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Co-determination and self-determination

Heiner Koechlin

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The constitutional initiative to introduce co-determination in companies was rejected by an unexpectedly large majority in Switzerland. This negative result was the result of massive “no” propaganda from the middle class, but also a relatively large number of workers who did not vote.

Should we conclude from this outcome that the majority of the population is not interested in having a right to co-determination at their place of work, where they spend most of their lives?

Such a conclusion seems premature to me.

It is far more likely that a constitutional paragraph that postulates such a right is too abstract for many people to have any confidence in it. They cannot imagine anything concrete and positive about this right, and not entirely without reason.

In addition, the fear of such an innovation is greater for some than the hope for it. And this is because, having been accustomed for generations to carrying out orders and instructions at work, they do not trust themselves or their colleagues to make appropriate and competent decisions.

It seems easier to them to have an employer who exploits them, but who they can also complain about and demand this and that from, than to take responsibility themselves. The Swiss direct referendum and initiative democracy offers undeniable advantages over pure parliamentarism, which limits the population's right to political participation to periodic elections of representatives.

But on the other hand, this type of democracy leads to the illusion that anything and everything can be achieved by collecting signatures and holding referendums. Many social postulates cannot be implemented in this way, quite simply because a new law or constitutional paragraph cannot establish a social reality.

For decades, the social democratic and communist workers' movement, which has its roots in Marxism, has preached to workers that the only way to achieve emancipation is to gain political power through participation in parliament and legislation or through armed rebellion. At best, the unions have campaigned for higher wages and shorter working hours. Co-determination and self-determination in the workplace is a new discovery for the social democratic and social democratic-union workers' movement.

It is encouraging that many social democrats and unions have abandoned the Marxist nationalization dogma as a result of recent experiences and are turning to the ideas of the anarchists and syndicalists who were once decried as utopians. However, it is somewhat naive to believe that a workforce whose so-called class consciousness has been shaped by Marxist dogma for generations would grab hold of this new discovery with both hands without being prepared.

The bourgeoisie waged its fight against the co-determination initiative out of the correct realization that co-determination leads to self-determination in the same way that constitutional monarchy leads to political democracy. Once the kingship has been riddled with holes by the grace of God, the king will either be killed or reduced to a mere representative and decorative figure.

How can co-determination and self-determination be achieved in work and the economy? The cooperative system, which has been able to establish itself and spread in various areas in our private capitalist society, has been watered down and distorted in many respects by the necessary adaptation to this private capitalist society.

On the other hand, we must not overlook the fact that our private capitalist society no longer has the purely authoritarian face of early capitalism. This change is due, among other things, to the penetration of private capitalist society by a cooperative system based on the principle of self-determination. By means of extensive company and union co-determination, the Swedes have condemned their capitalists to a “constitutional” existence like their king.

There are two historically significant approaches to the radical realization of social self-determination. One was lost in blood and terror, the other is still threatened with extinction today after a hundred years of existence.

In Spain, in 1936, in the course of a revolution triggered by a military coup, around half of agriculture and industry were socialized according to the principle of self-determination. This revolution and its successes and problems have not yet been studied and analyzed enough. Agricultural collectives emerged in the countryside, some with integrated craft workshops and small industrial enterprises. Membership in these communities was basically voluntary. Alongside them, there were independent small farmers everywhere. Their foundation was that of extensive solidarity, which in some places led to the abolition of money and freedom of consumption.

The socialization of industry in the cities was more problematic and fraught with tension. In the first phase, most companies were managed by internally elected councils. This system of company autocracy led to mutual competition and inequality between poor and rich industries, etc., so that critical voices spoke of one capital-

ist being chased away in order to be replaced by many. Successful efforts were therefore made to overcome this company particularism through federal union, municipal and regional coordination bodies.

A development from mere company “collectivization” to what was called “socialization” remained in flux until Franco’s victory. The essence of this revolutionary transformation can best be described by speaking of a precarious balance between industrial, trade union and municipal self-determination. It was spontaneous in the sense that it surprised even the anarchist leaders, who at the time were only concerned with saving the Republic from a military coup.

But it was only possible thanks to the education of a conscious working class in the spirit of anarcho-socialist ideology over a century and beyond, thanks to a tradition that has been rooted in the popular consciousness since the Middle Ages.

Social self-determination in Israel is based on the pioneering work of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe who were imbued with the spirit of liberal socialist tradition. The majority of the agricultural land and a sector of industry are socialized according to the principle of self-determination, either in the form of voluntary communist kibbutzim or cooperative moshavim. The productivity of the socialized economic sector is far greater than its quantitative strength in relation to the country’s overall economy. The opposite is true in forcibly collectivized Soviet Russia, where a high percentage of agricultural production comes from small plots of land granted to collective farmers for their private needs.

These two approaches prove that social and economic self-determination is not only possible, but economically and culturally superior to the private capitalist and state collectivist forms of society. But how can we achieve social self-determination? Both the Spanish Revolution and the Jewish settlement of Palestine are unique events that were forced upon us by certain historical constellations and cannot simply be repeated. Revolution and new

settlement, as different as they are in nature, have the common advantage of finding an empty space in which a new beginning is necessary and the realization of an idea is possible. But they also have in common the need to protect this new beginning against external and internal threats by means of power and violence. Both are threatened not only by the violence of their enemies, but by the spirit of their own power and violence, which contradicts that of free self-determination.

It seems to me that the slow path of development that leads to self-determination via co-determination is preferable to the revolutionary path for another reason: workers and employees would only rarely be able to cope technically and morally with an immediate and sudden takeover of a company. Bureaucratization would have to develop very quickly, and with it new relationships of dependency and social inequalities that would perhaps be more drastic than those that existed under the conditions of the private sector. On the other hand, an increasingly intensive and widespread active co-determination could go hand in hand with increasing technical training and economic insight as well as an education in a sense of social responsibility and in this way lead to not just formal but real self-determination.

Co-determination, however, cannot be initiated by means of a parliamentary resolution or constitutional initiative. The introduction of a corresponding law or constitutional paragraph can be advantageous if co-determination already exists *de facto*. It then serves to legally anchor a social reality. Here and here alone lies the advantage of Swiss direct referendum and initiative democracy. Only a legal principle that is already real in the people’s consciousness has the possibility of finding a majority. The path to co-determination and self-determination must begin in individual companies. For a workers’ movement that has concentrated on gaining political power along the lines laid out by Marxism and has essentially limited its social demands to wage increases and shorter working hours, this is new territory.