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Dario Azzellini (ed.), *An alternative Labour History. Worker Control and Workplace Democracy*, 2015, Zed Books, 2015, 352 pp. \$28 Paperback.

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Abstract. This book covers a wide variety of proletarian struggles to take control of the workplace from capitalists. This extends over a century - from the Austrian revolution in 1919 to recent events in Greece. It also covers theoretical questions (such as Pannekoek's council communism) to the practical issues faced by workers' cooperatives attempting to compete in the market place. The geographical spread from places as far apart as Brazil, Canada, Chile, Japan, Mexico, Italy, and Uruguay presents a little known history. Although the numerous authors do not offer a single perspective, the book posits both an alternative to parliamentary social democracy and those who ignore the working class as a factor in social transformation. Inevitably these experiences have succumbed to the surrounding capitalist environment but they point both to the persistence of striving for direct democracy and its potential as a real alternative to the current system.

Keywords. Democracy, Labour history, Worker control, Revolution.


JEL. C91, E20, F66, J60.


Book Review

This book appears at an opportune moment. The crisis of the neoliberal phase of capitalism has posed difficult, and sometimes intractable problems for the bosses, their states and social structures. However, the crisis has affected the labour movement just as profoundly, because it had been operating within a set of parameters that suddenly changed. Structures, practices and expectations that developed over decades are being put to the test and found wanting. A good example of that is reformist social democracy. While it took many guises over the years, in essence it promised benefits to the working class via voting and use of parliamentary structures, in return for quiescent acceptance of the status quo. A recent, and very radical manifestation of its crisis has been witnessed in Greece. This saw the near elimination of the traditional social democratic party, PASOK, and its replacement by Syriza. Yet this too, despite its radical intentions and language, has foundered on the same rocks.

It is therefore timely that an alternative to the seemingly endless sequence of hope followed by betrayal is presented and analysed in detail. The book's title - *An Alternative Labour History, Worker Control and Workplace Democracy* - tells the whole story of its contents. If these matters clearly have heightened relevance today, as the opening words of the introduction show, this alternative is not new:

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‘Over the past 135 years, in all kinds of historical situations...workers have taken control...’[p.1] One of the book’s great strengths is that it takes the working class, the mass who operate at the heart of the system and upon who the capitalists are totally dependent, as the key factor for change. At a time when some critics of the system have given up rigorous analysis of the system and its dynamics, and in their impatience abandoned this force in favour of a nebulous ‘multitude’, or loose movements that quickly rise and ebb away, a stress on the working class is important.

Another strength is that the collection of articles is by widely different authors, covering equally widely differing subject areas. After a substantial general introduction by Dario Azzellini, there are three theoretical chapters. The first and perhaps most abstract is entitled *Council Democracy, or the End of the Political*. Alex Demirovic provides a trenchant critique of ‘liberal democracy’ and then looks at the ideas of Marx, along with workers’ council theorists like Anton Pannekoek and Karl Korsch. Rather than picturing any new society in detail, the aim is to discuss how it is possible to constitute a ‘new way of living together in a society where people control their own relationships... in complete freedom.’[p. 61] Like most of the other chapters, this one does not come up with a clear-cut blueprint or an uncritical treatment of the thinkers. Indeed, as we shall see, there are perhaps more questions raised by this collection than answers provided.

In contrast, the second chapter, by the editor, is much more restricted in time, as it deals with *Contemporary Crisis and Workers’ Control*. It gives a global overview with detailed studies from France, Italy, Greece, Turkey, Egypt and the USA. The focus here is on ‘recuperated’ workplaces, largely those which have been taken over by workers acting to protect jobs by keeping open production units that the bosses wished to shut, sell off, or abandon. If the focus is global, the scale is very much more modest than in the previous article. For example, the two cases cited from France of workers taking over and running their workplaces involved 27 and 182 workers respectively, while there were 59 and 330 in the Italian examples.

The Canadian activist Elise Thorburn contributes the third chapter. She proposes a workers’ assembly, and specifically the Greater Toronto Workers’ Assembly (GWTA), as a new and exciting form of organisation. With the writings of Hardt and Negri in the background, this section is perhaps the most problematic of the collection, in that elsewhere in the book - whether large (mass workers’ councils in the Austrian revolution of 1918-19) or small (the couple of dozen workers of Ri-Maflo in Italy) - the subject is actual workers’ control and democratic operation of workplaces. Whatever one thinks of the premises lying behind Thorburn’s exposition she states that the GWTA has no workplace committees or representatives and is ‘not rooted’ in any particular workplace. [p. 105] Therefore, the 300 or so individuals who have joined the GWTA do so as individual activists rather than as a workplace collective. Equally, the breadth of the GWTA - ‘unionized, non-unionized, the unemployed... part-time... temporary, poor, students and community activists... socialists, communists, anarchists, autonomists’ forming ‘a center for discussion, debate, analysis and struggle’ to ‘broaden the understanding of workers’ power’ may be laudable and makes for an interesting experiment, but it is one that really lies outside the main thrust of this particular volume.

A similar point might be made about the discussion by Henrique Novaes and Mauricio de Faria of developments in Brazil. Here the discussion concerns the growth of factory commissions in the 1960s, and the impact of the *coup d’etat* later on. This is important in showing the early development of struggles for workers’ control. However, as the authors themselves say: ‘occupation and resuming production was considered an option by the workers’ movement only in the 1990s,

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when the economic and labor crisis provoked the emergency of recuperated factories in Brazil and other countries' [p.235]. But this later process lies outside the scope of the chapter.

Chapters four and five deal with the wave of revolution that swept Europe after the First World War, and the events in Chile, 1970-1973. In the former case, Peter Haumer describes the spectacular collapse of the Austrian empire and its disintegration into several independent states (Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary, Yugoslavia, and so on). This was coupled with a full-blown workers' revolt in German-speaking Austria. Covering an episode which has been insufficiently studied elsewhere, the author meticulously traces the evolution of the Austrian struggle during the war years. This included huge strikes, culminating in state breakdown and the formation of workers' and soldiers' councils. It ended with the taming of the workers' councils when they were incorporated into a neutered workers' participation model.

Chilean events evolved in a rather different way, but had equally radical potential, as Frank Gaudichaud explains. The hopes raised by the election of a left-wing government led to the bosses' and CIA attempting to de-rail Allende's government. In response the *cordonesindustriales* emerged as mass organisations of popular resistance designed, not only to push back the sabotage of the employers but to give workers' a real say in how their workplaces were to be run. They represented a potential workers' power in contradistinction to the existing state. , Tragically, when the military coup began they were left on the sidelines. Activists are quoted as saying: 'The workers were demanding weapons'. 'We spent the whole night of September 11, 1973 waiting for the weapons that never came... But nothing happened.' [pp. 177-8]

Kimiyasu Irie's chapter on 'production control' Japan after the Second World War, along with articles on Mexico, and Uruguay, discuss moments when the chaos of capitalism in crisis has led people to take over their workplaces to protect livelihoods (the exception being the Zapatista movement in Chiapas which has a distinct character of its own). Of course, the very fact that workers are capable of replacing their bosses and running production without them contains an implicit challenge to capitalism, and in the process of acting in this way the outlook of workers can itself be transformed. But context plays a very important part here. The thrust of the struggles discussed in these chapters was defensive and in the circumstances tended not to generalise across the working class as a whole.

Thus, despite the radical potential, what we see described are efforts to correct a defective social and economic system rather than go beyond it, something which the writers are well aware of. We read, for example, that in Japan 'The overall objective of production control was the participation of workers in management.' [p.212] Regarding Mexico Patrick Cuninghame writes: 'today, worker-controlled cooperatives can be an alternative model for survival against the prolonged crisis of neoliberalism but they do not necessarily provide a model for anti-capitalist resistance.' [p. 268] So it is not the external process of recuperation *per se* which has radical content but the consciousness and ideology of the those involved in the struggle that is crucial... Thus, it is neither the recovery of the enterprise nor the act of making it viable again that automatically generates political subjectivities partial to a certain transformation. No, it is the result of the specific self-management process that the collective subjects decide to follow while battling with the structural contradictions and relationships of oppression that previously existed.' [pp. 291-2]

The last chapter, by Alexandros Kioupiolis and Theodoros Karyotis, covers Greece. This is a fitting place to conclude the book because, although an Athenian coffee shop is the subject of one detailed study, such is the scale of the crisis there

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that the more limited struggles characteristic of the later chapters have the potential to turn into the overt revolutionary struggles of the entire class that are dealt with in the earlier part.

An Alternative Labour History is an impressive attempt to tackle an inherently contradictory problem. Any struggle which tries to pre-figure or transcend contemporary capitalism faces some basic difficulties. The context from which it emerges is the existing society in which the dominant ideology is capitalist while economic and coercive resources are in the hands of the bosses and their state. This is a system which refuses to allow space for alternatives (or does its very best to shut them down as soon as possible). Without a radical large-scale breakthrough, those who wish to create a durable form of workers' control or workplace democracy are immediately confronted with two choices.

One is to establish a utopian experiment which will probably command only a limited following, and therefore not involve the working class as a class. In that case the system as a whole continues even if the island of resistance can perhaps survive for some time. This first route can be taken by small groups of ideologically committed activists, and/or relatively limited minorities of workers compelled by their situation to break with the usual structures. However, as a fundamental challenge it will ultimately fail in its purpose. The other is to accept these limitations from the start and try to work within the existing frameworks by, for example, producing goods that can compete in the market place. This too leads in the shorter term to adaptation to the system itself, and so ceases to pose a real alternative to the prevailing system. Many of the contributors to this book are painfully aware of this conundrum, and it comes out time and again from the examples they give.

Barring folding one's arms and waiting for 'the revolutionary situation' (by which time it would already be too late to be anything more than a bystander), is there a way to escape both these traps? To their credit the authors illustrate the problem by documenting the red thread of struggle for workers' control and workers' democracy that runs through innumerable workers' struggles in both time and space, and they are not afraid to spell out the difficult lessons that have been learnt along the way. Although they do not come up with an answer, the material cited provides clues to a solution. One relevant area concerns forms of labour organisation. A number of accounts also explore the tension between the sort of struggles described in this book and other labour movement institutions.

Though the argument is not made in *An Alternative Labour History*, autonomists have suggested that the very idea of working class institutions playing a progressive role must be abandoned (in favour of a more nebulous 'precariat', 'multitude' and so on). The author of 'Workers' Assemblies' comes close to articulating this view, talking of an 'internal class war' where: 'those perceived to be members of the labor aristocracy with union protection, who labor for higher wages and greater benefits, are taken to be an obstacle' and so constitute a 'kind of perceived class enemy.' [p. 110] However, it must be emphasised that the word 'perceived' is carefully chosen, and Thorburn sees the workers' assembly precisely as a means of overcoming 'perceived' divisions. Still the question arises: should unions be treated as inimical to workers' democracy? In the chapter on Austria, conflict between workers and parties as such is stated explicitly: 'The underlying tension at the heart of all modern revolutions lies in the contradiction between worker self-organization and elite parties' claims to power. The councils were a mortal threat to the party system from the outset and conflict between party and council systems has been a decisive factor in every revolution of the 20th century.' [p. 120]

The problem with portraying matters in this way is shown by many of the

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accounts themselves. Let us consider the evidence. In post-WWI Austria, to avoid being outflanked by the left, the Social Democrats declared: 'We are creating workers' councils'[p. 129]. They then dominated them until they could be neutralised to the point where they improved conditions but also 'made it possible for workers to return to the factories and to accept exploitative conditions once again.'[p. 152] In Chile the *cordones* were 'not a result of the desire to be structured from the bottom up...' as elections were 'essentially the work of the union leaders and PS (Socialist Party) and MIR (Revolutionary Left Movement) members...' [p. 168] In Japan: 'At the climax of production control, Japanese trade unions started the Japanese Congress of Industrial Organisation (CIO)', the key institution of the movement, while 'The Japanese Communist Party was at the center of this initiative.' [p. 183] At the Euzkadityre factory in Mexico it was the union that established the limited liability cooperative company, TRADOC. [p. 249] and 'were supported by many unions' [p. 252] Discussing Uruguay, Anabel Rieriowrites that 'a true self-management has been formed in the PIT-CNT' [p. 289], the country's central trade union confederation.

This evidence in no way means that there is not a deep contradiction between, on the one hand the general practices pursued by reformist or Stalinist parties and trade unions, and struggles from below for workers' self-management, control and direct democracy on the other. Rather it is important not to fetishise forms of organisation over and above the members of those organisations. The reality is complex. As soon as any significant number are involved in the struggle for workers' democracy many participants will **also** be members of trade unions and/or members of political parties which may be hostile to revolutionary or radical change. The reason is obvious. A workforce is not recruited on the basis of ideological conviction and is inevitably heterogeneous in its ideas even if, when bound together collectively by struggle at work, the chance of forming a homogeneous class consciousness can begin to develop. Any attempt to artificially conceptualise an *a priori* Chinese wall between the labour institutions is therefore false, and any attempt to find a way forward for workers' democracy which ignores this reality will also face problems. Ultimately, supporters of workers' democracy cannot choose the working class they want, or their affiliations. The question is how can this working class be won to a consciousness of its own potential power and away from ideological acceptance of the system, and those institutions that are more comfortable operating within the system than overthrowing it?

With this question in mind it is possible to re-consider the key lessons of this book. As it shows so well, workers' struggle against capitalism can either end up as a form of accommodation to the system, or pose a radical challenge. This does not depend only on the formal institutional framework (of struggle from below through factory commissions, self-management, workers' councils and so on) that struggle takes, but on the direction injected into it by the actors themselves. Here the role of ideas is crucial. Parties can be defined as organisations whose members share a common set of political ideas, and just as this book shows it is a mistake to fetishise the form of workers' democracy while ignoring its ideological content, so it is a mistake to fetishise party organisation as such as automatically 'elite', 'authoritarian' or hostile to council democracy. Such attitudes are indeed true of capitalist parties - both on the part of leaders and followers. Equally reformist social democratic and Stalinist communist party leaderships have taken the same line. But that does not exhaust the issue.

The claim that 'conflict between party and council systems has been a decisive factor in every revolution of the 20th century', is correct, except for one, absolutely crucial exception which unfortunately is not discussed in the book. In 1917 the Bolshevik party, with the slogan 'All power to the Soviets' ('Soviet' is the Russian

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word for ‘council’), was able to win majority support in the workers’ and soldiers’ councils of Russia away from reformism, and lead them to a successful seizure of state power. This opened the door to a movement which swept away the capitalists and put virtually all of industry under workers’ direct democratic control. This is the only time in world history where the sort of struggles described in this excellent book, enjoyed success on a national scale (and indeed inspired workers all over the globe).

Trotsky, chair of the Petrograd workers’ and soldiers’ council, and key figure in the new Bolshevik government, later advanced the following analysis: ‘The organisation by means of which the proletariat can both overthrow the old power and replace it, is the soviets... However, the soviets by themselves do not settle the question. They may serve different goals according to the programme and leadership... The problem of conquering the power can be solved only by a definite combination of [revolutionary] party with soviets - or with other mass organisations more or less equivalent to soviets.’ [L Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution*, London, 1977, p. 1021]

Tragically with the onset of foreign wars of intervention, civil war and Russia’s continued isolation, the economy collapsed and the mass of workers who had powered council democracy were dispersed, de-classed and disempowered. This in turn led to the complete degeneration of the party and the workers’ state, so that under Stalin nothing remained of Soviet power except the name. In other words, workplace democracy needs an organised body of people who argue for it (a revolutionary party). Equally, the revolutionary party needs a fighting, confident working class capable of overthrowing the capitalists and running society for themselves if it is ultimately to remain true to its goal of workers’ power. In the process the memory of what was achieved in this sphere has been almost completely effaced under the monstrous weight of Stalinist counter-revolution.

This qualification should not detract from the value of an excellent book. It contains a wealth of thought-provoking detail about the key issue of the current conjuncture - the alternative to the failure of parliament and many existing labour movement institutions. It modestly finishes with a section entitled ‘Inconclusive Thoughts’, but the wealth of detail, argument, ideas and imagination it contains means this book should be read and read.



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