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The (In)conceivability of Real “Workers’ Control” Under Capitalism

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“History teaches, but has no pupils”

Introduction

Radical socialists around the world have long considered workers’ councils with the aim of “workers’ control” and “self-management” as the ideal form of work organization. On the other end of the pro-labor spectrum, reformist social democrats have insisted on a tripartite corporatist arrangement through which workers become social partners of capitalists and find a limited role in participation and management. Both tendencies have, to different degrees, failed in achieving their respective ends. Studies of council movements discuss workers’ control at two levels: the workplace for the control of production and the political system for control of the state. This paper focuses only on workplace councils. Workplace councils are historically of two types: those that emerged independent of and in confrontation with the ruling state or during its downfall; and councils that emerged with the support of the state or party in power. The focus here is on the first group of councils.

Drawing upon past experiences, the proponents of council democracy continue to campaign for labor management. The emergence of these councils, however, was the product of major political crises and they were eliminated once the crises were over. In instances where they lasted longer, it was because of state protection and affiliation, and along with changes in the political system, they met their eventual demise. The “work councils” that emerged in post–World War II Europe were totally different and have been a mechanism of minor and declining workers’ participation, and certainly not workers’ control.

Surely the emancipation of the “producing class” is not possible as far as the “appropriating class” controls the production processes, and thus the precondition for the liberation of the producers of wealth is the takeover of control of the production processes. The key question, however, is under which specific socio-economic and political conditions can this revolutionary ideal be materialized. This paper argues that under capitalism and neoliberal globalization, with major organizational and technological transformations taking place in industries and corporations, along with the weakening of the working class, it is inconceivable to have real managerial

workers' councils in industries, with the exception of some minor small production cooperatives. Sustained workers' control in the true sense of self-management is only achievable at the height of democratic and revolutionary transition from capitalism and in a postcapitalist society, with the backing of a progressive democratic political system. It also argues that corporatist models based on class collaboration, despite some gains for the workers, have never been able or even intended to challenge and weaken capitalism. The paper, focusing on councils and councilism, advocates for radical though practicable and progressive class-struggle forms of workers and employee participation in decision-making processes during the long process of transition from capitalism. It also stresses the need for the integral and simultaneous struggle of the working class for both control of production and for a truly democratic political system.

Short-lived Workers' Councils in Historical Perspective

The concept of "workers' control," which has different meanings in different languages, has often been used very loosely, ranging from full takeover and control of workplaces to short-lived labor actions. However, in its strict sense—which is the focus of this paper—the concept originates from the Paris Commune and Marx's earlier interpretations of it. Despite his prior disapproval,¹ Marx declared the Commune a "working class government" and "the political form at last discovered."² A decade later, however, Marx drew a very different conclusion about the Commune, and called it "...a rising of a town under exceptional conditions, [and that] the majority of the Commune was in no sense socialist, nor could it be."³ Nevertheless, for radical socialists the Paris Commune remained *the* ideal model for a working-class organization based on mandated recallable delegates. It became the reference point for all the advocates of workers' control, despite the fact that it was more fit for soviet-type political organs rather than workplace organizations for the control of production.

Decades after the Commune, the model appeared in the forms of "soviets" and "councils" in different parts of the world, and became the basis of the diverging strategies of transition to socialism through revolutionary councilism as opposed to reformist parliamentarism. The short-lived St. Petersburg Soviet of the Russian Revolutions of 1905 was among the first cases in this regard and was a precursor of the soviets, which played a crucial role in the February and October Revolutions of 1917. Lenin called the soviets the "organized form of the dictatorship of proletariat" and organs of political power.⁴ But the soviets soon became a rubber stamp of the Communist Party, and the dictatorship of the proletariat turned into the dictatorship of the party, and under Stalin, the dictatorship of the leader.

The actual workers' control organs in the factories in Russia were "factory committees." These committees, which were one of the most important pillars of the revolution, gradually faded away. Where in 1917 they were organs of workers' control and administration of factories, in 1918 they were transformed into state-run trade unions. Later, they became a part of the factory *troika*, consisting of the plant manager, the Communist Party cell secretary, and the head of the local union. They were altogether eliminated under Stalin, when the factory triad system was disbanded and

control of factories was handed over to plant managers.⁵ After Stalin, state-run unions were revived and played an active role in implementing the state's industrial policies.⁶

Around the same time, at the end of the First World War, councils (*Räte*) also appeared and played important roles in German politics through the 1918 and 1919 Revolutions.⁷ Similar to the soviet experience, in November 1918, the German working class, along with soldiers and sailors, established the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils, and a SPD-led national government was established. A main issue dividing the Left and the Right socialists—the right wing SPD, the left wing Independent USPD and Spartacists/later Communists KPD, and KAPD—was the type of political system. The vast majority of delegates to the councils' congress supported a parliamentary as opposed to fully councils-ruled system.⁸ The growing confrontations between the Left and Right socialists and the brutal suppression of the Left activists who were supporters of complete *Räte* rule extremely weakened the council movement.

Aside from these soviet-type *Räte*, “factory councils” played a very important role in the management of industries and were dealing with the question of socialization of industries and workers' control. The most significant ones were related to the Revolutionary Shop Stewards, and the supporters of Richard Muller. There were, however, differences among the skilled workers, who favored control of production as they had “the knowledge and autonomy” to modify production processes along with technicians and engineers, and the unskilled workers, who were more interested in bread and butter.⁹ Despite the relative strength of the council movement, it failed in part as a result of lack of support by the SPD-led government and sectarian disputes among the different factions of socialist. The National Assembly debated a workers councils bill, “which was a watered-down version of employer-employee ‘co-determination’ assigning a minor and insignificant role to the workers' councils.”¹⁰ Despite a successful strike in reaction to the right-wing Kapp putsch in 1920, councils came under further attacks in 1920, when the troops attacked industrial areas one by one, defeating workers, and executing and jailing many of the leaders. By 1921, the factory council movement had come to an end.

Elsewhere, during the first world war, “Internal Commissions” were created in major Italian industries. After the war, particularly during the Two Red Years of 1919–1920, “factory councils” emerged notably in Turin and Milan. Gramsci, impressed with the rise of councils, soon became their “main intellectual architect” and declared that the birth of workers' councils throughout Europe was “a major historical event — the beginning of a new era in the history of the human race.” As the main author of the “Program of the Workshop Delegates,” Gramsci considered the Turin councils as an “initial step . . . that would build toward urban soviets, which in turn would constitute the nucleus of a democratic proletarian state.”¹¹

In fact, the five-months-long great general strike that had led to heroic but very short-lived occupations and running of factories by workers, came to a brutal end. Facing the choice between socialism and fascism, the scared Italian capitalists did not hesitate to embrace the latter, and fascist thugs, taking advantage of the moment, ended the already weakened workers' councils.

Decades after the workers' councils of the First World War era, several other council movements emerged in other parts of Europe. Among the earliest were the Spanish

Councils created during the 1936–1939 civil war. As Modesto Escobar mentions, from the early 1920s there had been discussions to establish councils in Spain, failed efforts that were repeated during the Second Republic in 1931. However, during the civil war and in the regions under the control of the Republicans, many agricultural lands and industrial firms were expropriated, and revolutionary councils led mostly by the Anarchist CNT, and in some cases by the socialist UGT, established collectivistic production regimes.¹² These were also short-lived and ended with the brutal defeat of the Republicans.

In Poland, aside from earlier instances of workers' councils during the First World War, mass strikes in the mid-1950s led to the emergence of a council movement and establishment of workers' councils. Amidst suppressions by the regime, workers and student movements forced Parliament to pass a law allowing the workers' council to "manage the enterprise in the name of the workforce." In practice, however, the regime created many obstacles to prevent workers from managing their enterprises, and a new law in 1958 turned them into "organs of co-participation of the workforce in the management of enterprises," bringing about the "slow extinction" of councils.¹³ Later, during the 1980s mass strikes and turmoil leading to the eventual collapse of the communist regime, factory strike committees emerged and in many enterprises efforts were made for self-management.

In Hungary, aside from earlier cases in 1918–1919, workers' councils emerged during the political crisis and the anti-Soviet movement in 1956. Though short-lived (Oct. 1956–Jan. 1957), they provided a wealth of materials related to the workers' movement and their attempts toward self-management and to "introduce a socialist-communal system of self-management." During the crisis, with radical demands, they managed the enterprises and for a while there was a system of dual power. It failed eventually as a result of internal divisions and the intrigues of the post-Soviet invasion regime.¹⁴

The last spontaneous and independent workers' councils movement in the world, and the least known or studied by the proponents of councilism in the West, occurred during the Iranian Revolution of 1979. The strike committees-turned councils (*Showras*) in the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC), Steel (NISC), and other strategic industries including IDRO (Industrial Development and Renovation Organisation, the largest state-owned conglomerate in Iran consisting of over 110 heavy and light industries scattered throughout the country), were among many other councils that crippled the regime. In the months leading up to the collapse of the Shah's regime in February 1979, and for a while after the assumption of power by the new regime, in the absence of top management, which had either fled or been fired, the councils controlled and ran these industries. This was a time when all other institutions, including government ministries and agencies, banks, and universities, were also functioning under the control or practical influence of their workers' and employees' councils. Most of these councils were formed by the Left and liberal (i.e., not Islamist) activists, and comprised of workers and employees, engineers, and other professionals. The Khomeini regime first tried to seize control of the councils, which proved unsuccessful, and then resorted to the creation of "Islamic Councils" with the help of fascist-type Islamic Associations that had mushroomed in all institutions. With the hostage crisis in the American Embassy in Tehran in

November 1979, followed shortly thereafter by the Iran-Iraq War, the Islamist regime succeeded in consolidating its power, dismantling the genuine council, firing the leading members, and imprisoning and executing some and replacing them with the fake (Islamic) councils.

Aside from these and many other cases that emerged in different countries during major crises and were short-lived, there were also cases where councils were formed and lasted longer because they were under the protection and influence of the political regime of the time and identified with the official ideology. Notable among these were in Yugoslavia under Marshal Tito, where following breaking up with Stalinism, “workers’ self-management” and “workers’ councils” were established in major industries in the early 1950s. They went through many transformations but lasted for four decades; They were initially an integral part of the “planned economy,” followed by the “market socialism” of the 1960s, and with the economic crisis of the 1970s went through further transformations and “reforms” until a new law in 1989 ended the whole experience.¹⁵

Another example was the workers’ “self-management” experience in Algeria after independence in 1962, under Ben Bella’s FLN, when rural workers spontaneously took control of abandoned estates, followed by takeovers in urban areas.¹⁶ These efforts were initially sanctioned by the post-independent regime, and were later gradually brought under state control, and effectively ended after the coup against Ben Bella in 1965.

The latest example of this group of councils were the “community councils” and “workers’ councils” in Venezuela. In 2005, under Hugo Chavez’s Bolivarian Revolution, a growing number of state-owned, re-nationalized industries and private factories that had been closed by owners were put under different forms of collective management. Small and medium-sized “socialist factories” and social property companies were established with the communities’ help.¹⁷ While the national government allowed expropriation of small and medium sized factories closed by their owners in 2005, it interestingly excluded strategic industries from any form of collective management.¹⁸

State-supported councils, despite their many achievements and valuable lessons, were not independent workers’ organizations. While they clearly show the significance of a supportive political system for the preservation of workers’ councils, they also point to the fact that lack of independence turns workers councils into an appendage of the state, and hence the need for the integral and simultaneous struggle of the producing class for both control of production and for a truly democratic political system.

Evolving Theories and Councilism and Council Democracy

Workers’ councils in almost all the above-mentioned cases emerged spontaneously, with limited theorization based on past instances elsewhere. Original theorization about councils and councilism appeared when the Left Communists in Germany challenged Bolshevik’s views on the soviets. Initially there was no clear theoretical understanding of councils, except for attempts by some labor leaders who founded a newspaper, the *Workers’ Council*, that outlined a theory of council communism

and council democracy ranging from single-factory, to regional-industry councils, and a national economic council.¹⁹ However, the main theoretical works about councils and councilism were developed by Anton Pannekoek, the Dutch Marxist and a founder of Left Communism; Herman Gorter, a Dutch poet and communist; and Karl Korsch, a German Marxist theoretician. Although much of these theories dealt with the soviet-type political councils and not workplace councils, they are relevant to some of the conclusions drawn in this paper.

Pannekoek, initially impressed with the success of Russian Soviets and German councils in bringing the “initial speedy victory” and giving the revolutions “direct power,” called them “new instruments of power of the masses.” Later, critical of how the Bolsheviks and German Social Democrats dealt with the soviets and councils, Pannekoek advocated for workers’ councils as the sole organization of the working class, as opposed to a Leninist party’s vanguardism/democratic centralism. For him, “workers’ Councils are the form of organisation during the transition period in which the working class is fighting for dominance, is destroying capitalism and is organizing social production.”²⁰ In place of government or central bodies “with power of command,” he envisaged that “the executive task falls to the masses themselves. . . .”²¹ For him there would be no need for workers’ control after capitalism. He believed that workers’ councils were a superior form of organization as compared to the Paris Commune, as they could combine political and economic aspects, and instead of relying on a vanguard party or a state, directly run the affairs of society. Emphasizing “autonomous activity by the masses,” Pannekoek believed that parliament, political party, and labor unions inhibit such autonomy, as leaders and not the masses play the role. Lenin criticized the views of Left Communists including those of Pannekoek’s and called them “infantile disorder.”²² Herman Gorter who had joined the German KAPD, responded to Lenin in a long “open Letter,” emphasizing the differences between Russia and industrialized Western Europe, attacked labor unions and parliamentarism, and stressed that the “proletariat must make the revolution alone.”²³

Pannekoek and others insisted on councilism at a time when the vast majority of the German working class had sided with the right wing of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), which had taken the parliamentary path and not the Soviet-style councils favored by the left-wing USPD and Spartacists/later Communists. Later, he again strongly rejected any idea of working-class party and declared that “. . . every self-styled vanguard seeking to direct and to dominate the masses by means of a ‘revolutionary party’ will stand revealed as a reactionary factor by reason of this very conception.”²⁴

A most significant theoretical contribution was by Karl Korsch. While sharing similar ideas and viewpoints about councils, he rightly believed that the failure of the German Revolution was the result of the lack of ideological preparation of the working class, and stressed the need to further its education, consciousness, and mobilization. More importantly, he believed that every stage of development of the working class produces its own form of organization.

Korsch also rightly linked workers’ control to the question of socialization. In a short piece on the subject, he defined socialist socialization, as “democratic control of the means of production by workers who decide on their social use.”²⁵ He saw

this socialization either through “expropriation, nationalization, communalization” taking place all at once, or gradually, (à la Bernstein) through increasing public control of economic life and limiting the privileges of private property owners, via labor partnership, or labor parliaments. Critical of the second approach and rejecting “half-measures” such as “profit sharing” or “workers’ participation,” he emphasized that in either case, real socialization meant “eliminating *completely* the private property owner from the social process of production.”²⁶

On the question of socialization, Kautsky, heading the socialization committee of the SPD, was already confronted with two significant problems of bureaucratic autocracy and labor aristocracy; the first one arising when private capitalists are replaced by an undemocratic bureaucracy, and the second when all authority is transferred to a privileged group of workers managing different corporations.²⁷ As part of his plan, Kautsky argued for dual power, whereby Parliament would control the state and councils would control the factories, dealing with investment and socializations. Korsch also had similar views and believed that socialists must guard against these two sources of oppression. But there were differences of opinion in the way socializations should be implemented. Kautsky’s plan was gradualist and sector by sector, while Korsch and other Left critics favored a radical overall socialization.

Korsch also recognized contradictions between the interests of producers and consumers, but further elaborated it by differentiating between two forms of socialization: “direct” where ownership of the plant is transferred to the laboring participants, and “indirect” through nationalization, communalization, and consumer co-ops.²⁸

Despite all these and other important elaborations, many theoretical issues remained unclear. Complete elimination of private property as a precondition for socialization and workers’ control depended on yet another major precondition, namely the transformation of social relations and state power. Whether such transformation comes through a political revolution (favored by the Left Communists, among others), or is attainable through progressive peaceful means (favored by the socialist reformists) is beside the point. This is to say that any discussion of workers’ control (management) without first discussing the strategic issue of socio-economic and political transformations of the society concerned is simply meaningless. Korsch did not bother himself with the complexity of the process through which the goal of socialization can be achieved. In a sense, Korsch’s “program of practical socialism” was indeed not so “practical” to begin with. Complete and immediate elimination of private property was a policy that the Bolsheviks and other socialist revolutionaries elsewhere hastily and prematurely implemented and had to change shortly after. Korsch was so optimistic in his “practical program” that he envisaged that the “first phase” of socialization—that of material means of production—“. . . in all probability will become a broad-based reality. . . in the near future. . . .”²⁹ His expectations and those of other councilists, however, were not materialized, because of the unfortunate failure of the Second German Revolution in 1919.

A most important aspect of workers’ control is the preparedness of the workers for putting forth this highest level of demands. In Germany, only a radical segment of workers, the Revolutionary Shop Stewards of Berlin, were close to the communists and had elected Liebknecht as their leader. But even they had refused to join the party. Of the 490 delegates of the Congress of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Council who

voted for the parliamentary republic rather than the council republic, only ten were Spartacists.³⁰ This clearly showed that even in the second most advanced capitalist society of the time, workers were not yet supportive of a swift move toward socialism.

Over a decade later, while in exile in Turkey, Trotsky, in response to the question of German Left Oppositionists, defined the idea of workers' control under capitalism as part of a "dual power . . . a sort of economic interregnum," when "control lies in the hands of workers" but "ownership and the right of disposition remain in the hands of capitalists."³¹ He saw this possible in a period when the working class is on the road to take power and defined it as a "provisional transitional regime." Trotsky recognized workers' control as only relevant for the transition period, and not for a postcapitalist society. It is obvious that this strong statist view, shared and put into practice by the Bolsheviks, would mean that direct producers would not need to be involved in direct management in the presumed postcapitalist era.

Trotsky linked the possibility of workers' control to the overall revolutionary change, but what he called "workers' control of production" during the capitalist era was in fact "workers' participation" and not "control." Interestingly, he himself further refers to "the participation of workers in the management of production," and mentions cases that had taken place under capitalism, and which, in his words, "rests upon class collaboration and not class struggle." Trotsky used the two very different concepts of "workers' control" and "workers' participation" interchangeably. He contended that "workers' control of production can come considerably ahead of developed political dual power in a country" and saw such a possibility for Germany. He was still very optimistic about factory councils and envisaged that the workers' councils in Germany could act as soviets, the organ of dual power.³²

In Italy, Gramsci's "proletarian democracy" had similarities with Council Communism. Unlike Gramsci and other *L'Ordine Nuovo* activists, and the anarchists and syndicalists, the leaders of the Socialist Party of Italy, notably Amadeo Bordiga and Angelo Tasca, were critical of councilism. Bordiga's ultra-Leninist viewpoints aside, his criticism of councilism pointed to an important fact: He believed that as long as capitalists controlled state power, councils were inevitably confined to trade-union style activities. In 1920, in the sarcastically titled "Seize Power or Seize the Factory?," Bordiga wrote "Control within the factory has a revolutionary and expropriative significance only after central power has passed into the hands of the proletariat." He added, "The factory will be conquered by the working class—and not only by the workforce employed in it. . .—only after the working class as a whole has seized political power."³³ Tasca, on the other hand, put his emphasis on the unions, party, and state, and looked to the merger of the councils and unions. Despite their numerous differences, Bordiga and Gramsci later separated from the conservative reformist PSI (Socialist Party) and established the Communist Party of Italy.

Once the councils started their decline in the face of external threats and internal weaknesses, and before coming to their tragic end, Gramsci's optimism also waned. At the beginning of the factory occupations, in an article entitled "The Communist Party," Gramsci discussed the internal weaknesses of the Italian working class. He bitterly wrote, "the enemy to combat and overcome will no longer be outside the proletariat. . . . The enemy will lie within the proletariat itself. . . when the dialectic of class struggle has been internalized within every individual consciousness. The new

man, in his every act, has to fight the ‘bourgeois’ lying in ambush.”³⁴ As Carl Boggs³⁵ points out, this was Gramsci’s reference to the issue of “mass consciousness” and ideological hegemony, at a time when “bourgeois attitudes, values, and social relations was penetrating the everyday life of workers.”

Another notable shift in Gramsci’s position concerned the significance of the political party. In the same article, he implicitly called for separating from the PSI and creating a new communist party, like the Russian model. Dante Germino maintains that calling for a vanguard party was not a shift of Gramsci’s opinion about councils and he did not see the party as a replacement for councils but as an expression of political vanguard for them.³⁶ It is true that Gramsci never doubted the significance of the councils, and even later, in 1921, he enthusiastically discussed and praised the April Strike and the internal democratic organization of the councils and criticized the “union bureaucrats and the leadership of the Socialist Party.”³⁷ But compared to his earlier views about councils, a shift in his views was evident. In an earlier work on Gramsci, Boggs³⁸ mentions that the shift from Gramsci’s emphasis on workers’ councils to the revolutionary party was visible by 1920–1921 after his return from Russia, when he stressed the primary role of the revolutionary party as the “protagonist of history.” Boggs further argues that Gramsci never sought to obscure his criticism of the factory councils. “The defeats, he felt, were logically tied to an approach that encouraged seizing control of the productive apparatuses without simultaneously pressing the issue of state power.”³⁹

Despite all these earlier and conflicting theoretical advances, ambiguities abound around key questions regarding the nature, functions, and timing of the councils. Are workers’ councils conceivable during the capitalist era, or only possible during the period of transition to socialism? What are the pre-conditions of producers’ self-management at the workplace and at the political levels, in terms of the preparedness of the working class and the type of political regime in place? What are the relations of workers’ control and central control, and with parliament? What are their relations—if any—to trade unions? Can a political system based on full workers’ control be established in a single country? And are they necessary under socialism?

Continued Theoretical Ambiguities

In over a century since the rise and fall of the original workers’ councils, the idea and push for workers’ control persisted in different parts of the world and the concept continued to inspire much debate in different countries.

In the latter part of the 1950s, one year after the collapse of the Hungarian councils, Cornelius Castoriadis published the original French version of his pamphlet “Workers’ Councils and the Economics of Self-managed Society,” later published in English in 1972. Emphasizing the need for direct democracy, Castoriadis worked out some details of work organization based on councils. He believed that “socialism will only be brought about by the autonomous action of the majority of population,” and for him this autonomy implied workers’ management of production. While in this and his later works Castoriadis elaborated some of the workings of the councils, he did not explain how and under which political system could this ideal of full autonomy of producers be materialized. He was even so optimistic that he declared

that this is “no longer a ‘theoretical’ preoccupation relating to some remote and problematic future.”⁴⁰

Around the same period “Autonomists,” “post-Marxists,” “workerists,” notably Antonio Negri and his colleagues in Italy, also advocated direct peoples’ involvement in decision-making and self-organized action independent of institutions of state, trade union and political parties; a trend that continued in his later works, and others including John Holloway.

Taking issue with both liberal democratic and Marxist traditions and criticizing modern representative democracy, Hannah Arendt, in her 1963 book *On Revolution*, stressed a political system that allows and encourages citizens’ direct participation in government.⁴¹ She stressed the radical democratic nature of workers’ councils, while undermining their socialist nature.

In Britain, aside from earlier efforts during the first World War by the Guild Socialists and the left-wing shop stewards demanding workers’ control,⁴² the idea of workers’ control was revived again in 1968, mostly inspired by the May 1968 movement in France. Some activists, most notable among them Ken Coates, Tony Topham, and Michael Barratt Brown created the “Institute of Workers’ Control,” organizing conferences and publishing on the subject.⁴³ The general belief was the possibility of workers’ control under capitalism as a means of “dual power” during the transition. Among the major theoretical issues was the relationship between workers’ control and central control. Later, Barratt Brown optimistically wrote that “[i]f concessions won by labour from capital increase the knowledge and power of the workers and reduce the arbitrary power of capital, then increasingly capitalism is ‘working’ on the workers’ term.”⁴⁴

The idea and debates reappeared again in the early 1970s in Britain. There were also labor actions such as the occupation of workplaces in reaction to the industrial renovation programs of the Labour Party of the time. Another important debate began with the publication of Ernie Roberts’ influential book, *Workers’ Control* in 1973. Against those who questioned the possibility of workers’ control under capitalism, Roberts saw workers’ control as an immediate alternative to capitalism and a necessary step toward the transition to socialism. In response to Roberts, Bert Ramelson of the British Communist Party wrote: the “diversity in terminology [to express workers’ control] was a fairly good measure of the confusion and illusions that are being sown, of the utopian as well as class collaboratory and diversionary ideas that surround the subject.” Roberts, agreeing with some of the points raised by Ramelson, believed that “[i]t is possible that we will pass through Ramelson’s ideal of industrial democracy on the way to workers’ control.”⁴⁵

Around the same time, in France the powerful French Democratic Confederation of Labour (CFDT), in its 1970 congress called for workers’ control, *autogestion*, the idea that had emerged earlier during the Fourth Republic (1946–1958), when some socialists had separated from SFIO and created the Unified Socialist Party (PSU). However, all these and similar demands could not be put into practice in a serious manner, and no major theories emerged.

In the same period, Ernest Mandel also started writing his influential series on workers’ control and workers’ management. Bemoaning that the idea of workers’ control had for decades “fallen into disuse” in the labor movement, he tried to revive

the idea. His view was that workers' control is "a transitional demand," and explicitly emphasized that "workers must systematically refuse to take the slightest particle of responsibility for the management of capitalist enterprises and the capitalist economy."⁴⁶ He rightly differentiated between "control" and "participation," but while pointing to the major technological changes taking place in industries, did not clarify how workers could "control" these large capitalist enterprises under capitalism. In another piece on the subject written in the early 1970s, suggesting that there should be no illusion that workers' councils can necessarily lead to revolution, Mandel wrote that "what the revolutionary vanguard can and must do is to prepare favourable conditions for the workers to make a breakthrough toward socialism, by establishing organs of dual power at the height of a pre-revolutionary period, and by making sure that the revolutionary period culminates in the conquest of power."⁴⁷

In 1979, the rise and demise of Iranian councils, aside from state suppression and internal organizational problems, was partly due to theoretical confusions surrounding the nature and functions of workers' councils. Since they were formed mainly by Left activists, they all saw them as mechanism of workers' control. The councils were not just the organization of workers, and included salaried employees from the new middle classes who in the majority of cases had initially formed the councils. While this multiclass membership entailed obvious tensions, the presence of engineers, technicians, administrative personnel, and low/medium managers meant that the councils were able to effectively run the industries for a while. The *showras* had no links to city-level or community organizations. They were also operating in union-less industries, and were trying to perform both the function of council as managerial and participatory organization, and that of a union, defending the rights and demands of their members.

Interestingly, all debates to revive the idea of workers' control in the 1970s and '80s were taking place at a time when a more aggressive form of capitalism—neoliberalism—was emerging. Capitalism, despite its inherent crises, had continued its march forward, and had passed through major transformations of Fordism and post-Fordism, moving away from standardized mass production in centralized large factories to flexible specialization and the breakdown of the production processes into a cluster of smaller industries scattered around the globe, along with the shrinkage and segmentation of the industrial working class and expansion of the new middle class. All these and other transformations made the idea of workers' control under capitalism and the creation of a "dual power" an even more remote fantasy. No doubt, workers' insurgencies and direct actions, along with anticapitalist and social movements continued, but none of these could be considered as workers' control in its real sense of self-management.

With the rise of "square movements" in the second decade of the twenty-first century, interest in workers' control and councilism was revived, and several important books and numerous articles emerged. One of the books that appeared during this period was the edited volume by Immanuel Ness and Dario Azzellini, entitled *Ours to Master and to Own: Workers' Control from the Commune to the Present*. The highly informative book provided an excellent array of cases of workers' councils and direct actions in different parts of the world. But aside from reviewing major council movements, it explicitly or implicitly presents all cases of workers' direct

actions as cases of workers' control. In their introduction, the editors write "[u]nder all forms of government and political rule, workers have struggled for participation in decision-making processes of the enterprises they work for and have attempted to develop forms of co- and self-management, or workers' control."⁴⁸ Obviously, not all these forms have been workers' control, as "co-management" is workers' participation and not control. They emphasized that "not only are workers' control and socialist democracy possible . . . but they also serve as a remedy to the human misery. . . ." True, but the collection did not elaborate when and how this ideal would become possible. The editors on the one hand posed the important question as to "[w]hat are the dynamics of workers' control in the neoliberal era and how do they diverge from the Fordist era?" and pointing to the changes in production and labor in post-Fordist era, they asserted that these changes "have rendered the classical factory councils unthinkable in many labor scenarios."⁴⁹ Yet they emphasized that "[t]he legacy of workers' control is all the more relevant today during a period of global economic crisis."⁵⁰ One contributor to the volume notes more strongly that "[a] relevance of workers' councils model to today's political and economic situation is beyond doubt."⁵¹ Another contributor, however, is cautious saying that "[t]he Councilists' conviction that this was central to workers' emancipation was also correct. But whether workers' councils remain the ideal organisational form to face the challenges of today is less certain."⁵²

Later, several other important books and articles on the subject appeared and shed more light on the complexities of the council movement. Among these mention is made of James Muldoon's edited book *Council Democracy*, which discussed the idea of council democracy as a major component of democratic theory. He argued that "Council democracy is a project of deepening democracy which includes decentralization of the state, democratization of economy and solidarity with similar international struggles for self-government."⁵³ In his introductory chapter, Muldoon, referring to early councils, provides a concise overview of key questions and theoretical differences among council theorists, notably: overcoming the division between the political and the economic; the relation of council institutions with the existing state apparatuses; councils' roles as temporary revolutionary organs or as institutions that will also function in postcapitalist society; representation and revocability of delegates; and how to reconcile the two principles of workers' control over production and a universal conception of democracy. Much of the book deals with the conception of democracy and the desired political system, and not with workplace democracy, which is our focus here. Only chapter 11 by David Ellerman, drawing from abolitionist, democratic, and feminist movements, discusses in some general terms a type of workplace democracy that is "antithetical" to and "independent from and outside Marxist and communist theory," which supposedly can replace the Marxian views of workplace democracy.⁵⁴ Comparing council democracy to other types of democratic theories (minimal, participatory, radical, agonistic, and deliberative), Muldoon points to the pre-eminence and transformative character of the council system, but what is missing is how and under which conditions such a system can be established.

Other important theoretical contributions to workplace democracy also appeared in this period, notably the works of Nicolas Vrousalis. His major focus is on the question of socialization and how the dilemma of "state bureaucracy" (control by the

state) versus “labour aristocracy” (control by producers) can be resolved.⁵⁵ He rightly stresses that “socialists must constantly wage war on two fronts, quite independently of capital: against state officialdom, on the one hand and against technocracy, on the other.” For him, the institutional means for this has to do with the separation of powers between states, managers, and workers. He stresses that workplace democrats should be opposed to private property and be committed to economic democracy—socialism.⁵⁶ He rightly points out that “the full realization of [workplace democracy] principles is undermined by the existence of private property.” In his compelling analysis of the experience of German councils, in what he calls “Council Erfurtianism,” he concludes that “the only feasible and desirable alternative to bourgeois democracy in 1918 Germany was a parliamentary democracy supported by workers’ councils.”⁵⁷

All these important recent contributions, mostly if not all derivatives of past theories, along with those of Popp-Madsen, who argues along the same views as Arendt and Castoriadis, and Roberto Frega et al.’s review of recent debates⁵⁸, while advancing our understanding of council democracy, do not discuss how and under which conditions this superior democratic system can be put into practice. Many questions remain unanswered in these books and articles, or in the pro-workers’ control websites and sporadic writings or reprints of the advocates of councilism. Despite its important criticisms directed against Leninist-type parties, democratic centralism, bureaucratization and deradicalization of parties, unions, and social democratic states, the dominant version of Councilism or Council Communism by and large moved to the extreme of believing that workers, through their sole decentralized self-managing councils, would be able to manage the affairs of society and economy.

If real workers’ control could not be materialized in the pre-Fordist and Fordist era, how can it become a reality in the current post-Fordist era, when industries operate in a cluster of multi-layered upstream and downstream chains of companies scattered nationally and around the globe? Control of just one link (one factory) would not be sufficient, while control of the whole chain is out of the question, because other industries share the supply and value chain. To name but a few questions: How is control possible without ownership? How is ownership possible without socialization? How is socialization possible without change of the political system? How can such revolutionary transformations come about and by whom?

The Catch-22 of Control vs Participation

The past experiences of the creation of managerial workers’ councils clearly show that under capitalist rule, real and sustained control of production by the producing class is not conceivable, except in very small industries or co-ops, and even those industries cannot avoid capitalist imperatives. There are worker-owned or labor-managed firms, as well as workers cooperatives, which are in many ways different from workers’ councils. In terms of worker/employee ownership, other than very small shops that can be fully owned by their workers, most workers’ ownership in large firms are through minority shareholdings, a practice encouraged in many countries by capitalist states and some corporations. While the workers and employees of such companies get the same voting rights as any other individual shareholders do, it cannot by

any means be considered as “workers’ control.” Worker cooperatives are also mostly small, and the medium and large ones, while focusing less on maximizing profits and more on member benefits, have no choice but to operate, to different degrees, as capitalist firms. Even the most famous and celebrated example of workers’ cooperatives, the Spanish Basque’s Mondragon Corporation, is a holding operating internationally, taking advantage of cheaper labor in less developed countries, including in Central and South America. While the management system is definitely far more democratic and humane compared to a typical capitalist corporation, there are wage differentials among members, and most of the holding’s companies are run by professional managers.⁵⁹

Workers’ control in its true and sustained sense is only possible when the means of production are “directly” or “indirectly” socialized under a new political system that has been established with the democratic support of the “immense majority,” and which encourages and endorses the self- and co-management of economic and social institutions. Even with such preconditions, not every type of management could actually be “self-management” simply because most large industries have different “stakeholders,” ranging from consumers to producers of other integrated industries, and representatives of a central coordinating body (state), one of whose functions is to allocate scarce resources. Therefore, the obvious pre-condition for seizing control of production is the seizure of state power through democratic means. Christopher Gunn, referring to the changes in the organization and management of production, rightly argues that workers have become participants in broader managerial activities but not in the control of production. Workers’ control of production involves dramatic changes in the “relationship between capital and labor, and the development of alternative forms of production and distribution.”⁶⁰

We also know that the transition from capitalism is a much longer and more complicated process than expected. Such transformations cannot be brought about by workers’ councils alone, without the support of unions, parties and a radical progressive state. Moreover, gaining political power, not only needs workers’ councils, but also community, city, political councils, and other institutions at the national level with strong international linkages. Councilists’ accounts of the workers’ councils of the past century are full of laments that capitalists and their states suppressed workers’ attempts at control of production. What else could be expected, at a time when the dominant class is in full control, with all the repressive, ideological, and economic apparatuses of power at its disposal, and when even most workers, acculturated in the dominant ideology, do not necessarily support the more radical demands.

The main question now is what can be done for workers to be able to intervene in decision-making processes during the long process of transition from capitalism. If full workers’ “control” of production is not possible in this era, then the only other option is growing workers’ “participation” in the process. But we also know that workers’ “participation” in management has its own serious contradictions, and corporatism has had its problems. Many, including Gerassimos Moschonas, have rightly pointed out that social democratic corporatism is based on class collaboration and has not been able to challenge capitalism. Furthermore, rather than social democracy changing capitalism, it is capitalism that has changed social democracy.⁶¹ There is no doubt that there are degrees of cooptation involved in workers participation,

and there is conflict in the role played by the representatives of workers, defending the right of workers and at the same time managing the affairs and interests of the company owned fully or partially by the capitalists. Also, participation potentially dilutes and confuses class struggle and has deradicalization effects.

We are faced with a catch-22 situation: Under the present conditions, control is not practicable, and participation weakens the class struggle. Would this mean that because of the deradicalizing effects of participation and its contradictions workers should not seek any involvement in decision making? If this is the case, struggles for higher wages, shorter weekly hours, and better working and living conditions also have deradicalizing effects and should not be followed! Notwithstanding contradictions, the obvious choice between workers' participation and workers' control under capitalism and in the period of transition from capitalism is the ever-expanding class struggle-based industrial democracy.

Industrial democracy, depending on the changing balance of power between capital and labor, and also the combativeness of its advocates, can actually prepare the working class for managing its own affairs, when the change of political system permits full control. Michael Poole, in his important book *Towards a New Industrial Democracy*⁶² originally published in 1986 and in later works, points out that success of workers' participation is contingent on the latent power and values of the main parties concerned. And as Carole Pateman rightly mentioned decades ago, the principal function of participation is "educative."⁶³ A significant precondition for worker's control is the preparedness of the working class to demand and to manage its own affairs. We need to go back to Gramsci's teachings about the struggle for ideological hegemony and mass consciousness of the working class and the public in general.

Radical industrial democracy and workers participation, and different indirect and direct actions are major steps in the long process of class struggle, culminating in workers' control and dual power during the height of revolutionary change and under socialism. The stronger and more organized the workers, the higher the degree of participation, ranging from "information sharing" to "consultation," "co-management," and beyond. In this process, participative councils in each institution would act as participation arms of democratized unions, and for industries that are part of a value chain, a council representative of each unit in the chain would be represented in a "stakeholder council" of the whole cluster. There should of course be no illusion that radical industrial democracy and the focus on participation rather than control would necessarily be successful. Its success depends on how anticapitalist agents and movements can confront and increasingly weaken the power of global capital. What is certain is that the continued emphasis on "control" without considering the necessary preconditions will lead nowhere. No doubt, in the long process of transition to postcapitalist society, it is imperative to keep socialist ideas alive, both intellectually and in practice, as many, including Erick Olin Wright and Daniel Ben Said, have noted. However, insisting on seemingly radical but precocious and unworkable slogans such as "change the world without taking power" (John Holloway) or call for the immediate revolutionary rupture from capitalism, at a time when their conditions are not ready, not only does not contribute to the cause of socialism and working-class emancipation, but in effect can distort the anticapitalist struggle. Not every radical demand is necessarily progressive, and in fact, considering the specificity of the moment, could be regressive.

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