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Workers self-management in the Russian revolution

They did it eighty years ago!

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Workers in the driving seat

Since then factory committees and workers' councils have been the form of organisation thrown up again and again by workers in struggle. In the Spanish revolution of 1936 over 3,000 enterprises were "collectivised" and run by the workers. The Barcelona tram system provides an excellent example of what can be done. Here just days after beating the fascists off the streets the workers put 700 trams back in service instead of the usual 600. These trams carried an extra 50 million passengers at a decreased fare and wages were increased and equalised across the board. This is one small example of what can be achieved when workers do get into the driving seat.

Many other revolts and revolutions have thrown up such committees e.g. Hungary in 1956, France 1968, Portugal 1974 and more recently they made a brief appearance in Romania after the overthrow of Ceaucescu and in Iraqi occupied Kurdistan after the Gulf war. Again and again workers have proved that they can and, given the chance, will take over the running of society and make a far better fist of it than the bosses!

"The committee rooms buzzed and hummed all day and night"

(John Reed, 'Ten Days That Shook the World')

How many times on your job as the clock crawls towards closing time have you thought that you could do the bosses' job and, indeed, do it far better than them. Well not only have workers often thought this, they have occasionally even kicked the bosses out and given it a go. And guess what - it has worked and worked well.

Every good student knows that the Russian revolution took place on October 15th 1917. But this isn't exactly true. Like most revolutions the Russian one is best envisioned as a rolling process with workers gradually taking up more and more control at the expense of their bosses. According to Maurice Brinton in "The Bolsheviks and Workers' Control" the October revolution was;

"Not really so much a bold stroke by the Bolsheviks under Lenin as it was the culmination of months of social revolution throughout the country, the ubiquitous growth of peasants and workers' committees and Soviets (councils of elected delegates from workplaces, army units and neighbourhoods) sapped the power from Kerensky and the Bourgeois provincial government, which surrendered without a fight as its capacity to govern had completely dissolved."

Committees

Factory Committees began to appear in Russia from March 1917 onwards. At first they struggled to limit the control of the bosses and they took up issues such as the eight hour day,

which was won in many cases. The bosses reacted viciously and between March and April 586 enterprises were closed with 100,000 workers locked out.

By August 19th 1917 the government estimated that 5,531 railway workers were involved in the factory committee movement costing the State 11 million rubbles. On the wages front workers continued to fight through both strikes and factory committees for increases. Over the course of the war wages rose by an average of 500% but food costs increased at double this rate (1,109% on average) and this indeed was one of the causes of the February revolution.

The committees soon began to become more adventurous and began to speak not only of curbing the power of the bosses but of actively replacing them in the running of the factories. In April 1917 The Exploratory Conference of Petrograd War Industries declared

”The whole administrative personnel is taken on with the consent of the factory committee...The factory committee controls managerial activity in the administrative , economic and technical fields”

In many cases management was only rubber stamping decisions taken by the committees and was answerable to workers’ mass meetings.

The factory committees reached their high point in the industrial heartland of Petrograd. We know that they continued at least until 1918 as a Menshevik delegate to the First Russian Congress was heard to complain that:

”An anarchist wave in the shape of factory committees and workers control was sweeping over the Russian Labour movement”

Running the Economy

The victors write the history books and for this reason we know little of the details of how workers self-management was implemented and what was achieved. Russia was still a mainly agricultural country and the most organised workers were soon to be devastated by food shortages and the civil war¹ . Raw materials and fuel were scarce and foreign markets were cut off by an international boycott.

We know that the committees realised that co-ordination and integration of production was essential if they were to run the whole economy.

The Resolution of Factory/Shop Commissions (John Reed, appendix to chapter 3) declares:

”The economic life of the country - agriculture, industry, commerce and transport must be subject to one unified plan, constructed so as to satisfy the individual and social requirements of the wide masses of the people”.

In August 1917 the Second Conference of Factory Committees took this so seriously that they resolved to devote a quarter of their wages to support a central Soviet of Factory Committees. After the revolution they made attempts to do this with the All Russian Council of Factory Committees which the Bolsheviks stopped from meeting, believing instead in their vision of control by the State ‘on the workers’ behalf’.

Unfortunately as explained further in the WSM pamphlet ”Stalin Didn’t Fall From the Moon” they succeeded in implementing this vision and by the end of 1918 the committees were no more than a memory.

¹ The factory committees formed the basis of the Red Guards. According to John Reed in Ten Days That Shook the World; ”In the Factories the Committee rooms were filled with stacks of rifles”