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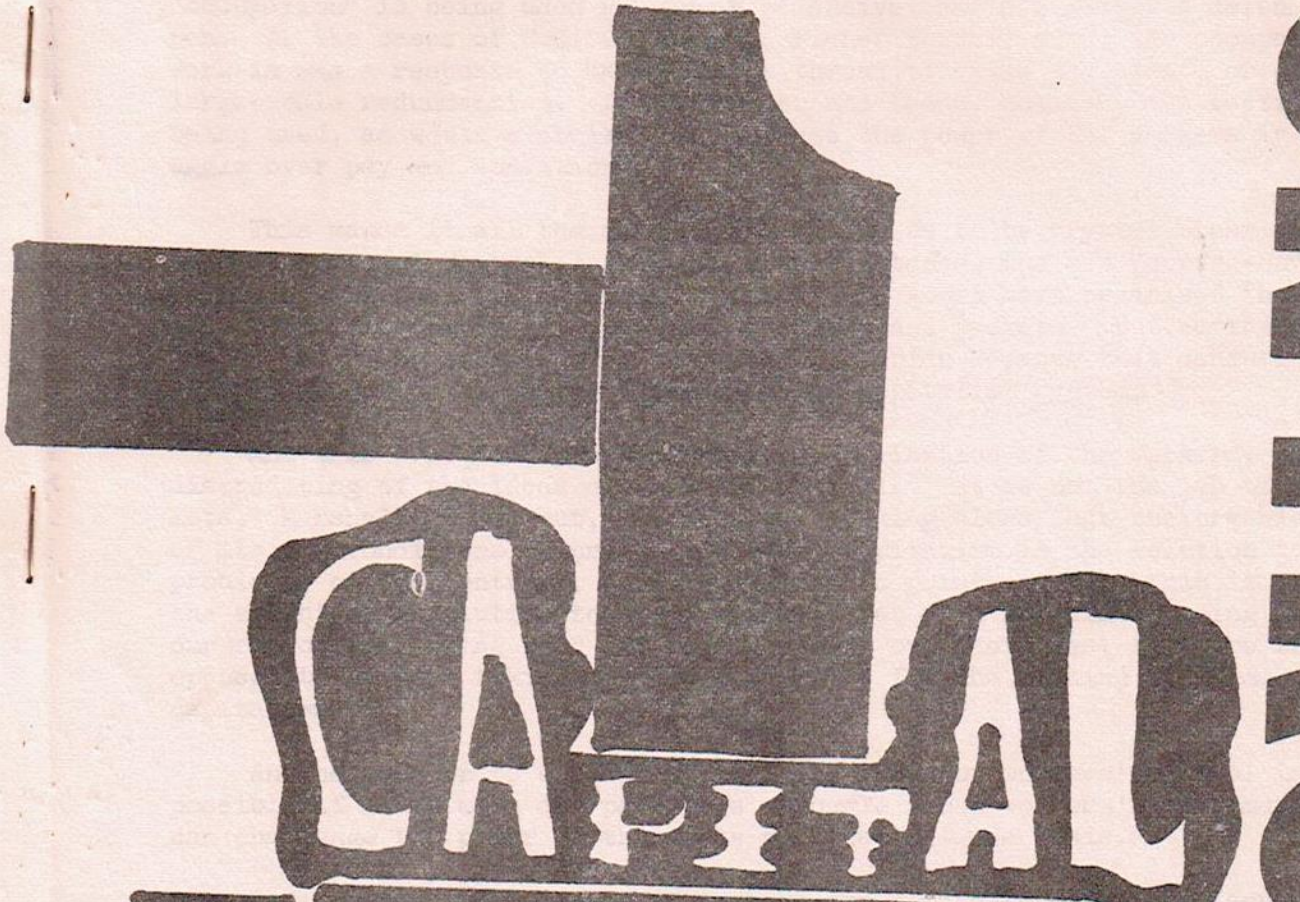
WORKERS CONTROL



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INTRODUCTION

This article by John Marshall has been reprinted form the Red Mole, No. 38. The article was prompted by a renewed interest in workers' control which had been stimulated by the recent development of factory occupations, work-ins, etc. But no one could have predicted at the time of writing the developments which have taken place since: nearly 30 factories occupied in the Greater Manchester Area alone, a number in Leeds and the promise of further developments in Sheffield and other towms.

What is different about these recent developments is, of course, that the "occupation" is being used now as an offensive, and not simply a defensive weapon. In the cases of U.C.S., Plessey, Fisher Bendix, etc., the occupation or work-in was a response to management's threat to close the plant, or effect large-scale redundancies. In Manchester and Leeds, however, the tactic is being used, as would a strike, to increase the power of the workers in a struggle over pay and conditions.

This makes it all the more necessary for us to be crystal clear about the idea of Workers' Control. At U.C.S., for instance, the men "worked-on"; at Sexton's shoe factory, Fakenham, Norfolk, the women have organised the machinery in the factory to produce leather skirts and jackets. But as the article points out, such schemes are, in general, utopian because they confuse the role of management with the effects of the capitalist system.

And this confusion produces only demoralisation of the workers, and the discrediting of the ideas of workers' control. "It is not the job of socialists," Marshall points out, "to tell the working class that the organisation of its own conditions of production under capitalism is the solution to its problems; on the contrary, it is necessary to point out that this is not in the silghtest a solution to its problems. Far from socialists being in favour of workers taking over and running their own factories, they are totally opposed to workers taking any responsibility for the running of firms under capitalism."

And he goes on to explain how the struggle for workers' control is only possible if it is seen as "part of s struggle for a workers' government which can challenge the power of the state on a nation-wide basis."

And already small groups of workers are coming together to discuss programmes which lind the various ideas in this article. In Barnsley, for instance, a rank and file miners' group is discussing such a programme for the mining industry. These are very important developments. The recent increase in the tempo of struggles is just a begining. A whole series of battles lie ahead. It is therefore vital that the militancy and political understanding created amongst the rank and file are not allowed to go to waste. This means that the ideas of workers' control and workers' government must be popularised. It is for this reason that we reproduce this article.

Sheffield IMG
25th. April, 1972.

INTERNATIONAL MARXIST GROUP (British Section of the Fourth International).

The exploitation of the working class and all other forms of oppression such as racism, discrimination against women, attacks on students, etc. are a result of the capitalist system and the ruling of the country in the interests of a small minority of society who own the vast majority of the wealth. It is the working class who produce that wealth, yet the worker own nothing but his labour-power. It is the working class, therefore, who have least to lose and most to gain by overthrowing capitalism and organising society in the interests of the workers.

Capitalism is an international system. The capitalist's pursuit of profit does not stop at the borders of his own country. The imperialism of the capitalist class must be fought by the working class on a world scale.

This is why the International Marxist Group (IMG) is part of an international organisation - the Fourth International - which sets itself the task of building a world revolutionary socialist party. The Fourth International bases itself on the principles of revolutionary Marxism, and beleives that it is essential for the working class to grasp Marxist theory as a guide in its struggle against capitalism.

To this end, the IMG holds a weekly Red Circle meeting at which discussions are held on basic Marxist theory and Marxist attitudes to various current events. All readers of the Red Mole , and other publications of the Fourth International are welcome to attend these meetings. Details of local meetings are enclosed.

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WORKERS' CONTROL
an analysis

In any economy, the types of things necessary in production are roughly the same. Under capitalism, what is essential about production is that all products are produced by units of production operating independently of each other, and only coming into contact through the market. In short, it is an economy based on generalised commodity production which is in turn only made possible by the existence of the commodity labour power. Production is for profit, and determined by the unplanned anarchy of the market.

Under this system of production it is possible, and indeed inevitable, for all sorts of crises to occur which are against the interests of the working class. It is important to note that it is the entire system of social relations which defines the mode of production as capitalist, and not the ownership or running of single factories, firms and industries. For example, a nationalised industry operating inside a capitalist economy is just as much a capitalist firm as any other. It still buys and sells on the market and its operations are therefore determined by the capitalist law of value. Ignoring or not understanding this point leads to all sorts of utopian schemes for destroying capitalism inside one factory. Most of these ideas of "workers' control" are merely impractical; others suggest ideas to employers which are positively counter-revolutionary.

The most extreme cases of this latter variety are a few privately owned capitalist firms where supervision has been abandoned almost completely. Here for example is a description of one such situation: ". . . the output and dedication of the girls on an assembly line shot up when they were put completely in charge of making the entire electronic product themselves and the controls over their work by the foremen, inspector and industrial engineer were abolished." (Packard, The Naked Society, p.96).

In such cases it is clear that there is absolutely nothing which is socialist about the measures at all. They are manoeuvres by the companies concerned to increase their profits by utilising the workers' knowledge of the stupidities and inefficiency of normal management and by making use of the thousands of dodges and tips that any operative finds out about how to do the job. In a strict sense they do not decrease the exploitation of the worker but, on the contrary, heighten it by increasing the amount of profit that the firm makes from each worker. The firms are still prey to the crises of the capitalist economy, and if unable to sell their goods workers will still be laid off, put on short time, etc.

participation

Also in the category of obvious fraud are so-called examples of wrkers' participation in management. A typical example of this can be found in the Steel Industry. Here the Steel industry suggested a scheme of "workers'

directors". Out of fourteen to sixteen members on each regional board it was suggested that three should be selected by the management from lists submitted by the TUC. If the workers recommended were shop stewards, they would have to give up their union positions. They were not to be subject to any form of recall and were to sit on Group Boards outside the Group in which they worked. Here again was another perfectly obvious fiddle. What was clearly intended by the Labour government was to have directors on the boards of the companies who could be termed representatives of the workers so as to strengthen the hand of the Steel corporation when it came to implement its massive programme of closures.

Even worse is the system in Sweden. Here on many occasions, the management has declared that there are going to be redundancies, but that the union can decide who is going to be fired. In this situation, the trade union does not fight redundancy at all, but just carries out the management's functions. In this situation, the union gets the worst of both worlds. Firstly, the workers sacked naturally become fairly hostile to trade unionism; secondly, the management avoids most of the blame for the sackings, and workers instead concentrate on attacking the unions over who has been sacked.

Equally bad are schemes whereby the workers either completely own the company e.g. the firm of Scott-Bader at Wallaston, or won it in conjunction with, for example, its consumers. The most notable of these examples is, of course, the Co-Op. Here, normal capitalist shareholding is abolished. But in fact the conditions of the workers are not improved in any material way at all, in the long run. The company simply competes with ordinary capitalist firms, and in the course of the competition is forced to organise production in much the same way as any other company, and is unable even to give higher wages than in ordinary capitalist firms.

The mistake in all these ideas and schemes is a confusion of the role of management with the effects of the capitalist system or, put in more technical terms, between the authority relations of the factory and the production relations of society. The reasons for this confusion, which is the most common of all in dealing with the question of workers' control, of course reside in the conditions of the working class under capitalism. It is the company and its management who are the clear "visible" oppressors fo the workers while the relations of capitalist production are "invisible" and, so to speak, behind the scenes.

The most difficult thing in explaining the ideas of workers' control is to get across the essential idea that what is involved is not a struggle against the management, but a struggle against an entire economic system. But as we have seen, any idea of workers' control refering to the management (authority relations) of the factory, leads to putting forward schemes that cannot sove the problems of the working class and in many cases actually aid the employers. The idea which must be got across is not that the struggle against the management is the main struggle and must be intensified, but on the contrary the simple struggle against management settles nothing.

production relations

All the theories and schemes we have dicussed in this section are mislead

by the situation of struggle against management, into confusing the production relations of society with the authority relations (management) within the factory. Even if the authority relations within the factory are completely destroyed, for example by having complete workers' management, that does not in the slightest affect the productions of society. The factory of firm still has to buy its raw materials, power, etc. on the capitalist market, and it still has to sell its finished products as commodities on the market.

As the factory or firm is still linked completely by commodity relationships to all the other production going on in society, it is still dominated by the law of value. If there is a general depression of the capitalist market it will still be unable to sell its goods. If other firms push up the exploitation of the workers to a higher point, the firm will still be frced to follow suit in order to compete. It is this which means for example that an individual industry nationalised under capitalism in fact is still forced to run like, and indeed still is a capitalist firm.

It is only the destruction of the general production relations of society, and not just the authority relations of the factory which means that firms can run in anything other than a way which is dominated by capitalism. When therefore we tald about workers' control, what we are talking about is not control over the management, but control over the effects of capitalist production (the law of value) within the factory. The second can of course only be acieved by the first, but we have to be very clear as to the aim, otherwise all sorts of varieties of reformism can emerge.

Apart from the very obvious fraud schemes we have already discussed, there are also schemes put out by, for example, the Institute for Workers' Control. For example, when the government scheme for Workers' Directors in the Steel Industry was put form ward, the IWC advanced the idea that instead of being a minority, the workers' directors should have made up 50% of the numbers on the boards. They suggested specifically: "These proposals for fifty-fifty membership of management committees and boards with the senior management official at each level being appointed subject to ratification by the workers dlelgate . . . . the veto on management appointments gives to the workers an important instrument of control".

Here is the classic example of confusion of authority relations and production relatinns. The strategy put forward by the IWC would not in the slightect solve the problems of the steel workers. It would have made no real difference if the workers had been able to appoint every single manager and habe 100% of the places on the boards of the companies. Even if the management were completely replaced and the entire factory or company were run by the workers, that would not in the slightest solve their problems. The company would still be producing within the capitalist production relations and would therefore still be a capitalist firm, even if were nationised, the workers took all decisions, took all income etc. Indeed such an experience would be the most demoralising one possible for the workers. The operation of the law of value would impose speed-up, short-time working or redundancies, dagger-

ous working etc. on the factory, or it would be forced out of business. And the workers themselves would be forced to take these decisions.

We are therefore completely opposed to workers taking over and running their factories or industries within capitalism. What occurs when this is tried, for example at UCS, is the demoralisation of the workers, and the discrediting of the whole idea of workers' control. It is not the job of socialists to tell the working class that the orgaisation of its own conditions of production under capitalsim is the solution to its problems. On the contrary, it is necessary to point out that this is not in the slightest a solution to its problems. Far from socialists being in favour of workers taking over and running their won factories, they are totally opposed to workers taking any responsibility for the running of firms under capitalism. Socialists must explain that it is not the management itself which oppresses the workers, but the entire production relations of capitalism. Any propaganda for workers' control must therefore have this as its key point. NO WORKERS' RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE RUNNING OF FIRMS UNDER CAPITALISM must be the absolutely central slogan of any campaign for workers' control.

the state

So far we have only discussed cases in which the capitalist relations of production in society have not been destroyed. In this context control means simply attempts by workers to resist the effects of the operation of the law of value within the factory. It means resistance to things such as speed-up, the introduction of machinery involving a deterioration in working conditions, and to dangerous working. However, the way in which workers' control has always been understood in Marxist terms is together with the idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat (i.e. a workers' state). As Lenin put it in Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?: "When we say 'workers' control', always juxtaposing this slogan to the dictatorship of the proletariat, always putting it immediately after the latter, we thereby explain what kind of state we mean . . . if we are speaking of the proletarian state, that is, of the proletarian dictatorship, then workers' control can become the country-wide, all embracing, onmipresent, most precise and conscientious accounting of production and distribution of goods." The point that Lenin is clearly making here is that real workers' control is only possible after the destruction of the state machine which defends the capitalist property relations. From that point of view the slogan of workers' control is therefore meaningless unless it is coupled with the slogans of a workers' government and a workers' state. This needs to be explored a little more carefully however to fully understand the point.

If the basic idea of workers' control is resistance to the effects of the working of capitalist production relations (the law of value), then qutie clearly completely generalised workers control actually means that the production relations of the capitalist economy are in fact no longer regulati g the economy. Such a situation is of course extremely unlikely to occur, although in situaions of mass take-overs of factories, etc. as in Spain and Russia, a situation something like this can

be approached. What it means in this situation is that there is actually no mode of production, or to be scientifically accurate there are elements of two modes of production so interlinked that neither is operative. If the workers can refuse the closing down of factories, stop loss of jobs, control the speed of production tec. throughout the entire economy then capitalist production relations are not regulating the the functioning of the economy. On the other hand, neither is production being organised according to a plan and therefore neither is a socialised mode of production in existence. Such a situation is precisely, considered at the economic level, the point of transition between the capitalist and socialised modes of production. Such a situation would be totally unstable. Economically production under these conditions would mean the ruin of the bourgeoisie. It would provoke an immediate attempt by the bourgeois state machine to destroy the workers' organisations in the factories.

In any real situation, such a situation of "total" workers' control would never be achieved. Either the bourgeoisei would step in at a far earlier point, or if the workers' organisations were in fact so strong that they were capable of imposing their will on the situation in this way, the proletariat would have seized power before this stage was reached. Nevertheless, examination of the situation of workers' control in a "pure" and complete sense indicates completely why any attempt at workers' control will inevitably be crushed if the state machine remains in the hands of the capitalists.

Against isolated groups of workers, or indeed against whole trade unions, the state always has infinitely greater force and resources at its disposal than do the workers. The whole force of the police, the organisation made possible through the government departments, the control of the press and television, the immense financial resource, and in the last resort the army, means that an all out contest between even large groups of workers and the state will always be won by the state. The struggle for workers' control is therefore only possibel if it is seen as part of a struggle for a workers' government which can challenge the power of the state on a nation-wide basis. The failure to understand this has led in the past to many tragic defeats for the working class. For example, in Spain in 1936, and in Bolivia after the seizure of factories in 1953.

acute class struggle

Nevertheless, it is possible to put forward demands relating to workers' control which can even be partially achieved in situations of acute class struggle. In particular in Italy this has been carried out to a high degree.

For example, at the tyre firm of Pirelli, complete regulation over the speed of work was established. Every time the management tried to speed up the production line, the workers just slowed it down again. However whether such typer of struggle are revolutionary or reformist depends not on what in particular is achieved, but whether the struggle is presented as being one which is an end in itself, or whether it is presented as

being merely the maximumthat can be wrested from capitalism given the existing relation of forces. In practice, as we have seen, this means whether the struggle is presented as one against the management, or one against the effects of the production relations of capitalist society.

Where this distinction becomes absolutely crucial is in dealing with the question of workers management (i.e. a transition from the workers merely regulating the effects of capitalist production to workers actually initiating decisions). As we have noted, socialists are completely opposed to workers management under capitalism. However, in periods of acute class struggle, and particularly in revolutionary and pre-revolutionary situations, the workers will in fact inevitably be forced to undertake functions of management if the crises last for any period of time. This was clearly visible in the May 1968 events in France.

At the Rhone-Poulenc factory at Vitry, the strikers established direct relations of exchange with the farmers and sought to extend this to other firms. Similar events occurred in Paris where the CLEOP (student worker-peasant liaison committee) organised food convoys supplied by agricultural cooperatives and distributed the food directly to the factories. At Citroen factories in Paris, lorries were requisitioned for the purpose of supplying strikers. At Brest, workers produced walkie-talkie radios for the strikers instead of their normal products. The question of course then arises as to at what point it is legitimate to be in favour of the workers actually initiating changes in production. The answer is that this is correct only when the social relations of capitalist production have in practice been destroyed. In general this can only be achieved after the destruction of the bourgeois state machine, although in certain circumstances, as we noted, it can occur before this has happened. As, however, capitalism is an economic system based on generalised commodity relations, this means the production relations of that society are not confined to those "within" the individual factory, and even less are reducible to the authority relations within the individual units of production, but include the relations between the individual units of production as well.

It is clear, therefore, that if we want to talk about workers' control or management, in its true sense, i.e. as referring to the relations of production and not to the authority relations, this can only be done in the context of organisations which span the various units of production and which unite together representatives of many factories. There are two classical forms of this - the workers' government, and Soviets. The idea of a workers' government is extremely simple. It is simply a government that gives control of industry to the working class. Because a government obviously exists for an entire state, the question of workers' control in its real sense of a regulation existing between as well as within factories is at once solved by the existence of such a government. The idea of Soviets also allows the question to be solved but so to speak "from the base" instead of from the top.

SOVIETS

The very word "Soviet" is of course associated with the Russian revolu-

tion, and has come to sound exceedingly romantic and mysterious. However, its basic idea is very simple. A Soviet is simply an organisation which draws together workers from many different factories, housing estates, etc. in an area. It is therefore different from a factory committee in that a factory committee is confined to one place of production only. In fact, organisations very much lide Soviets spring up in any really big strike led by the rand and file, and have existed in Britain. For example, in the 1911 railway strike, the leaders of the unions concerned refused to support the men. Immediately in Liverpool a Joint Strike Committee was established. This virtually took over the entire organisation of the city, and not even essential services were carried out without the authorisation of the Committee.

The development of such organisatinns can be seen clearly in the May, 1968, events in France. Thus at Nantes the entire town was quite clearly in the hands of the strike committee. Drivers patrolled all roads leading into the town and entry was controlled by the workers organisations. Only food lorries and vehicles sanctioned by the Central Strike Committee orgainsing workers from many factories were allowed through. Attempts by police to break up this system were smashed. Food supplies were organised into the city, and the strike committee even issued its own currency. And although Nantes was one of the high points of the workers' control/management in 1968 similar types of situations developed in many other places.

present perspectives

At the present time, unfortunately, capitalist production relations are still very much with us. The way in which the question of workers' control comds up at present is in terms of individual factories which are extremely militant and well organnised, and in the formation of policy for left factions inside unions. Under these circumstances, it must be brought out clearly that under the capitalist system, the workers must take no responsibility whatsoever for the running of firms or factories. The best way in which this essential point can be brought out in practice is by formulating the demands for the protection of the workers' interests in the form of vetos, in other workds the right to say no to any management decisions which harm the interests of the worders, without at the same time the working class taking any actual responsibility for the running of the factory or company. The workers of FIAT in Italy for example, put forward these ideas in the form of five demands:

1. The right of veto over movements of workers within the plant.

2. All questions of shift working and overtime to be subject to veto by the elected representatives of the workers until decided upon by a mass meeting of workers.

3. All questions of bonuses and work categories to be subject to veto by the elected representatives of the workers until decided upon by a mass meeting of workers.

4. Workers' assemblies to have complete control with regard to all questions affecting the danger of working. This to include not merely safety regulatinns, the payment of danger money, etc. but also the speed

of work.

5. All questions referring to the introduction of new plant to be subject to veto until brought before a mass meeting. This meetin then to decide whether the introduction of the new equipment is in the interests of the workers or not, and ~~xxxx~~ if they decide it is not, to have the right to veto its introduction.

These comprise a really excellent series of demands. Because they are put in terms of vetos, they do not involve the workers taking the slightest responsibility for the running of the plant, yet at the same time, they would defend the interests of the working class. There are also of course other demands of the same form which would be added to the list ~~xxxx~~ drawn up by the FIAT workers. For example: the right to veto job loss and the right for workers to veto the contents of the capitalist press are equally important demands, but the demands raised at FIAT are an excellent starting point.

workers' vetos

Demands for workers vetos can of course be achieved only in a situation where the relation of forces in society is deisively favourable to the working class; in short, where the employers fear the consequences of not granting these demands to the workers even more than they do, the consequences, financial and political, of granting them, or at least allowing them to be carried out. This relation of forces can of course exist in exceptional cercumstances even within an individual factory. Obviously as revolutionaries gain a bigger base in the working class, and as the crisis of capitalism deepens, there are going to be factories or even industries where the majority of workers will put forward such demands for workers' control. If these factories are of key importance and the workers are exceptionally well organised, then the management ma may even be force to grant some of these demands. In this situation, for a period of time, mormally of course very short, the workers would have achieved some of the semands, but would still be working under capitalism. In these circumstances these demands would be entirely appropriate as they would make clear that the workers were taking no responsibility whatsoever for the running of firms within capitalism. In general however, these types of demands can only be achieved in a revolutionary situation. At present they form the basis of slogans of left facts within unions, or of individual unions. It is these types of demands at the present time that should form the basis for a campaign for workers' control.

John Marshall.