

Workers' Control in America

**David
Montgomery**

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**Studies in the history of
work, technology, and
labor struggles**

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Yale University



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To Claude and Edward
from our past for your future

Preface

My thinking and research on questions of workers' control in America has been strongly influenced not only by the lessons in trade unionism imparted by my friends and foes in United Electrical Workers Local 475, Teamsters Local 1145, and Machinists Local 459, but also by many colleagues with whom I have been privileged to discuss them during my sojourn in the academic world. Noteworthy among the latter are James Hinton, E. P. Thompson, and Fred Reid, with whom I discussed the past and present of the working class at Warwick University in 1968 and 1969, and the participants in the international round tables in social history of 1975-7. The late James Matles of the UE and the delegates to the three UE conventions with whom I shared parts of this investigation helped keep my thoughts in touch with reality.

Above all, I am indebted to my companions in the study of working-class history at the University of Pittsburgh: Bruce Laurie, Fred Barkey, Horace Huntley, Ronald Schatz, Mark McColloch, Neville Kirk, John W. Bennett, Joseph White, Maurine Greenwald, Peter Gottlieb, Steve Sapolsky, Shelton Stromquist, Dodee Fennell, Cecelia Bucki, Peter Rachleff, Dale Newman, Clare Horner, James Barrett, Frank Serene, Rob Ruck, Bob Kaplan, Patricia Simpson, Donald McPherson, Paul LeBlanc, Gregory Mihalik, Linda Nyden, Geoffrey Bauman, and Patrick Lynch. Every idea in these essays was influenced by their research and by my conversations with them, though, to say the least, they are by no means in unanimous agreement with the form in which my arguments appear here.

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Finally I would like to acknowledge the publishers' permission for the use of the following articles: "Workers' Control of Machine Production in the Nineteenth Century," which originally appeared in *Labor History*

(Fall 1976), forms Chapter 1 and is reprinted by the permission of the publisher. "Immigrant Workers and Managerial Reform," which originally appeared in Richard L. Ehrlich, ed., *Immigrants in Industrial America, 1850-1920* (University of Virginia Press: Charlottesville, Va., 1977), is used for Chapter 2 by the permission of the publisher. "The 'New Unionism' and the Transformation of Workers' Consciousness in America," which originally appeared in the *Journal of Social History* (Summer 1974), forms Chapter 4 and is reprinted by permission of the publisher. "Quels Standards? Les ouvriers et la réorganisation de la production aux Etats-Unis (1900-1920)" originally appeared in *Le Mouvement Social* (January-March 1978), and is used for Chapter 5 with the permission of the publisher. "Facing Layoffs" first appeared in *Radical America* (March-April 1976); It forms Chapter 6 and has been reprinted by the permission of the publisher and co-author.

D. M.

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Introduction

Two notions, the complexity of modern society and its need for constantly rising levels of productivity, have become something more than common assumptions of contemporary American social thought. They are its basic reference points. From those assumptions we derive, among other things, the belief that an economy based on highly sophisticated technology *must* be characterized by a detailed division of labor and by a professionally trained management, which monopolizes its planning, directive, and supervisory functions. Employees under their command may make only the most trivial decisions, whether they repeat mindless operations on an assembly line or occupy positions which require high technical competence. Responsibility for the desired rising levels of output, we are assured, must rest with experts who alone can comprehend the whole complex process. For all the popularity that “job enrichment” and “participation” experiments have enjoyed from time to time during the last sixty years, American business has held fast to the principle enunciated by President John Calder of the Remington Typewriter Company in 1912: “The last thing a good manager would think of doing would be to make his policies of shop management the subject of a referendum.”¹

From this point of view, it is considered to the benefit of the whole of society that management becomes ever more “scientific,” not only in the sense of attaining increasingly precise knowledge of technology and of the physical nature of work, but also in improving its comprehension of the human relationships involved by means of social scientific research.² Only incurable romantics could chafe at this march of progress. Whatever complaints might once have been uttered against time and motion study or the dilution of industrial skills, Daniel Nelson assures us in his recent study of turn-of-the-century managerial reform, “the new factory environment was a vast improvement over the old, whether viewed from an economic or a social perspective.”³

Even if that improvement bore a heavy price in cultural or psychological impoverishment (which many enthusiasts of “modernization” strenuously deny), the bottom line in the social calculation remains per capita income.

As Douglass C. North put it, in his concise survey of the "new economic history":

The importance of increasing productive capacity cannot be overemphasized. Redistributing income or eliminating depressions would result in less gain for the poor or the whole society than they would derive from an even relatively short period of sustained economic growth. The consequences of a compounded real per capita growth rate of 1.6 per cent per year dwarf all other welfare effects in our history (assuming no change in income distribution).⁴

To be sure, this way of thinking is far from novel. Bernard Mandeville advised his compatriots more than 250 years ago:

Then leave Complaints . . .
T' enjoy the World's Conveniences,
Be Fam'd in War, yet live in Ease,
Without great Vices, is a vain
EUTOPIA seated in the Brain . . .
Bare Virtue can't make Nations live
In Splendor; they, that would revive
A Golden Age, must be as free,
For Acorns, as for Honesty.⁵

Since Mandeville's time not only did Adam Smith offer the world a positive science of producing National Splendor, but Benjamin Franklin, Calvin Colton, Samuel Smiles, Horatio Alger, and a host of lesser publicists taught us to devote our lives to its pursuit. Charles Babbage, Andrew Ure, and Francis A. Walker, among others, also clearly analyzed the role of minute division of labor and the disciplined subordination of those who execute tasks in production to others who direct that work in attaining such a national goal (not to mention personal wealth). Frederick Winslow Taylor and his fellow pioneers in scientific management both showed the way to reduce work itself to such systematic control that the disciplining of the individual worker would supposedly no longer be a problem and claimed that the "mental revolution" involved in their reorganization of work would lay the basis for future social harmony, as well as future wealth. Their influence was evident in the writings of the Chairman of the Board of the American Management Association in the 1920s, Sam A. Lewisohn, who believed, "*The problem of distribution, which has so often been regarded as a drama, with labor and capital as the conflicting characters, turns out to be largely the prosaic task of using wage policies to increase national productivity.*"⁶

To be sure, dissenters from this single-minded cult of productivity and expertise have been both numerous and articulate. Carter Goodrich,

analyzing changes in the management of American coal mines during the 1920s, disputed the idea that "modernity" or "technological complexity" by themselves made inevitable what Harry Braverman was later to call "the degradation of work" in the twentieth century. "It is often said that modern society has chosen efficiency in production rather than richness in working life," wrote Goodrich. To the contrary, he argued that

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 the 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.⁷

Just as Goodrich located the source of the specific way in which industrial work has been impoverished in the quest of corporate leaders for profits, rather than in the mysterious workings of some such imaginary agency as "modernization" or the "preferences of society," so R. H. Tawney heaped scorn on those who were conscious of such social maladies as poverty, but whose pinched imaginations could conjure up no remedy other than "increasing productive capacity." Wrote Tawney:

When they desire to place their economic life on a better foundation, they repeat, like parrots, the word "Productivity," because that is the word that rises first in their minds; regardless of the fact that productivity is the foundation on which it is based already, that increased productivity is the one characteristic achievement of the age before the war [of 1914–18], as religion was of the Middle Ages or art of classical Athens, and that it is precisely in the century which has seen the greatest increase in productivity since the fall of the Roman Empire that economic discontent has been most acute.⁸

It is no mere coincidence that both Goodrich and Tawney wrote from the vantage point of close and sympathetic personal acquaintance with the workers' control movement of the years immediately following World War I. As the essays in this collection argue, industrial workers in America, like their counterparts in Europe, were at that very time vigorously and explicitly challenging management's pretensions and the value system which supported them. Those workers were keenly aware that the "science of work," as Harry Braverman said, was in reality "*a science of the management of others' work* under capitalist conditions," that is, where "labor power . . . is bought and sold."⁹

The first quarter of the twentieth century, therefore, was not only the epoch in which scientific management and assembly line production came to characterize industrial work in all the most advanced capitalist coun-

tries, it was also one in which the alternative of placing the factory under the collective direction of its operatives, clerks, and technicians was vigorously and creatively supported by millions of workers in all those countries.¹⁰

The practice and theory of workers' control, as developed in America during those years, provide the principal subject of these essays. At times the story involved little more than silent and opaque resistance to the demands and innovations of employers. At other times, workers in skilled crafts adopted and fought to enforce collective work rules through which they regulated human relations on the job and wrestled with the chronic menace of unemployment. As the case study of the machinists' union will show, the shop-floor conflict between managements' prerogatives and workers' control both undermined the effort of the National Civic Federation to win corporate executives to its dream of harmonious contractual relations between labor and capital and spurred on the rapid rise of socialism among the workers. The machinists' answer to "scientific management" was to demand a "truly scientific" reorganization of the whole society on a collectivist basis. Furthermore, during the period of World War I and its immediate aftermath, miners, metal workers, garment workers, railroad employees, and others simultaneously forced their employers to rescind various aspects of the new managerial practice and demanded the immediate adoption of their own plans for the reorganization of work relations from below.

Nevertheless, the battle for control of the workplace neither began nor ended in the opening years of this century. Consequently, these essays will also trace various aspects of the conflict before and after that time, always emphasizing the initiatives of the workers themselves, rather than the ways in which they were manipulated by those in authority over them. In the first period treated here, skilled craftsmen of the late nineteenth century, who exercised substantial autonomy in the conduct of their industrial work and the direction of their helpers, upheld an egalitarian moral code in opposition to the acquisitive individualism of contemporary bourgeois society, and militantly supported each other's efforts to impose their own work rules on their employers.

The second period is that of the early twentieth century, in which management tried to systematically assert its mastery over the workplace, and workers responded with an unprecedented quest for social power. The third phase is that of the 1930s and 1940s, when the economy's collapse pulled down the defenses which companies had assiduously built up around their new managerial prerogatives, especially during the twen-

ties so that the government was forced to intervene directly in the reshaping of work relations. The final phase is the present day, when the New Deal formula itself has entered a fatal crisis, and workers' demands and struggles are once again breaching the confines into which managerial authority and the law seemed once to have restricted them. Through all four of these periods, it will be evident, the famous terms "collective bargaining" and "wage and job consciousness" have never been adequate to describe the aspirations of American workers.

Both workers' submergent resistance and their articulate programs have turned out to be causes, as much as effects, of the rapid evolution and diffusion of managerial practice. The forms of personnel management, which have been hallmarks of up-to-date plant administration since the 1920s, especially represent a cooptive and repressive response to workers' initiatives. They cannot be adequately explained simply as a logical extension of Frederick Taylor's "scientific" thinking. Sam Lewisohn showed his awareness of this dialectical relationship, while he linked it inseparably to his own insistence on management's leadership: "The modern workman has, it is true, an awakened imagination. He should be given a larger voice in matters affecting his status and his particular work. *But it is the employer, as the one responsible for administration, that must initiate him into his new role.*"¹¹

Lewisohn's language sounds quite familiar to anyone acquainted with discussions of "the blue collar blues" found in business periodicals of the 1970s.¹² The reason management's concern with wildcat strikes, absenteeism, drugs, and an apparent disappearance of "the work ethic" appeared to be new and surprising at this time, however, is that in the two decades which followed the Second World War all opposition to the cult of productivity and expertise seemed to have disappeared. With wage increases routinely linked to productivity gains and "management prerogative" clauses standard fare in union contracts, Daniel Bell's famous declaration of "the end of ideology" seemed plausible.¹³ Corporate executives, government officials, and union leaders all seemed to be speaking the same language.

In this period social scientists began to lump strikes, manifestoes, unions, revolutionary parties, anarcho-syndicalist leagues and other distinctly working class activity under the condescending rubric "protest." *Industrialism and Industrial Man*, Clark Kerr's handy and familiar compendium of the new vogue, argued that the moment had arrived to discard, not only Marxism, but also the John R. Commons' school of labor history, which had for too long fixed historians' attention on

"protest." What should concern scholars was "a more universal phenomenon affecting workers – the inevitable structuring of the managers and the managed in the course of industrialization." Lest their point be obscure, the authors added: "Not the handling of protest, but the structuring of the labor force is *the* labor problem in economic development."¹⁴

So pervasive was this style of thinking in academic circles that, when the civil rights campaigns and the struggle against the war in Vietnam awakened a profoundly radical consciousness among American students, very few participants in The Movement initially thought of industrial workers other than as inert victims of an alienating system, at best, and "hard hat" champions of the status quo, at worst. Moreover, most student activists rebelled against organization, deliberation, and theory per se, sensing in them the thin edge of their professors' doctrines of "complexity" and "expertise," against which they were in revolt. It was as though they believed, to paraphrase Hamlet, that the only role of thought was to "sickly o'er" the "native hue of resolution."

In quick succession France's May Events of 1968, the Prague Spring, Italy's "Hot Autumn" of 1969 and China's Cultural Revolution, each in its own way, placed the practice and theory of workers' control back again prominently on history's agenda. The ensuing wave of strikes in America, from West Virginia's "Black Lung" stoppage and the national walkout at General Electric onward through Lordstown and the shutdown of the post office system, sharply challenged management's authority and rationality, and often that of established union practice and leadership as well. By the mid-1970s the discontent and alienation of American workers had become favorite subjects of the popular press, business periodicals, and academic conferences. Although that discussion was very informative, it seldom breached the guidelines of the need for abler management. Radical movements which had originated in the New Left, however, turned their attention toward serious analysis of American economic life, and in the process began to orient their activities in much greater measure than before toward the work place, work relations, and the struggles of workers trying to find their way out of capitalist "rationality" into a genuinely rational form and purpose in industrial production.¹⁵

These historical developments have revived interest in both the origins of contemporary scientific management and the alternative ideas and practices advanced by workers in the epoch of its origins. To be sure, workers' demands and organizational forms of 1890 or of 1920 cannot simply be resurrected in 1980. Too much has changed in the basic configurations of economic activity and social life to allow that. On the other hand, a

clearer memory of earlier industrial practices which sprang from the autonomy, social formations, and militancy of workers would not allow us to accept the argument that the technology and work relations of industrial enterprises are simply too complex to be subjected to workers' collective direction. It would certainly remind us that the cult of productivity and expertise enjoyed no popular consensus in the America of the early twentieth century. No one knew better than the workers themselves that they needed a much better standard of living than they then enjoyed, that only hard work and sound productive organization could produce such improvement, and that inefficiency and waste were built into the very fiber of the economic system. Their ideas of how to remedy the situation, however, were very different from those of their employers.

Notes

- 1 *Iron Age*, 89 (April 11, 1912), 913.
- 2 See David F. Noble, *America by Design: Science, Technology, and the Rise of Corporate Capitalism* (New York, 1977).
- 3 Daniel Nelson, *Managers and Workers: Origins of the New Factory System in the United States, 1880-1920* (Madison, Wis., 1975), 164.
- 4 Douglass C. North, *Growth and Welfare in the American Past: A New Economic History* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1966), 3n. For an excellent discussion of the concept of "modernization," see Dean C. Tipps, "Modernization Theory and the Comparative Study of Societies: A Critical Perspective," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 15 (1973), 199-226.
- 5 Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees: or, Private Vices, Publick Benefits*, with a commentary by F. B. Kaye, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1924), I, 36-7.
- 6 Sam A. Lewisohn, *The New Leadership in Industry* (New York, 1926), 199. The italics are in the original.
- 7 Carter L. Goodrich, *The Miner's Freedom: A Study of the Working Life in a Changing Industry* (Boston, 1925), 5-6. Braverman's phrase is in the title of his book *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York and London, 1974).
- 8 R. H. Tawney, *The Acquisitive Society* (New York, 1920), 4-5.
- 9 Braverman, 90.
- 10 See Ernest Mandel, ed., *Contrôle ouvrier, conseils ouvriers, autogestion anthologie* (Paris, 1970); James Hinton, *The First Shop Stewards' Movement* (London, 1973); Carter L. Goodrich, *The Frontier of Control* (New York, 1921, reissued London, 1975); Goodrich, "Problems of Workers' Control," *Locomotive Engineers Journal*, 57 (May 1923), 365-6, 415; Gwyn A. Williams, *Proletarian Order: Antonio Gramsci, Factory Councils, and the Origins of Italian Communism, 1911-1921* (London, 1975); Peter von Oertzen, *Betriebsräte in der Novemberrevolution* (Düsseldorf, 1963); Patrick Fridenson, ed., *1914-1918, L'autre front* (Paris, 1977).
- 11 Lewisohn, 84.
- 12 For a review of much of this literature, see John Zernan, "Organized Labor versus 'The Revolt Against Work': The Critical Contest," *Telos*, 21 (Fall 1974), 194-206.

- 13 Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (New York, 1961).
- 14 Clark Kerr, John T. Dunlop, Frederick H. Harbison, and Charles A. Myers, *Industrialism and Industrial Man* (New York, 1964), 8.
- 15 See Braverman; Noble; Sidney Lens, *The Labor Wars* (Garden City, N.Y., 1974); Barbara Garson, *All the Livelong Day: The Meaning and Demeaning of Routine Work* (Garden City, N.Y. 1975); Jeremy Brecher, *Strike!* (San Francisco, 1972); Stanley Aronowitz, *False Promises: The Shaping of American Working Class Consciousness* (New York, 1973); James J. Matles and James Higgins, *Them and Us: Struggles of a Rank-and-File Union* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1974); Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying* (New York, 1975); Rosalyn Baxandall, Linda Gordon and Susan Reverby, *America's Working Women* (New York, 1976); James Weinstein, *Ambiguous Legacy: The Left in American Politics* (New York, 1975); Gabriel Kolko, *Main Currents in Modern American History* (New York, 1976).