Workers control - dual power in the factories

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In February 1917 the Russian workers overthrew the Tsarist regime, only then to accept a government of the bourgeois parties, the Cadets and the Octobrists. They ceded state power to the bourgeoisie while maintaining their soviets (councils) to oversee and pressure the government. A similar process took place in the factories and mines. The dual power that existed at state level was mirrored in the workplaces.

The Petrograd workers returned to work after the February revolution, determined to destroy the old tyrannical regime with which the management and police ran the factories. They rapidly imposed the eight-hour working day on the employers by simply leaving work once eight hours were up. They demanded, and often secured, full pay for the work they had done on the streets toppling the old regime in February. But most importantly they had accounts to settle with those who had cruelly exploited and humiliated them in the old days.

Government appointees had run large sections of Russian industry. Once the power of their chief patrons was broken many of the directors and managers simply fled. Some workers, for example those at the Okhta explosives plant, returned to find themselves without a factory administration at all. Elsewhere the workers kicked out those with a record of brutality who dared to return.

A veritable festival of carting out hated bosses in wheel barrows accompanied the return to work. The director of the giant Putilov Works and his aide were dumped into a canal. In the Thornton textile mill the women workers chased out thirty factory police who had dared to show their faces. Mass meetings of the workforce discussed and decided on hiring or new workers and ejecting those workers that were company men and women. At the Cartridge plant workers expelled 80% of the technical staff. At the first power station, workers voted to bar all the directors from the premises as henchmen of the old regime and recognising their harmfulness from the economic point of view and their uselessness from the technical.

In all the major industrial centres the workers elected factory committees to represent them in the new order.

The factory committees should not be confused with shop stewards committees on the British model where each section or shop elects their own steward. They were elected by the entire workforce at general meetings. In certain plants factory committees existed alongside shop stewards committees with sharply differing tasks.

In many state run plants, the factory committees initially had to take responsibility for running the factory, because their management had disappeared. In the factories, just as at the state level, they handed power back to bourgeois managers and directors when the latter put in an appearance.

Inspection and control
The parallels with the soviets' relationship to the government do not end there. While the factory
committees in general recognised the employers and managements' technical and economic responsibilities, they reserved for themselves the right to observe and inspect the carrying out of these functions. This mirrored the soviets' insistence that they were overseeing the Provisional Government's work.

Crucially, the factory committees demanded and effected ?control over internal order?. In plants throughout Russia the committees raised very similar demands; that they should control the length of the working day, the level of the minimum wage, the length and times of rest and all hiring and firing. In this most fundamental way they challenged the right of the employers and their representatives to manage their factories and mines.

Workers' control at this stage meant asserting factory committee authority over these matters of ?internal order?. And it meant working class vigilance over the workings of management. It was a highly unstable and contradictory situation, prolonged only because the bosses had no alternative but to accept it, since after the February revolution they could not hope to call in the police or the army to ?restore their rights.?

In general the workers held back from taking responsibility for the management of their plants. At the Patronnyi Works they did not constitute themselves as an alternative management. Nevertheless the factory committee purged the entire administration and then retained for itself an ?observing? function. This method was codified at a conference of state sector worker representatives on 15 April, which resolved that:

?Not desiring to take upon ourselves the responsibility for the technical and administrative organisation of production in the given conditions until the full socialisation of the economy, the representatives of the general factory committee enter the administration with a consultative voice.?

A situation, within which workers' representatives daily transgressed rights that managements traditionally hold sacred, could never have become permanent. As at the state level, so in the factory, one class or the other would have to prevail eventually. For the most advanced sections of the proletariat workers' control was only a transitional phase on the road to socialism. As the Putilov workers declared of their workers' control regime:

?The workers are preparing themselves for the time when private ownership of the factories and mills will be abolished and the means of production, along with the buildings erected by the workers' hands, will be transferred to the working class. Therefore, in doing this small matter one must continually keep in mind the great and principal aim towards which the people are aspiring.?

For the employers this situation was viewed as a mere passing phase, an irksome but temporary concession, until they could re-establish the full use of their state to restore their traditional prerogatives and their unfettered rule in the factory.

**Dangers of class collaboration**

During April and May there was mounting evidence, of both a dramatic deterioration in the performance of Russian capitalism, and of the fact that the capitalist class looked to the mounting economic chaos to break the strength of the workers. Often, for initially patriotic motives, workers were becoming increasingly suspicious that the employers and state managers were deliberately obstructing war production.

With supplies running out, factory committees frequently took upon themselves the job of procurement, through workers' delegations to the coal, iron and timber producing areas. To this extent the factory committees were in danger of becoming an accomplice to a more effective capitalist management. Yet at
the very same time they were proving that only the organisations of the working class could effectively avert an economic catastrophe.

Once again, however, the instability of dual power was demonstrated. Either the factory committees would become class collaborationist participation bodies or they would have to go beyond their ?observing? role towards the socialist revolution.

As shortages mounted and management threatened closures so the concept of workers' control did go beyond ?overseeing? the bosses. Having seen what the bosses were doing, it had to mean struggle against their plans for shutdown. In Petrograd, the capital city, the main centre of heavy industry and thus of the revolutionary proletariat, this took an especially sharp form, as the bosses prepared to ?relocate? production by moving their factories out of the city and thus disperse the vanguard of the Russian working class.

A good example of this reality was the Langezipen machine factory in Petrograd. At the end of April there were severe shortages and rumours of closure were rife. The factory committee posted guards at the factory entrance in order to prevent the administration leaving. As expected management announced plans to keep the plant going!

A similar pattern of further encroachment on management rights was being established throughout the major plants during May. As management and employers recovered confidence after the February and March revolutionary mobilisations subsided and the pro-capitalist policies of the Provisional Government took effect, they increasingly used the authority workers had ceded back to them to shut down or run down the plants.

The employers and managers were prepared to disorganise production in pursuit of their class goals - the weakening of the power of the workers. The struggle for control over production now took on a sharper form.

Of the workers' parties only the Bolsheviks were prepared to take up and lead the fight for workers' control. The party clearly saw this fight as part of the struggle for proletarian revolution. The Mensheviks were strongly opposed to any such struggle against capitalism. As their paper Rabochaya Gazeta put it: ?Our revolution is a political one. We destroy the bastions of political authority, but the bases of capitalism remain in place. A battle on two fronts against the Tsar and against capital is beyond the forces of the proletariat.?

Centrality of workers' control

In the face of mounting sabotage the struggle for workers' control played a central role in the Bolsheviks' programme for the transition to a socialist revolution. In his Resolution on Economic Disorganisation of late May Lenin argued:

?The only way to avert disaster is to establish effective workers' control over the production and distribution of goods. For the purpose of such control it is necessary, first of all, that the workers should have a majority of not less than three quarters of all the votes in all the decisive institutions and that the owners who have not withdrawn from their business and the engineering staffs should be enlisted without fail.?

That control was to be exercised by the factory committees, the unions and the soviets. It was to be made possible by opening the books of the companies to workers' inspection and it was to be extended to financial and banking operations. It was, however, not possible for workers to exercise effective control
simply at the level of individual enterprises. For the system of control to be developed into the full regulation of the production and distribution of goods by the workers? it had to embrace control over the economy exercised at a state level through a state responsible directly to the workers' own organisations.

**Revolutionary rupture**

Lenin returned to this theme and placed it at the centre of his programme in The Impending Catastrophe and How to Combat it, a pamphlet produced in September. Again he argued: ?There is no way of effectively combating financial collapse except that of revolutionary rupture with the interests of capital and that of the organisation of really democratic control, i.e. control from 'below', control by the workers and the poor peasants over the capitalists.?

Given the clarity of the Bolsheviks' call for workers' control at plant and state level it was not surprising that their growing strength in the workers' movement was first evident in the factory committees. The first conference of Petrograd factory committees, meeting in late May, endorsed the Bolshevik programme. So too did all subsequent factory committee conferences.

The factory committees maintained their own central council of committee delegates. As such they brought together the best-organised plants in citywide coordination. They were more immediately responsible for the day-to-day concerns of workers than were the soviets. They were responsible directly to general meetings. It was not surprising, therefore, that the mounting Bolshevik tide amongst the workers should be initially reflected in the committees rather than in the soviet leadership.

However, the very strength of the committees, as exclusively proletarian, workplace organisations, meant they were not able to play the role of mobilisers of all the exploited and oppressed. By their nature, unlike the soviets, their coordination excluded the soldiers and beyond them, the mass of the peasantry.

The mounting economic chaos that was gripping the country by spring, with unemployment growing, gave the employers the opportunity to step up their offensive against the factory committees. Now they set out to stop them meeting in work time, to put an end their control of hiring and firing and also to allow them to ship valuable plant and machinery out of Petrograd.

Under Bolshevik leadership the committees replied with determined resistance. Most committees now had their own armed militia to defend the plant and the workers against counter-revolution. A Moscow worker, Postavshchik, described what happened when the Bolsheviks won leadership in his plant: ?On 1 June as soon as the new factory committee was elected with a Bolshevik majority... a detachment of 80 men was formed, which in the absence of weapons drilled with sticks, under the leadership of an old soldier, Comrade Levakov.?

At the time of Kornilov's attempted coup (chapter seven) it was the Central Council of Factory Committees that played a key role in distributing arms to the various plant militias. When the employers launched their autumn offensive they were taking on committees that were armed with guns and ammunition as well as with Bolshevik leadership.

The sharpening polarisation in the plants could not be resolved except at the level of state power. As more factory committees resisted management plans so more employers pulled out. Production became increasingly disorganised while the committees became the de facto power in the plants.

Their power extended beyond the struggle to maintain production. Certain factory committees ran their own farms, canteens, shops and maintained procurement squads to go into the countryside to buy food from the peasants. As well as drilling young workers in the military arts the committees often maintained
their own educational and cultural commissions.

The Putilov Committee, for example, took the latter task very seriously urging their fellow workers:

"Comrades, do not let slip the opportunity of gaining scientific knowledge. Do not waste a single hour fruitlessly. Every hour is dear to us. We need not only to catch up with the classes with whom we are fighting, but to overtake them."

**Resolution of the crisis**

The seizure of power in October resolved the crisis of dual power to the advantage of the working class. With the passing of undivided state power into the hands of the soviets, the state could now at last play its part as an executive organ of workers' control of production and distribution. The factory committees could take their place as overseers of production with the full backing of state power.

In turn that state power legalised the control of workers' committees elected by all employees at general meetings. It gave them the right to inspect all books, documents and stocks. Their decisions were now to be binding on those owners who remained.

The struggle for workers' control in the plants was an indispensable component of the Russian workers' onslaught against 'management's right to manage?'. They learned to control industry and inspect accounts for themselves. And from that control and inspection came an immeasurably strengthened will and ability to resist the plans of the bosses. Such a situation could only have been transitory. Either the bosses could have rolled back the gains of the workers and reasserted their old authority, or the workers would have to break the power of the bosses in its entirety. The events in Russia prove that workers control of factories is not enough in itself, the working class must also seize state power to ensure that the gains they made are not rolled back.

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