Twenty-One. The Past and Future of Workers' Control

Published by

Green, James.
Workers' Struggles, Past and Present: A "Radical America" Reader.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/59700
To speak of workers' control in America is difficult, because little of the theory of the workers' control movement came out of this country. American experience forces us to begin with the world of practice, and then to probe some of the ideological implications of that practice. In fact, American workers have waged a running battle over the ways in which their daily work and the human relations at work were organized over the last century, and in the process they have raised issues which go far beyond the confines of "wage and job consciousness" or "bread and butter" unionism, into which historians have long tried to compress the experiences and aspirations of American workers.

What does "workers' control" mean? Perhaps the best way to answer the question is to begin with consideration of its opposite: the separation caused by industrial capitalism between those who direct the work to be done and those who carry out the directions. This separation is rooted in two of the most fundamental characteristics of our economic order. The first is that the historical evolution of capitalism involved a concentration of productive power in collective forms on a scale never before dreamed of. Production became a group activity, and the groups involved have typically become larger and larger over the last century and a half. Moreover, as production has become more collective in form, the technical knowledge

Reprinted from Vol. 13, No. 6 (November-December 1979).
which guides that activity has correspondingly become separated from the actual carrying out of the work. It has increasingly become codified in the form of engineering of scientific knowledge, which is in the heads of specialists hired by the owners to manage the works, rather than in the heads of the workers themselves. This process appeared in manufacturing even before the development of high level machine technology, and it has continued on ever rising levels since the emergence of factories, reaching its highest peak in today's automated firm. Science and technology themselves have been appropriated by capital and confront ordinary working people as alien, inanimate, hostile forces.

The second fundamental characteristic of our economic life is that the bottom line in determining what production methods are to be used and what is to be produced is neither the quality of working life nor the utility of the articles created, but rather the profitability of the enterprise. What is quintessential in capitalism is not simply its historically unique manner of turning out unprecedented quantities of goods, but also that the production of goods is not the basic motive of those who own and direct the factories. The production of profit is their basic motive. Thus how we work and what we are producing are both determined by standards of profitability, accumulation, and cash flow—not by the standard of making life more satisfying during our brief stint on this earth. This distinction was neatly identified by Carter Goodrich, when he wrote in his classic study of coal miners' control struggles in 1926:

> It is often said that modern society has chosen efficiency in production rather than richness of working life. [In actual fact,] society makes no choices as such, and the countless individual decisions out of which have come mass production as efficient as that at Ford's and jobs as dull as those at Ford's have most of them been made without the slightest reference to the quality of working life that would result. . . . They are made on the basis of figures of output and cost and profit for the immediate business in the immediate future.¹

Goodrich's book appeared at a moment in history when the struggle for workers' control over the methods and purposes of industrial production was more explicit, articulate and widespread throughout the capitalist world than at any other time in history, the period around the end of World War I. That period in the United States deserves close attention, but first it is necessary to examine its historical background. For half a century before that epoch there had been much in the daily practice of American workers to challenge the notion, which we encounter everywhere today, that no modern industrial society could possibly function without the two attributes of capitalism I have identified: the separation of direction from production and the dominance of profit accumulation over the creation of useful goods and services.
In the late nineteenth century American industry contained pockets of extensive control over productive processes exercised by groups of skilled workers. It is important to speak precisely here, so as not to give the impression that in some "good old days" the two basic attributes of industrial capitalism did not apply. That is not the point. The point is that even within that system numerous and important groups of skilled workers were able to assert their collective control over those portions of the production process that fell within their domain.

Skilled craftsmen then brought into the workplace characteristics which enabled them to challenge their employers, often successfully, for control over the direction of their own work and that of their helpers, and to some extent over what was being made. The first of these characteristics was simply their knowledge of the production processes. The puddling of iron, the blowing of window glass, the cutting of garments, or the rolling of steel was not learned in school or taught to the workers by their employers. It was rather learned on the job in ways which gave the craftsmen a knowledge of what they were doing that was far superior to that of their employers. No one was more keenly aware of this relationship than the "father of scientific management," Frederick Winslow Taylor. He believed that the first step in systematizing management was for the employers to learn what their skilled workers knew and did, in other words, to study the skilled tradesmen and expropriate their knowledge.

But the control struggles of the late nineteenth century cannot be explained by craft workers' knowledge alone. That technical knowledge was embedded in a moral code governing behavior on the job, a code which was not individualistic, but one of mutuality, of the collective good. Part of this code on all but the most highly seasonal jobs was a clearly determined stint, or level of output, that any decent member of the trade would not exceed. The violator of that code was condemned as a hog, a runner, a chaser, a job wrecker, or some other such choice epithet. To go flat out for oneself was simply dishonorable behavior. So was any action by which one worker connived against or "undermined" a fellow worker on the job. This code of mutuality was as important to the collective direction of the job as was the craftsman's knowledge, and it was often embodied in the work rules of unions. In fact, it is in those union rules that the most explicit formulations of the craftsmen's ethic are to be found.

One of the most elaborate sets of work rules from the period was by the window glass blowers, gatherers, cutters, and flatteners, who belonged to Local Assembly 300 of the Knights of Labor. They provided, among other things, that blowers should not work at all from June 15 to September 15, when the heat of the glass furnace was hard to bear. Only after the union was defeated by mechanization did summer glass-making become routine. The rules also specified that "no blower or gatherer shall work faster than at the rate of nine rollers per hour, excepting in the case of
rollers falling off, or pipes breaking.” The “standard size of single strength rollers” was fixed at “45 x 58 to cut 38 x 56.” In other words, it was the union that standardized the size of windows in late nineteenth-century America. Poor glass, absenteeism, and drinking which interfered with production were punished by union fines. To help secure obedience to union rules and to decisions of the shop committees, the foremen were obliged to belong to the union and submit to its discipline.

The important point is not just that these rules were elaborate, but that they embodied a moral code for which glass workers were prepared to fight. Consider this description from John Swinton’s Paper in 1884 of the strike which ensued when the employers tried to compel blowers to produce more than the 48 boxes of glass per week prescribed by their union. The language of the report reveals clearly what glass blowers thought of themselves and of their rules.

The last fight of the manufacturers was made on the “forty-eight box limit.” The reduction of wages was only the excuse. This is no secret. How the high-rolling manufacturer did splutter over this! His gouty limbs stumbled across it, and he broke his grip. He knew that if the limit was taken off, the men could work ten or twelve hours every day in the week; that in their thirst for the mighty dollar they would kill themselves with labor; they would “black sheep” their fellows by doing the labor of two men; they would employ apprentices innumerable to help them through; in their individual reach for that which governs the country [the dollar], they would ruin their association. The men said no. They thundered out no. They even offered to take a reduction that would average 10 per cent all around, but they said, “We will keep the forty-eight box limit.” Threats and curses would not move them to make more than forty-eight boxes of window glass a week, and finally, in despair, the grasping dollar-lover gave way and said, “Keep it and be d——d.” They have it still and they won’t be damned by any but their employers.

Two aspects of this late nineteenth-century experience should be emphasized. First, even in the setting of modern technology and large-scale production it was possible to have collective direction of the way in which jobs were performed. Moreover, such direction required not only a struggle against management’s efforts to control the work, but also a rejection of individualistic, acquisitive behavior. The practical and ideological aspects of this contest were inseparable from each other.

Second, this control by the crafts was the primary target of attack for managerial reformers in the early twentieth century. Scientific management—which might properly be described by paraphrasing today’s language, as a systematic job impoverization program—emerged out of a drive, evident in every advanced industrial country as corporate enterprise waxed larger and international competition grew more intense at the turn of the century, to increase labor productivity. In England, France, Germany, and
this country there were innumerable experiments with incentive pay schemes, designed to entice workers into going flat out for the almighty dollar, or mark, or franc. Frederick Winslow Taylor entered the debate at precisely that level with his paper, “A Piecework System.” Taylor’s message, however, was that tinkering with pay systems would not solve the problem. It was necessary, he argued, to go to the root of the problem: to expropriate the workers’ knowledge and to subvert his moral code. Only then could pay schemes serve as incentives to higher output. The instrument which he and his fellow engineers devised for acquiring mastery over the craftsmen’s skills was time and motion study. Through such studies, methods of working could be standardized and presented to the workers as orders from the engineering and planning departments.

Nobody carried these developments farther than Henry Ford, who was in the unique position, when he opened his Highland Park plant in 1914, of being able to produce some thousand cars a day without a storage yard. Virtually all of them were sold to dealers the day they came off the line. Ford’s engineers were able to devise not only thoroughly standardized production tasks for each of the plant’s 15,000 employees, but also extraordinarily specialized machine tools, each of which did just one operation in the fabrication of a single part for the eventual Model T. The plant was also filled with assembly lines, big and small, where components were fashioned, all leading to the final assembly line. In their thorough study of the Ford works, Arnold and Faurote reported that the company had no use for experienced workers. It preferred machine tool operators who had nothing to unlearn, “who have no theories of correct surface speeds for metal finishing, [but] will simply do what they are told, over and over again, from bell-time to bell-time.”

To run a factory with such operatives Ford also had to have a splendidly equipped tool room, where 270 skilled workers, for whom nothing was “scamped or hurried,” created the tools, jigs, and equipment needed by the production hands to carry out their work. Last but hardly least, the company employed an enormous supervisory staff. Everywhere scientific management was introduced, it required a vast proliferation of supervisors. In Ford’s machine shops alone 510 overseers of one type or another had the authority to fire any operative. Arnold and Faurote’s figures suggest that in early 1914 they averaged almost a firing a day apiece.

The pioneers of scientific management attacked the ideology of the craftsmen, as well as their knowledge. The workers’ moral code was contemptuously labelled “soldiering,” and their pretentions to directing their own daily tasks were denounced as dangerous folly. The “man who is fit to work at any particular trade,” wrote Taylor, “is unable to understand the science of that trade without the kindly help and cooperation of a man of a totally different type of education.”

Conversely, craftsmen resisted Taylor’s innovations on both the practical and the ethical level. The introduction of time study, standardized work
procedures, and incentive pay encountered dogged resistance, especially among metal workers. That resistance cannot be discounted as simple conservatism or "Luddism." A machinist at the Rock Island arsenal, Hugo Lueders, was asked if he objected to the planning of production. He replied: "The men would very readily welcome any system. They want it bad." Like so many workers today, Lueders saw nothing desirable in slipshod management. But he added quickly, "As far as having a man stand back of you and taking all the various operations you go through, that is one thing they do not care for."

Lueders's hostility to time study and standardization was evidently shared by many other workers. When someone in his arsenal was seen measuring a planer in a way that suspiciously suggested that he was making measurements for standardized clamps and bolts, he was ostracized, and other machinists demanded his instant discharge. At the Watertown arsenal the molders agreed among themselves that, if a stopwatch showed up in their department, all of them would cease working. When time-study men did appear at the American Locomotive works in Pittsburgh, the company had been careful to negotiate a prior agreement with the unions, but the workers assaulted the time-study men and drove them from the plant. The same workers also scornfully rejected incentive pay. American Locomotive had followed a common practice of Taylor's disciples, designed to circumvent workers' animosity toward incentive pay: they divided their employees' pay into two envelopes, one containing the standard hourly rate and the other any premium which a worker had earned. This device was designed to make any individual's acceptance of the new pay plan "voluntary." At American Locomotive, however, workers made a bonfire of the incentive pay envelopes, and the reforming manager left Pittsburgh to try his hand elsewhere. Meanwhile at the Norfolk Navy Yard the mere appearance of time clocks had provoked a general walkout and a union rally in protest, and at Starrett Tool in Athol, Massachusetts, workers passed a whimsical resolution to treat time clocks simply as part of the furniture.

Terms like "Sodom and Gomorrah" and "Pandora's Box," which numerous letters to the editor of the Machinists' Monthly Journal applied to Taylorized workshops, revealed the depth and pervasiveness of the feeling in the craft that scientific management was not only a threat to workers' livelihoods, but also morally outrageous. And the machinists' contempt for "the kindly help and cooperation" being offered them by men "of a totally different type of education" was captured in a poem, which Dennis O'Shea wrote for his union's journal in 1908. O'Shea was inspired by the often repeated statement of Carl Barth, designer of the twelve-variable slide rule for calculating machine speeds and feeds, that he dreamed "sometimes in between work and sometimes at night . . . that the time will come when every drill press will be speeded just so and every planer, every lathe, the world
over, will be harmonized, just like the musical pitches are the same all over the world." O'Shea depicted Barth's dream this way:

The demonstrator sat in his easy chair,
And as he smoked his cigar dreamed a dream so fair,
In the haze of the rings of smoke he blew,
A picture he saw of which I'll tell you:
In fancy he saw a building grand
Of which he was in supreme command;
There were lathes and planers and milling machines, too;
Of wheel presses and bolt cutters there were quite a few;
Horizontal and vertical mills by the score;
Of slotters and shapers a great many more.
While the shop—my, what a marvelous place!
Men moved like as though they were running a race.
And he thought of what a great change he'd wrought
Since he the other machinists had taught
To do their work so quick and fast
And not to be loafing over their task,
But make all the money for the company, then
They'll be treated like cattle instead of like men.

O'Shea continues by contrasting the new lust for speed with his trade's traditions of quality production.

And he smiled as he thought of the old slow way
When a man would turn up one axle a day.
First he'd center it up so good and true,
Then take a roughing cut or two,
And a finishing cut so nice and fine,
And then roll the bearings to make them shine,
Square up the ends, then make the fits,
Take it out of the lathe, and that was it.
But just look how he had changed this way—
A man had to do twelve of them now a day.
They simply wheel them into the lathe,
Turn the whole thing up in one might shave,
Throw it out again and then it was done,
And the lathe man would say, well, that's going some.

The same contrast is repeated through different departments of the plant. But the poem ends in a delightfully unexpected way, by portraying the "demonstrator" as an offender against working-class morality and as hopelessly outclassed in technical knowledge by those to who he is issuing commands.
So his thoughts ran along in this beautiful way,
And in fancy he could hear the directors say,
You're such a good man to keep down the pay
We have decided to raise yours twenty dollars a day . . .
Alas at this point the telephone rang,
And as he took the receiver a voice through it sang,
Hello! Is this you dear? I am glad you're so near,
I've just been told something awful I want you to hear,
The boys say you're a welcher, a piker at heart,
In a good honest bet you wouldn't take part;
That you hold your job because of your drags,
When you ought to be out with a sack gathering rags,
In a cobbler's shop you would surely shine,
Or a pulling the candy you could do just fine.
As for teaching machinists why let the thing pass,
Public opinion decides you're an incompetent Ass.ck

Of course, the attitudes and values evident in O'Shea's poem can be found in American machine shops to this day. One consequence of the modern style of management is the sense of rivalry and mutual contempt which pervades the relations between production workers and engineers. Nevertheless, that animosity was especially explicit during the years around World War I, and it was also then that the struggle against the systematized management was most successful.

Historians have been somewhat misled on this score by Milton Nadworny's study, *Scientific Management and the Unions*. Nadworny correctly argues that during the war years union officials increasingly came to reconcile their views with those of Taylor's followers. But what was happening on the shop floor was quite the opposite. The insatiable demand for labor gave workers a feeling of self-confidence, which produced among other things more strikes during 1917 and 1918 than any previous year in American history, in spite of the no-strike pledges of the unions. The records of the National War Labor Board and other agencies which attempted to cool down these disputes reveal that they often involved time studies, incentive pay, and work standardization. The quickest way workers could be convinced to return to the job was to get rid of these innovations.

Many struggles of the World War I epoch, however, involved more than just resistance to management's new techniques. As union strength grew and workers became more aware of their ability to manipulate government war agencies, workers began advancing their own plans for reorganization of work relations. These plans differed significantly from the familiar craft techniques of the late nineteenth century. Because the erosion of the position of skilled workers was clearly irreversible, workers had to come to grips with the new way in which factories operated. To be sure, some crafts in the
building trades and many tool and die makers could simply demand standard craft rates and craft rules of the old form. But others, among whom scientific management had already wrought extensive changes, developed novel sets of demands and new forms of self-organization.

Consider the machinists, helpers, and tool makers at the vast Mesta Machine Company near Pittsburgh. They struck in 1917 and again in 1918 for the abolition of the time-study and premium pay schemes, the establishment of three or four standard wage rates, the eight-hour day, and recognition by the company of a shop committee to deal with all grievances from the plant. This pattern of demands was commonplace by the end of the war, and it deserves attention. First of all, a demand for standardization was arising in this instance not from the managers, but from the workers. The new payment plans had generated a proliferation of individual wage rates, and employers openly defended having "as many hourly rates as there are human beings" in the factory as necessary for the efficient operation of the works. The workers realized that the old standard craft rate was now hopelessly obsolete, but they did try to create a determinate set of classifications to cover everyone, and one with a narrow spread between the highest and the lowest rates.

Second, strikers virtually everywhere demanded the standard work day of eight hours, and they enjoyed considerable success on this front. The struggle for a shorter work week made more headway between 1910 and 1920 than in any other decade of this century, despite adamant employer resistance. Third, new forms for organizing the collective power of workers were developed. Sometimes craft unions were coordinated through metal trades councils, and many unions opened their doors to unskilled workers, but virtually everywhere some form of shop committee or stewards' body assumed the task of directly representing the rank and file. Workers of this epoch were keenly aware that to speak of "workers' control" without effectively organizing workers' power is to drift into fantasy land.

Finally, as these struggles became more intense, they were increasingly often linked to far-reaching political demands. The munitions workers of Bridgeport, who had been seasoned by four years of chronic industrial battle by 1919, for example, held huge rallies to protest post-war layoffs. From these rallies they petitioned the president of the United States for the "creation of National Labor Agencies to assure in all industries a living wage and every right to union organization; collective bargaining and collective participation of the workers in control of industry;" a reduction of hours; "extensive necessary public works" to create jobs; and finally, the "abolition of competition, criminal waste and profiteering in industry and substituting co-operative ownership and democratic management of industry and the securing to each of the full product of his toil."

This was the age of the Plumb Plan on the railroads, the miners' pamphlet How to Run Coal, and the convention of delegates from 30,000
striking miners in Illinois who voted to make as a condition of returning to work the collectivization of the mines. Themes of public ownership, workers’ education, and political action played a constant counterpoint to shop floor demands between 1918 and 1922. Needless to say, the employers fought tooth and nail against all such proposals. Their mood was summed up by President Loyall A. Osborne of Westinghouse Electric, who wrote as a member of the National War Labor Board to its chairman, William Howard Taft, warning against concessions to labor and against “our Board being used as an instrument of propaganda by the labor unions.” Said Osborne:

It is quite natural that you should approach these questions in a different frame of mind than do we, for you have not for years, as we have been, fighting the battle for industrial independence. You have not had constantly before you as a part of your daily life evidences of bad faith, restriction of output, violence, disregard of obligations and irresponsibility that has ever been the characteristics of their organizations.14

Osborne’s statement reflected the determined posture which his fellow employers assumed before the Board. Representatives of Bridgeport’s manufacturers, for example, insisted on four principles in their personal relations: total and exclusive control over production by the employers; remuneration of each employee according to his or her individual merits; evaluation of those merits by the employer alone; and the resolution of all conflicts between employers and employees without “outside” interference, from unions or government.

By the end of the depression of 1920–1922 the resistance of unions to these pretensions of management had been decisively crushed in most basic industries. All that remained of the formerly overt struggle for workers’ control were its faint echoes in the Baltimore and Ohio Plan and a few similar “workers’ participation” schemes on one side, and the programs of small, isolated revolutionary parties on the other. Nevertheless, unorganized workers carried on the battle in covert forms. Among other things, the regulation of output which nineteenth-century craft unions had embodied in the stint did not disappear from American industrial life: it went underground. Instead of being openly proclaimed as union “legislation,” restriction took the form of secretive defiance by small groups of workers to management’s authority. In a word, the stint had become sabotage.

Moreover, it became something of an obsession with workers, as is evidenced by a document liberated from the Chevrolet company’s files during the Flint sit-down strike of 1937. This was a report of a spy on workers’ conversations during the first shift. Surely one sign of management’s scientific character was the fact that workers were now known by number, rarely by name. A few excerpts from this report suggest the tenor of the workers’ discussion of output:

398
Employee 7556046 . . . in conversation, was heard to say that he had completed his production by 2:45 P.M., and that he loafed for forty-five minutes before he quit work at 3:30 P.M.

At lunch time [on the second shift] the majority of the men had completed from 68 to 70 camshafts and in checking the sheet, it was evident that the other men had the same number. The check-up was made after the final pick-up had been made by 556594 (Leon D. Witham, transferred 10-30-35). When one of the employees had ten completed shafts, and when 594 (Witham) took only two of them, he asked the reason, to which 7594 replied,

"You have turned in 62 and that's enough."

The other was heard to ask, "Why, what difference does it make as long as I only get 124 in the nine hours?" and 7594 answered, "Well, last night they picked the sheet up on me at supper time and if a man has 66 to 70 shafts turned in for the first half of the shift they will expect you to turn in the same amount for the second half so we leave the shafts until after supper, just in case somebody should check the sheet and find out what the men are really doing."

There was considerable discussion among the employees of the plant about production, which conversation started before work this morning and continued throughout the entire day. The discussion was interrupted by the foreman during the lunch period, but was resumed in another location in Plant 5. . . ."

This covert style of struggle from the 1920s and 1930s is still very much with us today, but the rapid spread of union contracts during the late 1930s brought some significant changes, and a new challenge to management. With union protection came both a resurgence of the audacity and self-confidence among workers that had been evident during the war years and an eagerness among the rank and file to settle old scores and to change the conditions under which they worked forthwith. Consequently both management and governmental agencies sought to limit the influence which the new unions would have over work relations and production processes and to develop machinery for dealing with grievances which would leave the initiative in production and personnel questions with management. The task was not an easy one, as employers' laments from the late 1930s about their "unmanageable" workers make clear. But the goals toward which sophisticated managers were striving were neatly summed up by Sumner Slichter in a study published by the Brookings Institution in 1941, Union Policies and Industrial Management.

Convinced that unionism had become too securely established in American industry to be uprooted once again, Slichter set out to study in detail the practices and arrangements which affected the ability of workers and of managers to control what happened in their plants. He concluded that from management's vantage point, the ideal form of union would be industrial in
form and bureaucratic in structure. Industrial unions were to be preferred to craft, because the latter not only generated chronic jurisdictional disputes, but were also wedded to the vested interests of particular groups of workers within the existing technology of the firm, and thus posed more formidable obstacles to change than a union whose constituency is diffused throughout the whole plant. On the other hand, he warned, an industrial union whose leadership shared the daily experiences of members on the shop floor and sought to solve problems where and when they arose could make a mockery of scientific management. Only officers with secure tenure and a secure contractual relationship with the firm could develop an understanding of management's needs and problems.

Industrial relations did not take the shape proposed by Slichter just because he said so, but they were reshaped in that direction by a lengthy process, which involved the thorough regulation of industrial disputes by "tripartite" bodies during World War II, business' postwar crusade for "management's prerogatives," and the Taft-Hartley Law. That act of 1947 virtually outlawed any union activity other than bargaining over wages and conditions with their members' immediate employers and made unions liable for damages in case of strikes in violation of contacts. As early as the 1950s it was evident that the widespread incorporation of management's rights clauses into union contracts and the increasing rigidity of grievance procedures meant that conflicts over the pace or arrangement of work had reverted to the subterranean, sabotage forms of preunion days. Strikes about such questions were more often than not unofficial, and in this connection court decisions restricting such strikes on the basis of the Taft-Hartley Act have become increasingly important. In 1975 the district Federal court covering western Pennsylvania ruled in the Eazor Trucking Company case that any union was liable to damage suits in case of a wildcat strike by its members if the union did not do everything in its power to get the members back to work.¹⁶

Moreover, what contractual defenses of workers' control over work relations unions have maintained—largely through "past practices" clauses and through the defense of members against disciplinary sanctions—find themselves today under vigorous attack from management's side at the bargaining table. "Take-back" bargaining is the current vogue in management strategy, and its advocates make no bones about the fact that their primary objective is the elimination of whatever obstacles remain in union contracts to their authority over the workplace. "We pay good money," they argue, "and we want output in return."

Of all workers' control issues, the one which has assumed special prominence in our own times is that of preventing plant closings. Here the problem is not how the job is performed, but whether there will be a job at all. Since the workers of American Safety Razor sat down in its Brooklyn
In some recent instances workers have sought ways to reopen a plant which has been abandoned by a multiplant corporation under their own management, or some sort of community ownership. For example, when Youngstown Sheet and Tube announced that it would close its Campbell Works, local union members enlisted the aid of a ministers' council to promote a movement for acquisition of the plant by the community. The implications of this effort are profound. As the project's economic consultant, Gar Alperowitz, has made clear, community ownership of the mill cannot succeed without new governmental purchasing policies for steel wares that are directed primarily at the needs of urban America, in mass transit, housing development, et cetera. In other words, if a community-operated plant with any degree of workers' control is going to function, it must have its output determined by the nation's need for use values—by the real and sorely neglected needs of the American people—not by the rule of maximum profitability in the marketplace.¹⁷

The Youngstown idea has not been carried to fruition, but it has caught on elsewhere. In Buffalo, when the Heat Transfer Division of American Standard threatened to close down, the Buffalo AFL-CIO Council voted to take over the plant, if necessary, and operate it under union direction. Several plants in Jamestown and Dunkirk, New York, have already been kept alive by their workers' assuming ownership.

This is the setting of the most important discussions of workers' control today. And outstanding example of what is now possible has been provided by the birth and survival of Wisconsin's worker-controlled newspaper, the Madison Press Connection. Its origins lie in a long strike of the employees of Madison's major newspapers, provoked when their owners undertook to cripple or destroy their craft unions. Having gone out on strike and realizing that all the skills needed to put out a newspaper were to be found among the people walking the picket line, these workers decided to start their own newspaper as a rival to their scab-operated former employers. The Press Connection soon developed a network of readers such as few papers could boast, because in order to get subscriptions and operating funds, newspaper workers had to solicit support from union and farmers' organizations all over Wisconsin. As they did so, the people with whom they talked told them...
that they thought of and wanted from the newspaper. Responding to readers' suggestions and criticisms (that is, creating something useful for the people of Wisconsin) became essential to the survival of the paper.

Moreover, on my own first visit to the Press Connection's offices and composing room, I saw a workplace that looked more businesslike—in the true sense of the term—than anything I had seen before in my life. Each department had been physically designed by the people who worked in it, to make their work as efficient, easy, and accurate as they could make it, while it was also equipped with the flowers, pictures, etc. necessary to make the setting congenial. These journalists, bookkeepers, layout artists and printers were not socializing: they were putting out a newspaper of value to the local residents. And they were running it by their own collective decisions. (See Chapter 20.)

A group of these workers told me that they had gone to a seminar held by industrial relations experts on the question of workers' participation in management. They had listened to all the projects and experiments described there, saying nothing until close to the end of the day, when one of them put up his hand. He said: "I'm sorry. We can't quite relate to this discussion. You see, we found in the Press Connection that we don't need management's participation."

The control struggles which involve nothing but the immediate participation of those involved are those which emerge out of small groups of workers in direct relationship with each other. An example is the decision of camshaft turners among themselves as to how many shafts they will produce. Nobody from outside the group is needed for that sort of control—though we must remember that the parameters within which workers make such a decision are decisively fixed by the boss.

When we think in terms of operating a plant, however, two aspects of the question must be clearly confronted. First, it is not possible to build a fully participatory management within the existing economic framework. One cannot make socialism in one factory. Even if The People's Campbell Works was opened in Youngstown, it would still be enmeshed in an economy governed by market rules and oriented in financial and sales practices, as well as in known management techniques, toward the logic or profit. Those who are thinking of producing use values under collective direction within that system are facing an uphill battle every day.

The significance of that uphill battle depends on other developments connected with it, and this is where the political side of the struggle comes in. One factory by itself will sink or—if it survives—will not be self-managed very long. In Jamestown, New York, where six factories boast their "self-management," I found that three of them were impossible to distinguish from any other factory, except that the managerial group may have included as many as a dozen members.

The second point follows from the first. What matters is the connection
we make (in thought and deed) between struggles to change work relations and struggles to change the purpose for which we work. In recent years our fascination with the challenge of participatory democracy to hierarchy and bureaucracy has sometimes obscured the related, and more fundamental, challenge of popular economic needs to production for profit. A movement which aims to link collectively directed production to collectively determined economic needs cannot be confined to the workplace alone.

Will we then end up with nothing but another ruling bureaucracy? The crucial point is not to pose this question in either-or terms. Our thinking on this matter may be helped by the study, recently published by Andrew Zimbalist and Juan Espinoza, of 420 publicly operated factories in Chile during the Popular Unity government. They found that the actual level of participation of workers in plant management varied greatly from one factory to another. Where the plant had been nationalized by government decree and a governing structure introduced from the outside, the workers assumed actual collective direction very slowly, if they did so at all. On the other hand, where the plant had a long history of organized struggle and the workers themselves were active in its nationalization, their level of involvement was impressive. Their official representatives in those instances reflected an active base among the rank and file, which made “self-management” a living reality—in determining the product line, as well as in work relations. In other words, the dynamics of real political struggle do not allow us to treat action “from below” and “from above” as mutually exclusive.

There are two important differences between the early kind of worker control and today’s experiments in worker participation and worker management. First, the struggle for workers’ control in the nineteenth century began with the production process—or rather, with discrete elements of the production process. Molders, for example, collectively regulated the technique and the relations among themselves and between themselves and their helpers in the foundries of many different enterprises. At the high point of their craft struggle, they fought for a single set of rules regulating molding in many competing enterprises at once. But those molders did not contest their owners’ ownership and direction of the enterprise as a whole. Even when they were socialists, they envisaged the transfer of the industry to their complete control as an ultimate objective, not as the immediate goal of direct action. Like the legendary British machinist, they drew a chalk line around “their” territory within the boss’s factory, and they demanded that the boss deal with them from the other side of that line.

Today’s struggles around plant closings begin with the front office, rather than with the foundry or some other segment of the production process. They aim first and foremost at financial control of the enterprise, to keep it in business. Although some accounts from plywood or asbestos firms indicate that the advent of workers’ self-management made personal rela-
tions between workers and supervisors less authoritarian and more relaxed, very seldom has the basic pattern of decision-making and supervision inherited from private ownership been quickly and drastically modified. The John Brown Shipyard, occupied by its workers, the Madison Press Connection, set up by strikers, and the British and Irish Steam Packet Company of Dublin, where an imaginative works council "advised" the new managers after nationalization so effectively as actually to take command, are three instances in which control of the shop floor and control of the front office were inseparably connected. Nevertheless, the different starting points of the two forms of struggle are crucial. The primary objective of struggles against plant closings is to keep a job, not to change it.

The second difference is closely related to the first. The point of departure for workers' control struggles in the nineteenth century was the superior knowledge of production processes possessed by some workers. Today's struggles begin with the scientifically managed factory. That means that battles against plant closings, or against take-back bargaining, must embrace much, or even all, of the plant's workforce. They must also devise new styles of organization, just as their predecessors in the epoch of World War I had to do. Today the problem is to cross the lines of the "bargaining units" defined by the NLRB, so as to mobilize technical and clerical employees (and possibly even portions of the local management facing conglomerate owners), along with the production workers. Also like their predecessors of sixty years ago, they must undertake, through self-education, to learn the whole business, so as to overcome the gulf between mental and manual labor, which scientific management has spawned.

But finally, there is an important similarity between the earlier and the present struggles. Craftsmen battling for control of their trades were keenly aware, as I have pointed out, that to formulate and enforce their own rules meant to repudiate and do battle with the ethic of acquisitive individualism. The more far-sighted workers of that epoch also knew that to achieve workers' control meant to uproot the jungle of capitalism itself, along with its ethical code. It is equally evident today that corporations milk branch-plants dry and abandon them, heap "take-back" demands on the bargaining table in the name of productivity, and—ironically—even experiment with "job enrichment" schemes, not to create more of the goods people need, but to maximize their cash flow and their accumulation of still more capital. The struggles of workers and of communities for control over their own destinies in this setting becomes a battle to change the rules of the economic game itself.

NOTES


5. Ibid., pp. 45-46.


7. U.S. Congress, Hearings before the Special Committee of the House of Representatives to Investigate the Taylor and Other Systems of Shop Management (Washington, D.C., 1912), p. 1000.


15. F. F. Corcoran to M.K. Hovey, “Suggestions and Information,” Henry Kraus Papers, Box 9, Archives of Labor History and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University. I am grateful to Steven Sapolsky for bringing this document to my attention.

16. Editor’s note: As this article was going to press, the courts seemed to have overruled the Eazor case, declaring in Carbon Fuel Co. v. UMW (1979) that unions were not “vicariously liable” for the independent actions of wildcat strikers.

17. Editor’s note: See Staughton Lynd, The Fight Against Shutdowns (San Pedro, 1982).