action today. The mass of workers simply would not respond to the call and we would just look silly. No, at this stage it is a matter of patient propaganda, tied to concrete issues where possible, designed to spread the idea that eventually employees must and can, cease to accept that they are just hired 'hands', just labour machines, and instead take control, and set the purpose, of their places of work.

Again if the day does come when something like the perspective outlined occurs and an upsurge in the working class leads at first to an attempt to solve the problems of working people through establishing control committees in the factories we have said this can only be transitional to something else because of its contradictory character. It will form part of a revolutionary transformation of society.

We have come back to this question to pose one final issue. Given that the Labour leadership has amply demonstrated its non-commitment to socialism and has capitulated to the bankers and monopolists it is abundantly clear that a campaign for workers' control must be against the Labour Government.

Furthermore, historical experience shows that no capitalist class yields power easily, and it can always defeat uncoordinated, spontaneous and fragmented oppositional struggles.

In order to carry through the required transformation of society against the will of the capitalist class the construction of a party which can act as the focus of discontent in society, which can weld the fragmented forces into an organisation capable of acting decisively and unitedly, which can elaborate a socialist programme to be put into effect, which can probe the weak points of the enemy and capitalise on his mistakes, which can systematically propagate its programme and its demands amongst workers, students, teachers and other allies, and convince more and more of them that there is a way out of their problems, that an instrument exists which has the determination and ability to see the job through - the construction of such a party is a necessary condition of success. This party does not yet exist. It will not spring ready made out of the air. It has to be worked for. Such movements of opposition to the present Labour leadership as the campaign for workers' control help lay the basis for it in so far as they help to expose to the people involved the need for an alternative to class-collaborationist politics of the Wilson type.

We don't suggest that while there are still few convinced of this need anyone should immediately break with the Labour Party and leave this field clear for Wilson, but we must organise to fight him there and we must face the fact that sooner or later the labour movement will have to break with the Wilson group and reconstitute a party. We can start making preparations for this now by forming small groups and caucuses of likeminded people in the L.P., T.U's., and C.P. dedicated to workers' control, to non-authoritarian socialism, and to a party basing itself on class struggle.