

[front cover]

Workers' Control

**Looking for a
movement**

Geoffrey Ostergaard
**Approaches to
industrial
democracy**

Reg Wright
**The gang system
in Coventry**

James Lynch
**Workers' control
in the building
industry**

Philip Holgate
**Aspects of
syndicalism in
Sweden, Spain,
and America**

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[inside front cover]

Contents of No.2

April 1961

Workers' Control: Looking for a movement	<i>C. W.</i>	33
Approaches to industrial democracy	<i>Geoffrey Ostergaard</i>	36
The gang system in Coventry	<i>Reg Wright</i>	47
Workers' control in the building industry	<i>James Lynch</i>	53
Aspects of syndicalism in Spain, Sweden & U.S.A.	<i>Philip Holgate</i>	56
Cover	<i>Rufus Segar</i>	

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ANARCHISM

WORKERS' CONTROL

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expect men to take a responsible attitude and to display initiative in daily life when their whole working experience deprives them of the chance of initiative and responsibility. The personality cannot be successfully divided into watertight compartments, and even the attempt to do so is dangerous: if a man is taught to rely upon a paternal authority within the factory, he will be ready to rely upon one outside. If he is rendered irresponsible at work by lack of opportunity for responsibility, he will be irresponsible when away from work too. The contemporary social trend toward a centralised, paternalistic, authoritarian society only reflects conditions which already exist within the factory. And it is chiefly by reversing the trend within the factory that the larger trend outside can be reversed.

—GORDON RATTRAY TAYLOR: “Are Workers Human?”

Workers’ Control: looking for a movement

NEARLY EVERYONE AGREES with Rattray Taylor’s view in theory: the differences emerge when we talk of the steps needed in practice. On one side there are those who talk of profit-sharing, co-partnership (not the co-operative kind), and ‘participation’ which may mean anything from co-opting ex-trade union officials to the boards of nationalised industries, to a suggestion box for ideas on improving the works lavatories. In the middle there are those equally vague slogans for making public ownership of industries more attractive, which come from Labour politicians or Marxist ideologists, when they realise that nationalisation either on the Soviet or the western pattern is hardly likely to harness the aspirations of those whose socialism means something more than state-controlled capitalism. Finally there are those who denounce as reformist illusion everything short of a revolutionary general strike, and regard the “day-to-day industrial struggle” purely in terms of its tactical value in preparation for a day which seemed imminent fifty years ago, distant thirty years ago, and infinitely remote today.

All these approaches have their counterpart in social thought. At one end there are what the Americans call “cow sociologists”—working on the theory that contented cows produce more milk, and that workers must be similarly tranquillized. In the middle there are those sociological and psychological thinkers who see the authoritarian structure of industry and the “subhuman condition of intellectual irresponsibility” to which the organisation of work in contemporary society is said to reduce the worker, as enemies of individual and social health. Finally there are those who, like Sorel (who welcomed syndicalist militancy in France not for the sake of the ends it sought, but because he thought that a revolutionary “myth” kept the workers from decadence), see industrial militancy as a healthy symptom in society, without regard to its aims. Thus in the recent television series *Challenge to Prosperity*,

34

Dr. Tom Lupton of Birmingham College of Technology declared that the so-called restrictive practices were probably socially desirable since the perpetual battle of wits with authority fosters working-class cohesion and sense of community, and Mr. John Mack of Glasgow University remarked in January that the unofficial shop steward organisations were creating small centres of resistance to large-scale control both in industry and in the trade unions themselves, and went on, “They are sometimes mischievous, They are often a nuisance. They are also and mainly centres of social health”.

Anarchists are interested in the idea of workers’ control, not as a revolutionary myth nor as an

indicator of the “health” of society, but as a manifestation of the struggle for personal and social autonomy which is the aim of every school of anarchist thought. But agitation for workers’ control, as Peter Sedgwick remarks in a recent article,* “can be rather like boxing with a statue of blancmange: the opponent yields so readily to the blow that one’s fist may be trapped inside the mess of gooey assent.” Nothing, he notes, is left from the torrential demand of the second decade of this century (chronicled in Branko Pribicevic’s study *The Shop Stewards’ Movement and Workers’ Control 1910-1922*) except for

some bottled samples of the dead flow, analysed painstakingly and labelled with care, the Guild Socialist library, the Independent Labour Party pamphlet, the article in FREEDOM. We have the brave resolution and the detailed blueprint; but the *movement* where is it?

Where indeed is the movement? The first attempt, since the collapse of Guild Socialism in the twenties, to institute such a movement, was the formation at the end of 1948 of the London League for Workers’ Control. A new attempt is being made today following the Rank and File Industrial Conference sponsored by delegates from five small left-wing groups including the London Anarchist Group and the Syndicalist Workers’ Federation, which was held on January 29th. The Conference was largely procedural. It voted itself into existence as the National Rank and File Movement, it voted in a long list of functions for its Liaison Committee and elected the committee members, and it voted its approval of an initial statement declaring, among other things that

Workers must come together and lay the basis of an organisation which will fight to defend their present interests and, in doing so, organise to enable working people to run industry themselves.

Whether or not this new movement is to have more than a nominal existence depends upon the Success with which it is able to link short. term and long-term aims. No justification need be made for rank-and. file movements in industry as such. The remoteness and bureaucratisation of the trade union structure is a matter of common observation. The “built-in” obstacles to reforming them from below emerge from

* P. Sedgwick: *Workers’ Control* (International Socialism 3, Winter 1960-61).

35

such studies as Goldstein’s *The Government of British Trade Unions*. The futility of setting up rival “militant” unions is shown by the history of the dockers’ “blue” union. The failure of the unions to meet the challenge of the Government’s carefully manoeuvred wages policy was illustrated in Richard Clements’ *Glory Without Power*. The success within its own terms, of unofficial rank-and-file action is demonstrated in John Hughes’ study “The Rise of the Militants” in *Trade Union Affairs*, where, discussing the Yorkshire coalfield strikes, he concludes that:

The machinery of conciliation and arbitration had not safeguarded the earnings of the lower-paid men; the NUM is already moving to restore the official strike to its armoury. It is not entirely irrelevant, therefore that in the 1950’s local and unofficial strike action wrested improved earnings that the machinery of conciliation and arbitration was unlikely to have conceded without such pressure.

The long-term aim, workers’ control, was scarcely discussed at all at the Rank-and-File conference, except by a few speakers who remarked that the increasing responsibilities and technical “know-how” of the new kind of worker in advanced industries made the whole idea more. and not less feasible. The “movement” in fact does not yet exist, and if the vague aspiration is to be clothed with something more than lip- service, we have to re-examine the history of the idea and its applications, not as a museum of bottled samples, but in order to fill out the slogan with meaning and direction.

The point of view of most of our contributors can be summed up in Ken Alexander’s declaration in his essay “Power at the Base” in the symposium *Out of Apathy*:

it is from workers’ desire to change the character of their lives—working and leisure—that the motive power for social change must come. The Guild Socialist policy of ‘encroaching control’ indicates how industrial action, economic power exercised by workers, can be used to set in motion basic changes in industrial organisation and indeed in society. A few simple aims—for example, control over hire and fire, over the ‘manning of the machines’ and over the working of overtime—pressed in the most hopeful industries with the aim of establishing bridgeheads from which workers’ control could be extended, could make a beginning. The factors determining whether such demands could be pressed

successfully are market, industrial organisation and, more important, the extent to which the nature of their work compels the workers to exercise some control.

This kind of conclusion is reached by Geoffrey Ostergaard in his authoritative historical survey, since, like James Lynch, he recommends a wider exploration of the collective contract, and by Reg Wright in his account, from the inside, of the gang system. But even Allan Flanders, who is an eminent and not very radical thinker on industrial relations has observed that

Whatever the virtues of the collective contract it is not an idea that is likely to rally a new crusade among those far whom industrial democracy is an ideal, vague perhaps but reaching beyond strong unions and collective bargaining. One can hear them asking: has a mountain laboured to bring forth this mouse and one with grey hairs at that?

But the “pure” syndicalist approach has its pitfalls too, as Philip

36

Holgate’s study of syndicalist mass movements in three countries shows. (Hugh Clegg remarks that the revolutionary syndicalists were so concerned to preserve the virginal purity of their independence that they advocated no agreements with employers’ and that if this advice had been accepted the unions would have remained impotent.) The attractiveness of the approach of “encroaching control” is that it could combine effective day to day means with radical ends.

Approaches to industrial democracy

GEOFFREY OSTERGAARD

THE IDEAL OF industrial democracy is as old as the Labour Movement and has its roots in the conditions which gave rise to an organised socialist movement in the early 19th century. Of these conditions the most important was the destruction of the hitherto generally prevailing ‘domestic system’ of production, under which the worker owned his own tools, and its replacement by the factory system, under which the means of production were owned by others. A concomitant of this change was the widespread adoption of the wage system. The independent craftsman or peasant was transformed into the industrial proletarian who, in order to live, found himself compelled to sell his labour power to the owners of the new factories. Under this wage-system, capital employed labour, labour was treated as a commodity and, as part of his bargain with the capitalist, the wage worker surrendered all control over the organisation of production and all claim to the product of his labour.

The patent injustice of this system suggested to the first generation of socialists an obvious alternative. Instead of working for capitalists, the workers should work for themselves—not individually, as under the pre-industrial system, but collectively or, to use the then current phrase, ‘in association’. They should pool their limited savings, invest them in the means of production, and institute a system of mutual self-employment. In this way, the workers would escape the wage system, together they would retain control of the product. Capital would be put in

GEOFFREY OSTERGAARD, born at Staploe, Beds. 1926, lectures in political science at Birmingham University and was recently visiting fellow at the University of California, Berkeley. He was the author, with J. A. Banks, of Co-operative Democracy and contributed a long series on The Tradition of Workers’ Control to FREEDOM a few years ago.

37

its proper place as the servant of labour; labour would employ capital, not capital, labour; and the

worker would once more regain the dignity of being his own master instead of being treated as a marketable commodity.

This, in essence, was the first approach to industrial democracy—the co-operative approach. It is the approach favoured by none other than that doyen of mid-19th century bourgeois economists, John Stuart Mill. In a chapter of his famous *Principles of Political Economy* concerned with ‘The Probable Futurity of the Labouring Classes’, Mill predicted: “The form of association ... which if mankind continue to improve, must be expected in the end to predominate, is not that which can *exist* between a capitalist as chief, a workpeople without a voice in management, but the association of the labourers themselves on terms of equality, collectively owning the capital with which they carry on their operations, and working under managers elected and removable by themselves”.

The history of the 19th century is studded with attempts by groups of workers to apply this approach to industrial democracy. Most of these attempts were unsuccessful, but not all. At the present time there exist in this country some forty or so worker co-operatives, mainly in the footwear, clothing and printing trades, which exemplify this original approach. These cooperative co-partnerships are of course, to be sharply distinguished from the more numerous retail and wholesale co-operatives which substitute democratic consumer for capitalist control but introduce no modifications in the wage system. Taken together the co-operative co-partnerships constitute an insignificant part of the national economy but they remain nevertheless the clearest examples of a form of socialised production which goes beyond the wage system.

The limitations of the co-operative approach are obvious. One of the major obstacles to the extension of the co-operative system of production was the workers’ lack of capital and it is no accident that the industries in which co-partnerships have become established are those requiring comparatively little capital and where labour costs constitute a large proportion of aggregate costs. More important, the whole approach was grounded on the assumption that co-operatives could peacefully compete the capitalists out of existence. The workers were to build up the new system inside the capitalist framework with the object of eventually superseding capitalism: they were to build up their own capital, not to take over anybody else’s.

The questioning of this social pacifist assumption led to the development of a new approach to industrial democracy—that of the syndicalists. In essence, the syndicalist idea was simple. The workers had already developed protective organisations in the shape of trade unions to defend their interests *vis-a-vis* the capitalist employers: why should not these same organisations be used to supplant capitalism? Instead of merely fighting for better wages and conditions, the trade unions should, in addition, aim at winning control of industry. On

38

this theory, the unions had a dual role to perform: first, to defend the interests of workers in existing society, and secondly, to constitute themselves the units of industrial administration in the coming socialist society.

It was this approach to industrial democracy which was adopted by the classical syndicalist movement in the decade before the First World War and by its successor, the guild socialist movement. There were some important differences between the two movements. Syndicalism was essentially a proletarian movement which pinned its faith on direct revolutionary industrial action culminating in the social general strike: guild socialism, in contrast, was largely a movement of bourgeois intellectuals which, while supporting direct action, hoped to see workers’ control introduced as a constitutional reform through the State. There was a further difference in their attitude to management. Broadly, the syndicalists regarded the managers as mere lackeys of the capitalist class and saw no problem in the workers, through their unions, taking over the functions of management. The guildsmen, on the other hand, were more conscious of the complexities of industrial administration; they saw the need for managers and insisted that the democratically organised industrial union, to be transformed into a guild when it became a unit of industrial

organisation, should include technical and administrative workers—‘the salariat’—as well as the rank-and-file manual workers.

Both movements, however, shared the same central idea—industrial democracy through trade union control of industry—and both may be seen in part as a reaction against State Socialist doctrines whether adumbrated by the reformist Fabians and Labourites or by the revolutionary Marxists. Nationalisation by itself, both the syndicalists and guildsmen declared would make no essential difference to the status of the worker. Under bureaucratic State ownership the worker would remain alienated from the means of production. He would be working for the State and not a private capitalist, but he would still be a wage-worker and, as such, treated essentially as a commodity, a factor of production, rather than as a human being with inalienable rights. In short, State Socialism was only another name for State Capitalism.

During the period 1912-1925 guild socialism exerted a considerable influence on the Labour Party’s nationalisation policy. Bureaucratic nationalisation on the model of the Post Office was discredited and industrial democracy as the necessary complement of political democracy became an axiom of Labour ideology. But instead of guild socialism being swallowed outright, a compromise was effected between the old and the new. The form this compromise first took is best seen in the Miners’ Nationalisation proposals laid before the Sankey Commission of 1919. A quasi-independent form of administration was to be set up, under which the State and the Miners’ Federation would exercise ‘joint control’, the State appointing half and the Federation the other half, of members of management boards at all levels. This compromise was rejected by the syndicalists as a snare and a delusion but was accepted

39

by the guildsmen and the miners as a step towards the establishment of a fully self-governing Mining Guild which would have complete control of the industry.

In retrospect it is now clear that the acceptance of this compromise was a fateful step for the protagonists of industrial democracy to take. It marked the beginning of a process of watering-down the concept of industrial democracy as hitherto understood and the development of a new approach—that of participation in management. In an effort to counteract the movement for workers’ control, ‘enlightened’ employers, spurred on by the Government, put forward the idea of joint consultation. The right of workers to be consulted on matters outside the scope of the traditional areas of collective bargaining—wages and conditions—was admitted, while at the same time management was clearly to remain in effective control. Joint consultation represents in effect a spurious concession by management in the name of democracy to ward off challenges to its prerogatives.

It was not to be expected that industrial democrats brought up in the guild socialist movement would accept this concession at its face value. But, having promoted the idea of ‘joint control’, they found it difficult to combat joint consultation except in terms of workers’ representation on management boards. Inevitably, the notion of workers control began to be associated with the idea of workers’ representation and, perhaps equally inevitably, once the guild movement had collapsed, the industrial democrats found themselves committed to the view that *any* representation of the workers was better than none. For the last generation, in fact, the main debate on industrial democracy within the British Labour Movement has been conducted in terms of joint consultation *versus* workers’ representation. And in this debate the ‘radicals’ have steadily lost ground.

When in the early ’30s the Labour Party adopted the Public Corporation as its chosen instrument for the nationalisation of basic industries, it was round the question of the composition of the governing boards that controversy centred. The unofficial leadership, with Morrison as its chief spokesman, came out for the non-representative board—the so-called corporate board of ability—appointed wholly by the Government; the right of the workers to participate in management was acknowledged but it was to take the form of joint consultation with the trade unions having no more than advisory powers. The critics opposed this and claimed 50% direct representation by the trade unions. The claim was rejected, so the critics reduced their claim and

have been steadily reducing it ever since. Over the past 25 years the idea of workers' representation has been successively whittled away. If not half the seats on management boards, then less than half; if such members are not to be appointed by the trade unions, then at least nominated by the trade unions; if not nominated by the trade unions, then at least one trade union leader to be appointed by the Government. Until we reach the feeble demand, expressed frequently in the post-war years at Labour Party and Trade Union conferences, for 'more trade

40

unionists', meaning by that, of course, 'more ex-trade unionists', on the boards.

The reason why the idea of workers' representation has met this fate is not wholly explained by the superior forces of managerial socialism ranged behind the Morrisonian concept of the public corporation. There are many within the Labour Movement who are deeply conscious of the inadequacies of the present set-up in nationalised industries and who feel that no amount of joint consultation will suffice to give the workers a genuine sense of democratic participation in the control of their working lives. But the industrial democrats in choosing to fight over the issue of workers' representation—or, more strictly, trade union representation—have chosen badly. Intellectually, they have a weak case whose defects it has been only too easy to expose.

The case against trade union representation was most persuasively stated by Hugh Clegg in his *Industrial Democracy and Nationalisation*, 1951. To argue that the trade unions should appoint representatives to serve on management boards is to assert in effect, that the unions should be both *in* the government of industry and, at the same time, *outside* it. If the unions are to remain partly outside, as the system of joint control envisages, it must be because they have a function to perform: to defend their members' interests *vis-a-vis* those of management. But how can they perform this latter role effectively if, at the same time, they are partly responsible, through their representatives, for managerial decisions? The two roles—defending the workers' interests and participating in managerial decisions—inevitably conflict. The trade union representatives on boards would be faced with an insoluble conflict of loyalties. The trade unions, therefore, Clegg concluded, must firmly avoid accepting any responsibility for managerial decisions; the role cast for them is that of being the permanent opposition in industry. Industrial democracy, as well as political democracy, depends for its existence on an active opposition which is able to prevent the arbitrary exercise of power by the government—in this case, the management. At the same time joint consultation is to be encouraged by a means of improving relations between the government and the governed, but it must remain consultation: any attempt to go beyond it, to give the workers a share in executive responsibility will simply result in the dilemma of a conflict of rôles for the workers' representatives.

The plausibility of Clegg's arguments was undeniable. Both the Labour Party and the TUC have accepted them and repeated them in recent declarations of policy such as *Public Enterprise*, 1957. We may, apparently, hope and work for improved forms of joint consultation but the two sides of industry—employer and employed, management and labour—are to remain as a permanent and inescapable feature of industrial organisation. Until eternity, it seems, the destined role of the trade unions is to oppose management in the interests of the employees, while at the same time supporting, wherever possible, co-operation between management and labour in the shape of joint consultation.

There is, it must be admitted, something ironic in the situation the

41

industrial democrats find themselves in. It was the syndicalists and guildsmen who raised aloft the banner of industrial freedom and denounced the slavery inherent in the wage system. But it is their opponents who have stolen this particular piece of thunder. It is now the critics of workers' representation who present themselves as the defenders of industrial freedom. In stressing the

opposition role of the unions, they can claim that they are preserving the rights of the workers *vis-a-vis* management, which the advocates of representation are in danger of conceding in return for a dubious share in control.

In this unhappy situation the appearance of another book by Hugh Clegg with the promising title, *A New Approach to Industrial Democracy*,¹ encourages expectations. Perhaps here we might find a review of the earlier approaches, a systematic analysis of their deficiencies, and an attempt to explore a new path towards the realisation of the old ideal. Alas, these expectations are largely unfulfilled. With one significant exception, this 'new approach' leaves us very much where we are. The bulk of the book may be put alongside other socialist revisionist literature of recent years, all tending to demonstrate that what we have now is almost (but not quite) the best of all possible worlds.

Clegg's essay had its origin in a conference organised in 1958 by the Congress for Cultural Freedom on the subject of Workers' Participation in Management. Clegg draws upon the material presented in papers by representatives from fifteen countries and part of his book, consequently, provides a useful introduction to post-war developments in this field in places like Germany, Yugoslavia and Israel. The rest consists of a not very satisfactory historical review of the idea of industrial democracy, in which the co-operative approach is wholly ignored, and the elaboration of a theory of industrial democracy, the principles of which, he asserts, have been gradually revealed in the behaviour of trade unions in Western democracies over the last thirty years.

The originality of Clegg's contribution to discussions of industrial democracy consists largely in this application to industry of recent developments in the theory of democracy. As formulated by 18th and 19th century radicals, democracy was seen as essentially a system of self-government, a mechanism by which the people themselves, either directly or indirectly, through representatives, made the decisions they had to obey. This classical theory, in its representative form, placed emphasis on the importance of elections and on majority decisions which were to be taken as the practical expression of 'the will of the people'. The theory rested on individualistic and rationalistic assumptions and made no provision for groups in the political process.

Partly as a consequence of the questioning of its individualistic and rationalistic assumptions in the light of increased psychological and sociological knowledge and, more especially, as a result of the rise of mass dictatorships in the 20th century using representative elections as plebiscites to justify their claims to express the will of the people, theorists in recent decades have rejected as inadequate the notion of

42

democracy as self-government. In any large-scale organisation, they have pointed out, self-government is no more than a myth: the important decisions are inevitably taken by the few, not by the many. Wanting above all to distinguish Western political systems from the bastard 'true democracies' of Fascism or the 'people's democracies' of the Soviet bloc, some of them have seized upon the existence of legitimate opposition as the key concept of democracy. More recently, to this has been added the notion of a free play of independent pressure groups all seeking to influence government decisions and taken as a whole, providing a neat balance of social forces in which individual rights and liberty are maintained. Organised party opposition and pressure groups ensure, it is claimed that the few who do, and must, take decisions will not act arbitrarily: hence the system can justly be called *responsible* democracy.

Using this kind of intellectual apparatus, Clegg argues, in effect, that the older industrial democrats were pursuing an impossible ideal: industrial self-government. However, if we abandon the notion that democracy means self-government and realise that 'the essence of democracy is opposition', then industrial democracy becomes a live possibility. And, what is more, when we look at industrial organisation in Western countries, we find that we have *already* achieved industrial democracy! 'In all the stable democracies there is a system of industrial relations which can fairly be called the industrial parallel of political democracy. It promotes the interests and protects the

rights of workers and industry by means of collective bargaining between employers and managers on the one hand and, on the other, trade unions independent of government and management. This could be called a system of industrial democracy by consent, or pressure group industrial democracy, or democracy through collective bargaining.”

Starting from this new conception of democracy it is not surprising to find that the three main elements in Clegg’s theory of industrial democracy are: (i) that trade unions must be independent both of the state and of management, (ii) that only the unions can represent the industrial interests of workers, and (iii) that the ownership of industry is irrelevant to industrial democracy.

As a result of his survey of foreign experience, Clegg is prepared to qualify a little the first two principles. The German system of ‘Co-determination’ in which the workers elect one-third of the members of the Supervisory (not Management) Boards of firms and in which Works Councils have the right to exercise ‘co-determination’ over a wide range of matters, such as times of starting and finishing, training schemes, payment by results and hiring and firing, has not, apparently, undermined the position and influence of the trade unions. Nor, it seems, does the Histradut, the Israeli trade union federation which is that country’s largest industrial concern, find itself in an impossible position because it is both a management and a trade union body. This suggests that British trade unions could adopt a much less narrowly restricted view about their need for independence from management than they have done in the past. Independence from government is another matter.

43

Clegg is clearly sceptical about the large claims made for the Yugoslav system of ‘workers’ control’. The Workers’ Councils there may be less dominated by the Communists than is sometimes supposed but the latter’s influence is pervasive. In Clegg’s judgment, the Yugoslav trade unions lack sufficient independence to be considered adequate instruments for defending the interests of the workers. Despite their break with Moscow, the Yugoslavs have not abandoned the Marxist assumption that in a ‘workers’ state’ there can never be any difference of interests between the workers and the government.

Although German and Israeli experience suggest that the trade unions generally could, without danger, adopt a more positive role towards participation in management Clegg doubts whether in practice German and Israeli workers have more influence in industrial decision-making than British or U. S. A. workers. Co-determination is more appropriately seen as a way of extending the pressure group influence of the workers when they lack a strong trade union movement. The whole tenor of Clegg’s argument, in fact, is against the idea of ‘participation in management’. In this respect, he has shifted away from the position he took up in 1951. He is no longer an enthusiast for joint consultation as a method of achieving industrial democracy. Joint consultation has not fulfilled the hopes of its protagonists: it is no more than ‘an occasionally useful adjunct to existing practices’.

The weakness of Clegg’s whole position is most clearly seen in his discussion of the third element of his theory—the irrelevance of public ownership to industrial democracy. Its irrelevance is, of course, a simple consequence of the theory of democracy he adopts. If all that industrial democracy means is a system of collective bargaining in which the trade unions act as influential pressure groups, opposing management in the interests of their members, then clearly ownership is irrelevant. One is as likely to get it in private as in public enterprise. This principle of Clegg’s, which ties in so neatly with current revisionism, is a curious perversion of the argument of the older industrial democrats. The latter argued, correctly, that public ownership in itself would make no essential difference to the workers’ status. At the best, it would simply involve a change of masters; at the worst, it would result in a more tyrannical master, since the State would be a more powerful boss than any private capitalist. From this, they concluded that the workers must become their own masters. They did *not* conclude that ownership was irrelevant but only that it was not a *sufficient* condition of industrial democracy. The abrogation of the rights of private capitalists still remained

a *necessary* condition, in so far as ownership carried with it the right to control.

The validity of Clegg's theory depends upon his conception of democracy. Even if we accept that Western political systems are properly to be described as democratic, it is doubtful whether the 'essence' of these systems lies in the existence of opposition. Their essence, if anything, lies in their maintenance of a system whereby, through elections, the mass of citizens can turn out of office one set

44

of political leaders and put in another. Opposition only comes into the picture as a consequence of free competition among the political elite who are out to win sufficient votes to put their 'team' into office. And even then the system would not be described as democratic unless the mass of citizens had equal political rights, symbolised by the right to vote. Modern industry, with its machinery of collective bargaining, provides *no* parallel to this. The political system we find in industry is, on the contrary, one in which the government (the management) is permanently in office, is self-recruiting, and is not accountable to anyone, except formally to the shareholders (or the State). At the same time, the vast majority of those who are required to obey this permanent government have not citizenship status at all, no right to vote for the leaders who form the government. The only rights that the masses have in this system are the right to form pressure groups (trade unions) seeking to influence the government and the right to withhold their co-operation (the right to strike). Such a political system might be called pluralistic; it is not totalitarian; and, if the pressure groups are effective, the powers of the government will be limited. But it no more deserves to be called democracy, old style or new style, than does the oligarchical political system of 18th century Britain.

One is forced to conclude that Clegg has obscured not illumined the concept of industrial democracy. The one big redeeming feature of the book, however, is his somewhat grudging espousal of the idea of the collective contract. This idea, put forward by the syndicalists and guildsmen as part of a policy of encroaching control, championed for decades by the French writer Hyacinthe Dubreuil², was recently revived by the late G. D. H. Cole in his *The Case for Industrial Partnership*. 1957. In essence, the collective contract system involves the division of the large work group into a number of smaller groups each of which can undertake a definite identifiable task. Then, instead of each worker being paid individually, each group enters into a collective contract with the management. In return for a lump sum sufficient to cover at least the minimum trade union rate for each individual, the group would undertake to perform a specified amount of work, with the group itself allocating the various tasks among its members and arranging conditions to suit its own convenience. Such an arrangement as Cole correctly argued, would have the effect of "linking the members of the working group together in a common enterprise under their joint auspices and control, and emancipating them from an externally imposed discipline in respect of their method of getting the work done".

Clegg's support for the collective contract idea is, perhaps, surprising in the light of his general position. He sees it, however, not as part of a strategy for winning complete control but rather as a way of satisfying in some measure the aspiration for industrial self-government without challenging management. Management, he asserts, is indispensable in modern industry but there may be areas of industry in which management is unnecessary. It is in such areas that the collective contract system becomes a possibility. This is a curious approach to

45

the subject, since clearly a self-governing group working under a collective contract system does take upon itself some functions usually regarded as managerial, albeit those of 'lower' rather than of 'higher' management. Clegg's inability to see this is a consequence of his failure to analyse the functions of management. Had he done so, his assertion that 'management is necessarily separate

from the workers' would have been revealed as either a tautology or simply an obscure way of stating that (higher) management in modern industry is a specialised and indispensable function—propositions from which nothing can be deduced about the impossibility of industrial democracy in the traditional sense. For the question is not whether management is necessary but who shall appoint the managers and to whom shall they be responsible. If there must be a hierarchy of authority in a complex industrial organisation, there is nothing in the nature of management which precludes it from being a democratically based hierarchy—as are the hierarchies in co-operative factories.

For the anarchist who objects to all hierarchies of authority, including democratic ones, the attraction of the collective contract idea lies in the possibility that it could lead to a breaking down of the hierarchical organisation of industry and its replacement by a system of mutually co-operating functional groups knit together by contracts. In the long run, if the idea were fully developed, management might be reduced to the position of being just one other co-operative group within the larger enterprise, enjoying the same status as the others, but specialising in the functions involving control of the product, investment, control of raw materials (buying) and control of the finished produce (selling).

With this perspective, it is encouraging to learn that the collective contract is not merely an idea: it is already, in a small way, being practised in the Durham coalfield. A full report of this experiment is to be published in the forthcoming book by E. L. Trist and H. Murray, *Work Organisation at the Coal Face*. Meanwhile, Clegg's quotation from a paper by Trist must suffice as an outline description:

In one coal-face unit recently studied by my colleagues and myself ... a team of 41 miners undertook the responsibility of providing for the manning of the works groups on each of three shifts of just under eight hours. As a group, they accepted complete responsibility for this in such a way that there would be sharing between group members of jobs with different degrees of satisfaction and difficulty. Since the group were on a single collection payment agreement no questions arose over differential rates of pay. In developing their systems of rotating members from shift to shift the initial interest of the group was to avoid the unfairness of a man being tied for a prolonged period—or even permanently—to an unpopular night or afternoon shift; they especially wished each to have an equal share of the 'good' day shift. Each man could also, when his turn came, have some choice with respect to which of the two unpopular shifts he would prefer on a particular occasion.

Later on, within each sub-group of 20, there developed a further system not of shift but of job rotation. Flexibility was provided within a basic pattern, and certain crucial jobs were shared amongst those best suited to them. This acceptance of responsibility for self-regulation of shift and job rotation has persisted throughout the life of this particular coal face—over two years at the present time.

46

In discussing the implications of this experiment, Clegg raises the question whether the collective contract could be generally applied as a means to industrial democracy. He suggests that there may be limitations on its general applicability but his main conclusion is: "It is impossible to be certain how far the transfer of managerial functions to self-governing groups of workers could be taken in modern industrial societies, because that can only be discovered by empirical investigation, and no-one has yet tried to find out. There are considerable technical and social obstacles. In many areas of industry they will probably be prohibitive. My own guess, however, is that there is room for progress before these limits are reached".

The conclusion is cautious as becomes a Fabian. My own guess is that it is too cautious. Seymour Melman's recent study of worker decision-making at Standards³ suggests that the system could be readily applied even in the most technologically advanced industries, The real obstacles are social not technical. Of these perhaps one of the most important is the conservatism of trade unions. This conservatism can be and must be overcome. In this connection, one great advantage of the collective contract approach to genuine industrial democracy over earlier approaches is that it does not involve a radical change in existing trade union organisation and practices, but only a willingness to extend the range of collective bargaining. For as Clegg points out, "A collective contract is clearly a form of collective bargaining, so that areas of self-government can exist within

a system of democracy by consent.” The moral is obvious: all those who wish to go beyond the prevailing forms of ‘democracy’ in industry would do well to concentrate their attentions and activities in furthering the idea and practice of the collective contract.

¹ Blackwell, Oxford, 1960, 18s. 6d.

² See his *A Chance for Everybody*, 1939.

³ *Decision-Making and Productivity*, Blackwell, 1958. See also Colin Ward’s and Reg Wright’s discussions of this book in FREEDOM, June 18, 25, July 2, 23, 30, 1960, and the articles on the subject in this issue of ANARCHY.

MEANING IN WORK

If one accepts again the heritage of the old socialist and humanist tradition of worker protest, then the work place itself and not the market should be the centre of determination of pace and tempo of work. The “flow of demand” must come from the worker himself rather than from the constraints imposed from above. Even if costs were to rise, surely there is an important social gain in that the place where a man spends such a large part of his day becomes a place of meaning and satisfaction rather than of drudgery. Fifty years ago, few enterprises carried safety devices to protect workers’ limbs and lives. Some protested that adoption of such devices would increase costs. Yet few firms today plead that they cannot “afford” to introduce safety devices. Is meaningfulness in work less important?

—DANIEL BELL: *The End of Ideology*.

47

The gang system in Coventry

REG WRIGHT

THE GANG SYSTEM AS OPERATED IN COVENTRY is modern and yet traditional. Its roots lie among the bloody-minded craftsmen who, centuries ago, sent the King to hell—and paid for it afterwards. They worked in *groups*—guilds. Later on in Coventry there was a prosperous ribbon-weaving industry. Semi-domestic *groups* by the thousand sent beautiful silk ribbons, flags and banners all over the world. My grandmother started work at 6 years of age, winding silk for the weavers. She told me: “We didn’t look upon it as ‘work’ —we enjoyed it.” She also carried tea (an expensive luxury) to the weavers. Ribbons were followed by watch manufacture. Again highly specialised family and neighbour *groups* made the various parts of the watches which were assembled by the master-watchmakers—who also worked in *groups*. It was all very informal and satisfying. The watchmakers always had a ‘Saint Monday’—boozing all day, taking Tuesday to get over it, and working Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. Saturday morning they “cleaned up the shop”. They grew most of their own food, kept pigs and fowl, grazed horses and cows on the commons (which were never enclosed—only built on in recent years), and nearly always married young—not because they had to, but because they liked it. Watchmaking died out from lack of standardisation—undersold by machine-made watches. The making of parts *was* highly specialised, but to make a cheap product an elaborate system of standards and gauging was necessary, as in engineering today. (Peter Kropotkin described a similar set-up among the Swiss watch-case makers of Jura—how they sat around and worked and talked and were natural anarchists).

Next came the manufacture of sewing machines, and then bicycles. Inventions by the thousands, mostly by unknown men, made bicycle-making into a precision manufacture, one of the

bases of production engineering as we now know it. Again men formed groups around the job. Mechanics came from all over England and they learned that group work paid. As employers became capitalistic, groups were

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48

broken up, but they always re-formed, and re-demonstrated their virtues.

And so it has continued to the present day: right through the making of cycles, motor-cycles, cars, aeroplanes and machine tools, there has been a continuous warfare between the group idea and the individualistic-minded employer and his officials. Those firms today which have the knack of the gang system have a huge advantage over the others. Wages are higher (which attracts better workers), they turn out a good product, make larger profits and are very adaptable. Technical methods and tools used are the same in the American type mass-production plant, *but* the human aspect is vastly different. Each worker contributes an effort, and idea, a pooling of knowledge and experience that is not readily forthcoming in the autocratically managed plant. Work is easier and people are happier. This is *not* a eulogy of capitalism—there are rows—fierce disputes that break the monotony of regular work. Disputes are often due to the clash of opposite mentalities—middle-class individualism in management *versus* working-class collectivism. Domestic disputes between gang members are settled on the spot—purely private scraps! Idle people are very severely dealt with by their mates—*never* from above. There is no ‘idealistic’ talk about these things, but the benefits are obvious. Rough talk and aggressive attitudes are usually poses—the real man underneath is usually quite reasonable. People rarely leave and the labour turnover is very small indeed. There are no secrets about earnings or wage rates—everybody knows all about everyone else. The facts of output required and achieved are common knowledge. A car model will be in production for five years or more, a tractor for ten. Regular work, year in year out is thus essential—which can be horribly monotonous for certain temperaments.

One of the compensations can be the company of other people. In addition to the firm’s own social club activities, most gangs organise their own, some of them surprising. The firm’s official sick-club *reduces* the amount of benefit paid to members as an illness is extended. To counter this each gang pays an increasing amount to the person as the period grows longer, on the basis that “the longer he is away from work the more his need grows”. In another firm a man has been away in a mental hospital for over five years—he is still a gang member, recognised by the management and the trade union. The latter grants his wife periodic sums from surplus funds—the firm can provide for his rehabilitation should he be cured. He still *belongs*.

In another works, sheet metal workers were making car wings by hand (for high-class sports cars) and one man spoiled fifty—a week’s work—through misreading a drawing. The gang had a meeting, took the foreman out to a pub, fifty men made one wing apiece, the scrap ones were ‘lost’ and no-one was any the wiser. The middle-class works manager would have had a baby had he known, but the gang saved him the inconvenience. There are thousands of such stories that could be told daily. This is the natural cohesion of workers when they are not stampeded by clever and cunning people. They don’t profess to

49

be good—just ordinary. Girls and boys enjoy ganging-up and so do men and women. And in Coventry the gang system has been *forced upon* employers who, at first reluctant, now concede it. But each new generation of clever young managers has to relearn the same old lessons. They start

off determined to “put the men in their place” and end by accepting the gang system—even boasting about it as though it were their own creation.

Gangs are self-recruiting, nearly all new members being “recommended” to a trade union for the formalities. ‘Green’ labour (*i.e.* people with no special skill) is put on simple repetitive jobs and when the stage of boredom is reached are moved to increasingly complex operations. In effect the man or woman serves an apprenticeship of sorts while earning full pay as a gang member. No distinction is made between them *as people*. They are all paid the same regardless of skill. The clever man will do the clever job—because he can, and because he likes it. The not-so-clever (or even stupid) man will do the job that is within his powers, It has been proved long ago, that distinctions cause much more trouble than they are worth. Both management and men are agreed on this. Such agreement is tacit. These things I describe are not even mentioned—they have become social custom, commonplaces. Melman in his work continually refers to the excellence of the gang system but the fundamentals of it, the human sense of it seems to be beyond him.

The whole method has evolved directly *from the work*, from the human and technical need for co-operation. The tough men who have given their whole lives to it have seized on every significant thing or event and turned it to their purpose, *our* purpose. Bit by bit a new form of industrial society is being built. However bad it may still be, it is far better than most autocratic systems and it teaches people better ways by practice and not by exhortation. When the gang system has worked out and stabilised a new step forward, then the local trade union officials come in and register the facts in an official agreement with the firm, One such man (known to me personally as a very clever negotiator) stepped in and formalised the entire scheme at the Standard works. It was a major achievement, and would have been, at the highest professional level. This man was self-taught, in workshop and trade union. There are *some* trade union leaders who try to claim credit for themselves for all that is done—they don’t deceive *us* but the newspapers lap it up. *They* think and write of trade unions as the *leaders*, whereas in reality the achievements are those of the members and their ideas.

Technically the gang system is a method of payment for piecework—a form of collective contract. In *practice* it follows the natural tendency of men to group up around the job. Gangs can be of any size from three to three thousand—the latter being the approximate size of the Ferguson tractor team. Half-a-million tractors were turned out in ten years with practically no supervision—one gang for the entire works and yet there was still the piecework urge—still the initiative from

50

below, in addition to the technical progress from above. This is the essential difference between the Midlands attitude to the job and the uniform and fixed wage system elsewhere, especially in the south of England. In the Midlands the *men* have the initiative and are the driving force—the rest of the staff have to keep pace, to provide for and assist the production team. Everything is done to make the job easier, every hint and suggestion from whatever source is heeded and used if possible—especially if it takes the strain from the job.

Thus men’s energies are conserved for other things than work. But it is still work! Automation is a misnomer—there is just continuous production, some automatic, some semi-automatic, and much of it by hand. Greed is abolished because any increase in wages or betterment of conditions is due, and is *known* to be due, to the men’s own effort and creative ideas. The result of continuous struggle and creative effort is *seen* in the finished product and enjoyed *via* the pay packet. People of lethargic temperament may loathe and dread the very idea of all this, but the workers concerned “don’t die on the job”. Neither do they worry or conjure up images of destruction. They are vigorous and healthy and are busy home-making and rearing families.

In other factories *small* gangs may be grouped around a machine that is being built, or an aeroplane component. In a car factory it will be a production line, or a group of machines, When the product is very complex and costly and is produced in small numbers the gangs will be very clever in adapting their skills to a variety of jobs. Individual skill of a very high order will be applied to a

prototype and to the first few production ‘jobs’. The individual will be guaranteed his money by the gang while he undertakes exploratory work—others will follow him, each taking a portion of the work and becoming specialists in it, while others will improvise special tools and gadgets to make it into a “production job”. The variety of work and gangs is infinite.

The gang system sets men’s minds free from many worries and enables them to concentrate completely on the job. It provides a natural frame of security, it gives confidence, shares money equally, uses all degrees of skill without distinction and enables jobs to be allocated to the man or woman best suited to them, the allocation frequently being made by the workers themselves. Change of job to avoid monotony is an easy matter. The “gaffer” is abolished and foremen are now technicians called in to advise, or to act in a breakdown or other emergency. In some firms a *ganger* will run, not the men, but the *job*. He will be paid out of gang earnings, and will work himself on a small gang. On a larger gang he will be fully occupied with organisation and supply of parts and materials. A larger gang may have a deputy ganger as a second string and also a *gang-steward* who, being a keen trade unionist or workers’ man, will act as a corrective should the gangers try to favour management unduly or interfere with the individual in undesirable ways. Gang meetings are called, as necessary, by the latter and all members of the gang are kept informed and

51

may (and do) criticise everything and everybody. All three are subject to recall. Constructive ideas on the other hand are usually the result of one or two people thinking out and trying out new things—this is taking place continuously—to the general advantage of the whole gang.

The fact of taking responsibility in any of these capacities is educative in every sense, and I have often been amused to see someone who is a notorious “gaffer’s man” being persuaded into taking the gang steward position which will bring him into contact with other stewards whose ideas he will unconsciously absorb. He will attend meetings with management representatives at all levels and usually completely changes his ideas. Experienced stewards, with grim humour call this “educating the so-and-so’s!” Some stewards have been known to use variants of this method in educating management representatives.

Similarly in car factories. A gang of 100 or more will have a *charge-hand* paid by the management. He will stand out from the gang, only working in the event of difficulty arising—any hold-up or breakdown. The *gang-steward* will stand out with him and settle with him all points of difference on the gang’s behalf. He also will work as necessary. Sometimes they are idle (educating each other!) and at other times they will work like fiends, to keep the flow of work going.

Gang stewards form a reservoir from which *senior* stewards are recruited. There are thousands of such men and they are quite often engineering experts, usually holding their own with any rate-fixer, cost expert or other managerial type. Occasionally fools are appointed—the blustering wordy windbag—the ‘rebel’ who just fights—and the exponent of an ideology. Some ideologists are first-rate stewards but do not realise that their actions may be the reverse of their ideological aims.

There are many local variants of the scheme—some good, some indifferent. As in any other aspect of life, much depends on the quality of the people concerned, and on their experience. Ideas (that is, theories or ideological or political standpoints) do not enter into any of it—a person can think what he likes, say what he likes, *except* that he does not *do* anything against the gang or the trade union. He is expected to be a trade union member—even if only as an outward and visible sign of toughness. In terms of the old working-class motto, “he is either with us or against us”. There is no half-way. Incentives are three: to get as high a rate of pay as possible (depending on out-put), having achieved a certain stability in that, there is a general urge to speed up production gradually so that hours of work can be reduced. The final aim (a continuously successful process) is to make the job itself, and the surroundings, as good as possible.

All these urges are *everyone’s* concern. In such a production set-up it is natural that people in full health and vigour are needed, and sickly people are strongly advised not to take a job there. In a temporary indisposition it is usual for the person to be given some help, or if that is not possible; a

transfer to a light job that is not urgent.

Most of this has been forced upon employers, but one must give

52

credit to those managers who have genuinely tried to help the urge to better conditions. On the other hand one frequently finds amongst managers a tendency to “swing to the right”. This may be the result of a new director or manager coming in from the outside, usually from firms with American ideas; occasionally he will have a strong political (Conservative) urge. Sooner or later he shows his hand—forthright and dictatorial. From that moment the “worker decision-making” apparatus works against him. His “education” commences. Once I finalised the process by warning the particular manager “You must always remember that a thousand men will wear *you* out quicker than you can wear *them* out”. It worked. The moment something actually happens or is pending, there is a ferment right through the plant and the decision-making is carried out at shop-floor level, even to the point, if necessary, of contradicting or disowning the stewards’ proposals.

It is difficult to convey in writing a whole way of industrial life, a subtle, yet obvious, development of capitalism, a different and better way of running large-scale industry. It *is* better—a vast improvement—a continuance of an age-old method in a modern setting. *It has all those elements that could develop into a successor to capitalism.* I can imagine some clever people dismissing all this as nonsense, mere sentimental drivel, etc., and going on to *prove* that it is only a temporary thing that could be wiped out when required, by a powerful managerial capitalist class, etc., or that when “the slump” comes and the workers are thrown out on the streets, etc. (all of which is outmoded thought). My answer is that if “disaster” comes to capitalism, we have at least done some preliminary rehearsing for the new play we may be called upon to produce. If capitalism goes on for a long time without disaster, we shall have tried to make life as good as we can for as many people as we can. If there is some day a general desire to push capitalism over, we shall do our share. I think we are quite as clever as the “intellectuals”, only we have applied ourselves to the daily task instead of to theoretical disputation. As engineers we have changed the world, as social engineers we have improved our part of it as much as we can. We feel that we are reasonably well-equipped to go very much further, and if we do we shall need the co-operation of all those technicians and organisers who are at present on “the other side”, and we know that *some* of them are already with us.

TWO EXPERIMENTS IN WORKERS’ CONTROL

is the title of a two-part article by Roger Hadley in preparation for the quarterly *Trade Union Affairs*, a journal of study and criticism. It is an interim report of a study being conducted in two British common-ownership firms, the first part describing the background of the experiments, the second summarising preliminary findings, with special reference to the problem of evolving a “democratic power structure” and introducing meaning into work, and the role of the unions in these experiments. *Trade Union Affairs* costs 3s. 6d. a copy or 14s. A year from 62 Devonshire Chambers, 146 Bishopsgate, E.C.2.

53

Workers’ control in the building industry

JAMES LYNCH

WHAT DO BUILDING WORKERS WANT? Like everyone else they want independence, security, and plenty to take home at the end of the week. All these depend on good times. You can be independent and secure so long as there are plenty of jobs, because someone always knows of another site with a better bonus. The fact remains that there is no other major industry so badly organised, few with such bad working conditions, or with so much uncertainty about how long a job will last. In spite of the Federation, there is little solidarity between trades and none between tradesmen and labourers. In the T.& G.W.U. there is an annual average of 84 per cent. lapsed membership and 85.7 per cent. new members among labourers who are signed up on the site and let their cards lapse when the job finishes. If ever there was an industry which needed a breath of fresh air in the unions and a new spirit of *industrial* solidarity it is ours.

All kinds of attempts at workers' control have been tried out in building at one time or another and it saw the most advanced practical realisation of the guild socialist idea. Raymond Postgate has summed it up in one sentence with a sting in the tail. "*Perhaps the most important achievement of the Guild was that it gave the workers of the building industry confidence and showed them that they were competent to run and control the industry, if only they could lay their hands on it.*"

At the end of the first world war, when the slogan of homes for heroes was coined, the building workers seized the opportunity that the climate of opinion built up by the syndicalist and guild socialist movements offered. This was the time when the Sankey Commission was ready to support the miners' demand for workers' control of the mines, and the engineers were demanding it in the factories. Dr. Addison's Housing Act of 1919 made it possible for housing to be built with little capital, payment being made as the work proceeded. The

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54

building unions in Manchester formed a Building Guild under the influence of S. G. Hobson and in London, Malcolm Sparkes persuaded the operatives to form the London Guild of Builders. The movement spread and in no time there were 140 Guilds which joined forces in 1921 as the National Building Guild. The Guild was for legal purposes only, a limited company, which undertook centrally the work of finance, insurance and supply, the making of contracts being in the hands of Regional Councils, elected by the local guild committees and by the craft organisations of the region (including professional organisations of clerks, architects and engineers). Capital was borrowed at a fixed rate of interest, and full trade union rates paid during the currency of the contract "in sickness and in health, in good weather and bad"—something unheard of in those days. Surpluses were to be used for improvements, and development, not distributed to individuals. In cases when a job worked out cheaper than was expected, the saving on the contract price was handed back to the local authority employing the guild. Dr. Addison was sympathetic to the idea and so was Sir Raymond Unwin the famous architect who was chief architect to the Ministry of Health, and promised contracts if finance could be guaranteed. An overdraft was arranged with the C.W.S. bank and contracts for materials and joinery signed with the C.W.S. building department and loans were made by the Co-operative Insurance Society. Work worth more than two million pounds was taken in hand. The London Guild landed the £500,000 Walthamstow Contract and the Manchester Guild had contracts worth £1,428,918. By April 1922, in less than a year's actual work they had received £849,771 in cash and had spent £30,283 on plant.

The guilds attracted the best men, and there was genuinely effective workers' control. The independent investigator, Ernest Selley, after examining the contracts on each site, concluded that

- (1) the Guilds have proved that they are organised on business-like lines and are able to carry out building operations in a workman-like manner;
- (2) the quality of the work produced is distinctly above the average;

(3) the weight of the evidence goes to show that the output per man on Guild contracts is as good as that obtained by the best private contractors, and certainly higher than most.

(Ten years after they were built, the estates at Manchester built by the guilds were shown to have cost the local authority least in maintenance and repair work).

The end came as quickly as the beginning. The first of the post-war slumps came, the “Geddes Axe” was wielded by the government, housing policy changed, Sir Alfred Mond, later the ICI boss became Minister and determined to kill the guilds. The master builders’ associations agreed among themselves to submit lower tenders and to share any loss from undercutting when tendering against the guilds. Richard Coppock (later Sir Richard of the NFBTO) remarked that “the guild

55

eventually failed because of the power wielded by the banks, but it was not crushed before we had learned a valuable lesson in self-government in industry”.

In considering why the guild experiment was not tried again after the second world war, the most striking thing is that one cannot *imagine* a modern Minister of Health (Labour or Tory) nor his chief architect, nor the union leadership, and least of all the CWS bank sponsoring any such venture—so far have we moved from popular acceptance of the idea of workers’ control, and so completely have the bureaucrats taken over from the innovators.

But efforts have been made. Bro. Harry Law of the Battersea ASW sought to revive the guild idea in 1946 without much response. but by 1951 there were several productive co-operative building firms, affiliated to the CPR (Co-partner Builders, Co-partner Building Operatives, Northants Co-partner Builders). By 1960 they had all gone out of existence. Lack of capital, which helped to kill the old guilds, has killed the much more modest co-operative co-partnerships. What is the next step?

It scarcely needs saying that under a capitalist system the worker is a commodity (labour) to be bought and sold at a price (wages) according to the total number requiring jobs (supply) and the number of jobs to be filled (demand). The worker’s only capital is his capacity for work. And this is what he has to capitalise, by collective action. This is the whole basis of trade unionism—collective bargaining, and it is also the basis of the collective contract. There used of course to be gangs in the building trade run by “labour-only subcontractors” but not by the gang-members. I am told that the gang system as described by Reg Wright is worked under some contractors (Wimpey’s, Higgs and Hill) but what I am thinking of is the sort of group contract in which the worker is not paid individually by the boss at all. The group undertakes the job and arranges everything else for itself, including the share-out. The late Professor G. D. H. Cole says in *The Case for Industrial Partnership* that “The effect would be to link the members of the working group together in a common enterprise under their joint auspices and control, and to emancipate them from an externally imposed discipline in respect of their method of getting the work done”.

I would certainly prefer to work this way; it would be a more genuine kind of workers’ control than exists in any part of the industry today or seems likely to exist until the idea of worker’s control permeates public opinion at least to the extent that it did at the time of the guild socialists. It would, if the gangs consisted of more than one trade, cut across the craft barriers and promote solidarity on an industrial basis. and once generally accepted it could be the lever for a wider extension of control. It is certainly more reasonable than either “mindless militancy” which collapses at the end of a job, or ‘I’m all right Jack’ apathy, and is more practical than trying to struggle along as undercapitalised would-be capitalists.

56

Aspects of syndicalism

in Spain, Sweden and U.S.A.

PHILIP HOLGATE

ANARCHO-SYNDICALISM HAS BEEN DESCRIBED as the application of anarchistic ideas to industrial problems. Its basic ideas, described in innumerable pamphlets and in Rudolf Rocker's book, are that working-class organisations should be completely independent of politics; that their structure should be federal and non-bureaucratic; and that they should fight capitalism and the state without compromise, aiming to replace them by a free society based on co-operation.

The workers have not generally responded to syndicalist propaganda, and the unions based on it have been too small to play an important part in industrial affairs. However, in some countries conditions have made it possible for syndicalism to develop on a significant scale. The purpose of this article is to look at this development in three such countries, under widely different conditions, and to try to discover to what extent syndicalist ideas were borne out, and to suggest the lessons that these experiences have for libertarian industrial movements today.

Syndicalism in Spain dates back to 1868, when Bakunin's comrade Fanelli made a propaganda visit. His message was enthusiastically received. Spain is a country of varied cultures and several languages. Federalism was even then a respectable idea, and this, united with the workers' and peasants' desire for social revolution, was the very situation in which Bakunin's ideas took root and flourished.

A section of the First International was formed as a result, and it remained almost unanimously faithful to the anti-political point of view when the International broke up. Since then there has always been a syndicalist movement in Spain, either openly or underground, and in 1911 it crystallised in the foundation of the *Confederación Nacional del Trabajo* (C.N.T.) at the Congress of Bellas Artes in Barcelona, by representatives of 30,000 workers. The strength of the CNT increased rapidly, so that on the eve of revolution in 1936 it counted on a million enrolled members.

Several suggestions have been made to account for the success of a revolutionary ideology which was relatively ignored elsewhere. In addition to the federalist tradition, which was just as unfavourable to socialism as it was disposed to anti-governmental syndicalism, there was a tradition of direct action. At every peasant rising in the 19th and

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57

20th centuries the demand had been for a sharing out of the land. The peasants had a deep conviction that if only they were left alone to farm their land and reorganise their villages, all would be well. They could see the local part of their problems, and could not see what relevance Madrid politics had to them. Brennan has suggested that anarchism in Spain has been analogous to protestantism in the rest of Europe; a movement of reason against the church. While this is a dubious theory, there is certainly an ethical content to Spanish anarchism which marks it off clearly from any other political movement. The un-philosophical working-class conviction that you can always tell right from wrong shows itself in millions of ordinary Spaniards concluding that the State and capitalism are wrong; a fact which seems so difficult for many people of supposedly better education.

Sweden had no long-standing libertarian tradition similar to that of Spain. As in many European countries, social democracy and anarchism developed side by side within the same

organisations, and it was not until the turn of the century when the socialists were clearly within sight of parliamentary influence, that the theoretical differences between the two currents led to expulsions and splits. The Young Socialists, who developed into the continuing anarchist movement, began to go their own way from about 1893.

The year 1909 saw a general strike throughout the country, which ended in crushing defeat for the workers. The *Landsorganisation* (L.O.) had led the movement with characteristic half-heartedness, and as a result of the demoralisation following the defeat its membership was halved from 161 to 80 thousand.

In response, timber workers in the "red" province of Skaane got together in a committee, and in 1910 the foundation Congress of *Sveriges Arbetares Centralorganisation* (S.A.C.) was held in Stockholm. It had 696 members to begin with, but developed rapidly, to a membership of 4,500 in 1914, 20 thousand in 1918 and 32 thousand in 1920.

The *Industrial Workers of the World* was founded in 1905. Despite its name, and small groups of members in many countries, it has always been a predominantly American organisation. When it was founded the American labour scene was occupied by the A.F.L., which was a federation of craft unions, and numerous petty unions which spent their energy scrapping among themselves, engaging in legal disputes and organised scabbing, and providing a happy hunting ground for racketeers and power seekers.

The fact that syndicalist organisations developed in three countries where the national temperaments are so different, and the problems of industrial organisation so varied, counts against the theory that revolutionary syndicalism is only suited to Iberians. It also challenges us to find out why syndicalism rose to be a significant movement in some countries, but not in others with apparently similar conditions. Why did the S.A.C. grow in Sweden, but nothing on the same scale develop in Norway? Why was the Italian Syndicalist Union always numerically smaller than its rivals, while the C.N.T. was far superior? There is possibly a loophole for the answer, long buried under determinist

58

ideology, that the success of an idea depends on the vigour with which it is propagated. Certainly, the specifically anarchist minorities played a major part in getting the syndicalist unions going in Spain and Sweden.

Looking for common features in the early years of the three organisations, we find that two of them, I.W.W. and S.A.C. were founded as a direct response to the failures of orthodox and politically-inclined trade unionism, a factor which is still present in the more comfortable conditions of today.

All the organisations found themselves immediately involved in bitter industrial disputes throughout the area in which they operated. In 1913 when the S.A.C. had only 3,709 members they were involved in 30 strikes. They took part in 80 strikes in 1916; 172 in 1917 and 262 in 1918. In 1923 nine thousand of its members took part in strikes in the forestry industry alone. The local strikes in Spain had a more revolutionary character, as the workers often made demands so high that they could only have been achieved by a social revolution. A wave went through Spain in 1905, in which peasants demanded the division of the big agricultural estates. These disputes were often directed against inhuman conditions of work, and sometimes secured the doubling of wages. The I.W.W. and all the unions claim that the overwhelming majority of these resulted either in victory for the workers or compromises favourable to them. The biggest strike of the period in America was undertaken by the textile workers of Lawrence, where the whole labour force of 25,000 came out in 1909 and after ten weeks of police violence won a substantial wage increase. The culmination of C.N.T. militancy during the period was the strike against the *Canadiense*, the electrical company of Barcelona, which involved 100,000 workers.

It was clear that for this type of activity, where direct action by small concentrations of workers against their respective bosses was the predominating form of industrial conflict,

syndicalism was what the workers had been looking for.

The ability of the syndicalists to face up to violent attacks from the State and bosses is another feature common to them. The C.N.T. was declared illegal almost as soon as it was founded, and has been frequently forced underground since. It was subjected to actual assassination of its militants by police agents, as was the I.W.W. Police charges against workers' meetings, shootings, arrest and imprisonment of officials and prohibitions of activities were the lot of all syndicalists, and their ideas and organisation made them better prepared to meet this than the socialists.

The central feature of the structure of these organisations was their decentralism. They were composed of workshop branches federated into local federations, and these would in turn link up in regional and national federations. The local branches in each industry also federated to form industrial unions, an important pillar of the I.W.W. but one which was not introduced into the C.N.T. until 1929. It may be objected that this structure corresponds exactly with that of

59

say, British trade unionism, but the difference is that in the syndicalist unions the power rested with the local groups, and they exercised it.

Linked with their decentralism the syndicalists had a mistrust of paid officials. Propaganda in the early days was carried out by dedicated militants who would be supported by comrades in the districts where they were working. Even when its membership was in the region of a million the C.N.T. only employed one full-time secretary. It is also part of syndicalist theory that members of committees should be ordinary workers, elected to fulfil specific tasks, and subject to immediate recall. While this is an ideal which is most difficult to keep to, in practice, because of the way in which revolutionary mass organisations tend to throw up oligarchies and influential minorities, it did check the tendency for elites to develop, and in the I.W.W. and S.A.C. cases ensured the virility of the organisations even when they were numerically overwhelmed.

The organisational factors mentioned above are natural consequences of the fundamental assertion of syndicalism. That is that the enemy behind capitalism is the State, and that working-class struggles should not be waged through parliamentary and governmental channels, but must be directed against them, and aim to replace the oppressive State by a free federation of producers in a free co-operative community.

Only the C.N.T. openly used the word "anarchist" in its declarations. Its 1919 Congress in Madrid for instance, reaffirmed that the objective of the confederation was anarchist communism. The famous: preamble to the I.W.W. adopted by its foundation Congress, Chicago, 1905 declares that "the army of production must be organised, not only for the everyday struggle with capitalists but also to carry on when capitalism shall have been overthrown. By organising industrially we are forming the structure of the new society within the shell of the old". The S.A.C.'s foundation manifesto similarly states that "the proletarian class struggle ... should never, however, be regarded as an end in itself, but only as a means, to develop the weapons of the class struggle's real aim; the overthrow of the existing order and its rebuilding."

The theory and practice of the syndicalists then were united in: stressing the value of direct action. While unions throughout the world were using direct action as an alternative to constitutional methods, the: revolutionaries, being prepared for it, were consistently more effective.

Their attitudes to parliament varied. The C.N.T. was most strongly inspired by an anarchist opposition to government as such. During the 1933 elections it carried out a determined anti-electoral campaign. culminating in a mass meeting in Barcelona where the slogan "In place of the ballot-box, the social revolution!" was put forward, and they declared that if abstention resulted in a victory for the right, they would launch the social revolution. In 1936, as a result of compromises with political elements, the anti-electoral campaign was hardly noticeable.

The other two organisations were not so strongly influenced by pure anarchism, and their opposition to parliament derived more from the fact that democratic methods corrupted working-class militants and organisations. It is important to remember that whatever the views of

the organisations were about parliament, they included in their ranks supporters of every political view from anarchists to members of the Socialist Party.

Syndicalism had its most notable successes when it was fighting against a decentralised enemy, in a period when the unstable nature of industrial conditions paralleled the unstable aspects of revolutionary organisation. The weaknesses of these were as apparent as their advantages. Accounts of the wildly hopeful local risings in Spain, where the anarchists in a small village would proclaim libertarian communism, and the end of money, property and exploitation, only to be bloodily repressed by assault police a day later make tragic reading. On occasion too, a strike would fail because only one region supported it, while the others who were not in favour, stayed at work.

The wildly fluctuating memberships of the syndicalist unions was a great source of weakness. The S.A.C. had had 200 thousand workers pass through its books of which most only remained members for short periods. After the successful strike at Lawrence in 1909, 10,000 workers joined the I.W.W. local. In 1913 its membership had dropped to 700. Generally, the I.W.W. was enthusiastic about numbers, and this led it to underestimate the fact that paper membership is not a good guide to revolutionary strength. One of the worst errors the C.N.T. made during its early period was to imagine that its membership could be relied on to support radical action, when in fact about one in ten was personally convinced of syndicalist objectives.

Capitalism, the State, and trade unionism have developed considerably since the days when syndicalism was developed, in theory and practice. This is most noticeable in the Swedish welfare state and the managerial society in America, and least in Spain. The problem facing syndicalism was how to respond to this development, so as to preserve its essential objectives, yet be able to carry on the struggles called for by contemporary events.

The peak year for the S.A.C. was 1924 with a membership of 37,336. After 1933 a gradual decline set in with membership falling from year to year. The I.W.W. had several peaks, and had different degrees of success in different industries. It had one peak just before the first war and another in the early twenties. Outside of Spain then, the history of revolutionary syndicalism has been one of rise and decline.

Before examining the external factors which affected this, it is worth examining some of the internal difficulties of syndicalist ideas and organisations. It is inspired by anarchist and libertarian ideas which call for a high degree of personal conviction, yet it sets out to be a mass movement. In order to preserve its specific nature it should only admit to membership applicants who subscribe to its point of view, but in order to be effective it needs the support of all the workers. By basing itself on a distinct minority principle it introduces a division into the working-class movement, yet one of its aims is the unity of the proletariat. The fact that syndicalism has been relatively ignored in most of Europe, and has been scorned by many anarchists

may be because these contradictions have been too much to face.

The anarchists of Spain and Portugal set up the *Federación Anarquista Iberica* (F.A.I.) in 1918. Its members had to belong to the C.N.T. which they regarded as their special field of action. Not all the anarchists belonged to it, as some felt that this committal to the C.N.T. involved a sacrifice of the universal appeal of the anarchist philosophy. The membership of the F.A.I. has been estimated at 10,000. The rest of the membership of the C.N.T. contained a certain proportion who personally agreed with the revolutionary syndicalist point of view. It also contained workers who joined it because it was the strongest union in their locality, or because of its obvious vigour in fighting disputes. Furthermore, these are very good reasons for joining a union, and particularly one in which action was regarded so highly in comparison to words.

The dangers inherent in such a situation were almost all realised in practice. It became

plausible for reformist “leaders” to rise up and denounce the extremist “leaders” for sacrificing the immediate needs of the members by their “doctrinaire” policy. Such a movement against the alleged dictatorship of the anarchists was a constant feature of internal C.N.T. politics. The anarchists, in reply, found themselves devoting much of their energy to preserving the doctrinal purity of an organisation, many of whose passive members did not accept it, and it has been suggested that this deprived Spanish anarchism of its chance to play a really independent role in the social affairs of the time. When anarchists play such a part in a larger union they become involved in the importance of getting elected to this or that committee, of disputing the precise interpretation of documents and so on; the very features of political life that lead them to reject the reformist programme of freedom through government. In practice, all the prominent Spanish anarchists occupied leading positions in the C.N.T., and later on found it impossible to act as anarchists during the crisis of the revolution.

In Sweden, the founding of the S.A.C. was accompanied by a weakening of the Young Socialist movement, as many of its prominent and active members gave up all their other activities and concentrated on syndicalism. This did not, unfortunately, prevent the eventual rejection of revolutionary syndicalism by the S.A.C. The case of the I.W.W. is different. This union had suffered badly from the machinations of Marxist socialists during its early years, and developed an anti-political attitude which even made sure that anarchists did not have too much influence in its councils!

The tendency of capitalism to become centralised was met by putting more emphasis on the national industrial unions. This however was the cause of a split in the I.W.W. in 1924, which resulted in “most members dropping out in the middle” and was a hard blow. At the 1929 C.N.T. Congress too, some delegates opposed the national industrial unions on the grounds that they departed from the anti-centralist spirit of the Confederation.

Another feature of syndicalist tactics which could not be retained was the opposition to any form of wage agreement, binding for a fixed

62

period of time. The S.A.C. had specifically declared against such agreements in its declaration of principles, and had proposed instead a “permanent state of war in the social field”. When conditions of work are physically brutal, and open war is being waged on both sides, the revolutionary position has a natural appeal, which it unfortunately seems to lose when the employers feel safe and prosperous enough to bargain with unions, and the State realises that its interest lies in arbitrating between employers and workers rather than in attempting the brutal repression of the latter. Since there was a much stronger social democratic union in Sweden which did treat in terms of agreements the S.A.C. found itself pushed towards this position in order not to be at a disadvantage. This was in spite of the fact that official statistics showed for instance that forestry workers wages in the areas organised by the S.A.C. were consistently much higher than those where L.O. agreements were in force. As happens so often, the bad organisational ideas drove out the good, and at the S.A.C.’s 1929 Congress, industrial syndicates were given the option of signing binding agreements, and the 1938 Congress asserted that while the organisation somehow or other stood by its principled position, it would consider binding agreements, and accept the responsibilities they implied, in practice. The evolution of the I.W.W. on this question was parallel.

On the one hand, the desire to keep a syndicalist organisation on the right road has led to splits in the movement, and on the other hand desire for working-class unity has led them to seek agreements or amalgamation with other organisations. The split in the I.W.W. in 1924 has been mentioned. It was never an attractive take-over proposition. The S.A.C. suffered a split in 1929 when most of its locals in the South West broke away to form the *Syndicalistiska Arbetarefederation* (S.A.F.). This organisation stood for a more uncompromising position, at a time when intransigence was becoming increasingly unpopular, and it made no progress. In 1938 its residue re-amalgamated with S.A.C. From 1928 a committee of the S.A.C. and L.O. sat to determine a basis on which the two organisations could get together. In 1929 the executive of the

S.A.C. agreed to this with only two opposing members. The basis for union was a document affirming that both organisations were based on the socialist class struggle, that they both aimed at the replacement of capitalism by a co-operative democracy, and that they were opposed to militarism and war. When this proposal was placed before the members it was decisively thrown out. For once, the rank and file of a union had saved it from a sell-out, and had recognised what their leaders were indifferent to, that the socialist paper declarations of revolutionary intentions meant nothing in practice.

The scission in the C.N.T. was precipitated by the famous Manifesto of the Thirty, which argued for a more flexible policy, which they claimed would be better able to serve the needs of the workers than one based on determined, principled declarations of intransigence. The movement of the *Treintistas* was closely connected with the ideal of working-class unity, seen in terms of an alliance between the C.N.T. and the socialist *Union General de los Trabajadores* (U.G.T.). In

63

Asturias where this point of view had majority support a pact was signed just before the rising in October 1934. When this occurred the socialists tried to gain complete control, excluded the C.N.T. from committees wherever possible, and the socialists failed to initiate worthwhile supporting activities in the rest of Spain.

These activities in Spain were all being carried out under the shadow of fascism and in the hopes of a social revolutionary response to it, and they need far fuller discussion than is possible here. Readers are referred to the books listed at the end, and to a forthcoming issue of ANARCHY which will be devoted entirely to Spain.

In attempting to draw up a balance sheet for syndicalism it is inevitable that most of the praise or criticism will also fall on the heads of anarchists, for without the determined action and theoretical conviction of men holding anarchist or related views the syndicalist organisations would neither have come into existence nor remained.

However, the anarchists were acting in an atmosphere that was: limited, and while it has been asserted that the industrial syndicate is the place where anarchists should be active, it has not been shown that anarchists are most successful when trying to provide leadership for a mass movement.

The most effective way for anarchists, or people convinced of the rightness of syndicalist ideals to help a union to keep them as its inspiration, is to be at the same time independent and committed. This is a difficult position, as it throws them into the position of critics from the outside if they are not careful, but the problems which it raises are soluble within the anarchist frame of reference, while the problems of anarchists in positions of power, of the situation where they are denying others the right to adopt non-anarchist resolutions, and issuing manifestos in the name of thousands who have never seen them are not.

With capitalism developing towards a more centralised and stable structure, and the evolution of the modern State and the trade unions, the problems facing the workers have become broader and more complex. The syndicalists reacted to this in very different ways. The I.W.W., perhaps because of its early quarrels with the Socialist Labour Party, had declined to take up a not directly related to on the job organisation and class struggle. Even when it was itself engaged in a series of "Free Speech" fights in areas where its activities had been banned by the police, there was disquiet in case concentration on the freedom aspect of the case should divert the attention of militants from their factory and lumber camp organisation. A similar suspicion fell on anti-militarist propaganda during the first world war. One I.W.W. leaflet showed all other radical tendencies pointing to the stars, while the I.W.W. figure pointed to the factories and said "organise". It was part of their theory that as the workers became more independent and self-respecting their revolutionary consciousness would rise, and that success in day-to-day direct action would lead them straight to the social revolution.

That is where syndicalist theory has broken down most conspicu-

ously. After winning striking victories in bitter struggles using direct action, the workers have not profited by their experience and extended the class war until final victory, as the syndicalists hoped they would. The bosses and the State have profited far more from their experience and have modified the economic structure of society so that the conditions in which syndicalism flourished no longer prevail.

This means that if a workers' organisation is to be effective it must take up attitudes, as an organisation, on all sorts of questions which did not come into the field of interest of the pioneers of revolutionary syndicalism. It is this need to change from a fighting organisation engaged in localised and short-lived struggles, to a movement of opposition opinion which has been the hurdle on which the I.W.W. and S.A.C. have been caught. The I.W.W. stuck to its traditional narrow field and declined to insignificance, while the S.A.C., finding at last that the pressure of the inactive card holders did not allow it to take up a conscious revolutionary position on issues such as the war crisis and the welfare state, slid into a position in which it is barely distinguishable from the L.O. which it was formed to replace.

It has been easy for anarchists to attack the reformists in the S.A.C., but they were trying to find some solution to the problem of a revolutionary organisation in a situation unfavourable to revolution. In the welfare state of today there are growing signs of revolt against the new, milder forms of oppression that it involves. The twin aims of the syndicalists of the past were effectiveness in the day-to-day struggle, and through it, the introduction of a libertarian communist society. They were remarkably successful in their first objective, but have not made any real progress with the second. The workers' movements of the future will have to fight different kinds of battles; against bureaucracy, affluent complacency and working-class bosses as well as against employers. They may be put in the position where they appear to be biting all the hands that feed them. They will therefore need far more social understanding than ever before, and the merits of mass organisations will be more doubtful. It should also be more clear that the building of a free society does not automatically follow the destruction of the old one.

In short, the most necessary development for a future workers' movement is not so much a revival of the old syndicalism, as the development and spread of anarchism.

SHORT BOOK LIST:-

- GENERAL: Rudolf Rocker: *Anarcho-Syndicalism*.
Philip Sansom: *Syndicalism, the Workers' Next Step*.
- SPAIN: Gerald Brenan: *The Spanish Labyrinth*.
Anselmo Lorenzo: *El Proletariado Militante*.
José Peirats: *La CNT en la Revolución Española, I*.
Vernon Richards: *Lessons of the Spanish Revolution*.
- SWEDEN: Karl Bergkvist & Evert Arvidsson: *SAC, 1910-1960*.
John Andersson: *40ars kemp med SAC*.
Karl Fernstrom: *Ungsocialismen*.
- U.S.A.: Ralph Chaplin: *Wobbly*.
Fred Thompson: *The IWW, Its First 50 Years*.

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