Workplace Democracy Revisited: Labour and Practices of Participation, Workers' Control and Self-Management in Global Perspective. 54th ITH Conference

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Two anniversaries set the agenda for the yearly ITH Conference, the long-standing forum of labour historians. While it was the centennial anniversary of the Russian Revolution last year, this year the anniversaries of the revolutions in Central Europe in 1918 and the movement of 1968 motivated the conference organisers to examine different forms of democratic participation and self-management at the workplace. Thereby, they built on last year's conference on „Revolutions and Labour Relations", as it often were revolutionary upheavals that paved the way for workplace democratization. In the end, it was the revolution around 1918 that led to respective changes in the field of labour law, while the movements around 1968 also had impacts on industrial relations in many countries; today, a fact little known even among historians. Above all, these historical movements involved a variety of specific attempts of self-management at the workplace, either by workers taking over existing capitalist enterprises or by workers establishing new companies.

The range of research on this topic is vast. However, as the conference organisers outlined in their call for papers, most studies – usually oriented towards the political history of the labour movement or alternative company history – would overlook issues regarding labour relations and the inner workings of workplace democracy. Thus, the clarification and categorisation of terms and conceptualisations as well as the examination of actual practices of workers' involvement and decision-making were defined as goals of the conference.

DARIO AZZELLINI (Ithaca), who became known for a range of studies and publications on the history of workers' control and workers' self-management, delivered the keynote lecture. During his historical overview, he defined cooperation as an anthropological constant and foundation of society itself. Accordingly, early forms of associations of production and consumption already existed in antiquity and the Middle Ages. He also included forms of mutual help, as they existed in the guilds and extended into the early labour movement and, finally, constituted the basis of the modern welfare state in some industrialized countries. However, his lecture focused on the 20th century, in which he identified several waves of emergence of self-managed enterprises and workplace democracy. He included the revolutions after World War I as well as the time after World War II, when workers took over enterprises and autonomously resumed production in many countries. Likewise, the national liberation movements in Africa and Asia as well as the overthrow of several dictatorships in Southern Europe and Latin America in the 1970s were fertile ground for respective aspirations and attempts. Since the beginning of the 21st century, a new wave of company takeovers by workers can be observed. However, in contrast to former times, these actions do not result from the strength of an offensive movement, but from a situation of crisis, in times, in which the labour movement is socially and politically fragmented and weakened. Starting in Argentina in 2001, workers have overtaken abandoned enterprises in many crisis-ridden places to save their jobs until today. Frequently, their success depends on whether the respective workers are part of a broader social movement and a solidarity community or whether they find themselves isolated in a hostile environment.

In the following six panels these historical and thematic lines were further developed in 20 contributions during the conference. However, the composition of the panels was partly confusing, since chronological, geographic or thematic criteria were not always obvious. Therefore, some selected contributions will be outlined along the discussed terminology and conceptualizations below and, thus, draw on the conference's objective rather than follow the sequence of panels.

Initially, workers' control was mainly discussed as the control of workers over work process and working conditions, partially also over employment and the allocation of work. These characteristics were already present in the early labour movement and partly drew on older traditions of the craft guilds. ANDRÁS TÓTH (Budapest) and ESZTER BARTHA (Budapest) outlined how the first trade unions in Budapest exerted their control over the local labour market for skilled workers in the beginning of the 20th century. Thereby, they did not only boycott single companies that attempted to evade their control, but also workers that hired in boycotted companies and that were blacklisted for further employment. Unfortunately, both speakers did not enter into the role of trade unions during the Hungarian Council Republic anymore, although workers' control played a central in the revolutions at the end of World War I. Initially understood as control over the plant management by workers' councils, in many places it consequently developed into the attempt that the enterprises are to be taken over by those councils. As RALF HOFFROGGE (Bochum) pointed out, in Germany also comprehensive models for the administration of the entire society by councils were drafted during this process. Also during the 1979 Revolution in Iran similar workplace-related movements emerged, as outlined by PEYMAN JAFARI (Amsterdam) by the example of the Iranian oil industry.

However, workers' control was also a concept of the trade-union representation of interests in enterprises that were still capitalist-run that was, for instance, demarcated against concepts of co-determination. The aim was oriented towards the control of the production process according to the needs of the workers, regardless of operational business considerations, as DIETMAR LANGE (Berlin) outlined on workers' control at FIAT Mirafiori and STAN DE SPIEGELAERE (Brussels) on co-determination in the strategy discussions of the Belgian trade unions.

In turn, co-determination was discussed as a form of participation. Respective legal regulations achieved a breakthrough during the revolutions of 1918/19, as the contributions of HOLGER CZITRICH-STAHL (Berlin) on the development of German labour law and BRIGITTE PELLAR (Vienna) on the case of Austria revealed. A comparison of those two examples – unfortunately presented in different panels – would have been interesting, as the legal provisions in Austria reached beyond the scope in Germany. Also the Chambers of Labour represent a form of institutionalisation of the councils' movement that had an equivalent in the Weimar Constitution that was, however, not implemented anymore. Both speakers urgently appealed that the respective legal institutionalisations remain contested and can at any time be challenged, as the most recent attempts of the new government in Vienna show. Regarding the specific practice of participation, SARA LAFUENTE HERNÁNDEZ (Brussels) emphasised during her presentation of co-determination in European enterprises that the involved trade unionists would rather not see its relevance in the participation in decision-making processes in supervisory boards, in which trade union representatives are always in a minority, but in informal conversations at the sidelines and the access to information. The respective approach, for instance, whether the representation of interests is strategically aligned with the employees in the enterprise or in terms of the competitive logics of social partnership that above all aim at mediating local interests, decisively depends on the respective trade union cultures and the training of trade union representatives. Forms of participation that were no concessions and achievements of the labour movement but introduced by the enterprises as alternative methods of personnel management were also discussed. Thereby, workers were generally granted greater autonomy in performing work activities and regarding their working hours, albeit without being able to determine targets and purpose of their work. With Klöckner-Humboldt-Deutz in Cologne in the 1930's NIKOLAS LELLE (Berlin) presented an example that also found its way into the Nazi discourse on the „Betriebsgemeinschaft". On the other hand, BENJAMIN FERSCHLI (Linz / Vienna) examined contemporary examples in the IT industry and concluded that more autonomy does in no way automatically lead to more

control but rather to employees putting pressure on each other and to increased stress at work, while the production indicators are still determined by management.

Under the term of self-management different examples were discussed, in which workers partly or completely exercised control over the administration of enterprises. This included companies that had been taken over by workers in conflictive processes as well as companies that had been founded by the employees themselves or cases in which existing institutions conferred them the company administration. The notion of self-management certainly is the youngest concept discussed at the conference and became particularly popular during the 1968 movement. It was taken up by the New Left and the Catholic labour movement to conceptualize the vision of democratic socialism as alternative to dictatorships in Eastern Europe and social democratic reformism, as ETTORE BUCCI (Pisa) elaborated in his contribution on autogestion in the discussions in France and Italy. The term itself goes back to the model of self-managed socialism in Yugoslavia that had been conceptualized by a relatively small circle within the Communist Party in contrast to the Stalinist Soviet Union. The experiences in Yugoslavia can certainly be described as the most persistent and, in terms of size, largest experiences of workers' self-management und were, thus, present in several contributions in different panels during the conference. Despite frequent criticism on the limited specific scope of self-management – that above all reached its limits in the power of the Communist Party – also positive aspects were discussed. Thus, JASMIN RAMOVIĆ (Manchester) emphasized that despite all problems self-management did not only ensure a certain influence of workers on the administration of the companies, but also fostered the inter-ethnic cohesion, as it created different opportunities to get together in assemblies and leisure time facilities in the context of the enterprises. This is also reflected in the memory of many former workers and also is the basis for the widespread „Yugonostaliga" in the successor states. Further research on self-managed companies and cooperatives in Central and Western Europe shows that a high degree of democratisation in the respective decision-making processes comes along with an increased degree of civic commitment, for instance, in social and environmental issues; as WOLFGANG G. WEBER (Innsbruck) and CHRISTINE UNTERRAINER (Innsbruck) pointed out for Austria, Southern Germany and South Tyrol and CIAN McMAHON (Galway) for Ireland.

The conference was closed by a roundtable. The discussants ascertained that the used terms cannot always be clearly distinguished from each other and are often used synonymously. Thus, what matters is to examine how and in which context these terms would be used. Furthermore, it was distinguished between the passive involvements of employees, such as in authoritarian systems like fascism or in new management methods, in which employees would have greater autonomy in the performance of tasks but would still only have performing functions, and actual workplace democracy also involving the democratization of decision-making processes. By contrast, the question of property was regarded to be less important, since also enterprises owned by employees could have similar structures as capitalist enterprises, with only the shareholders being different. Moreover, it was clarified that self-managed companies would by no means be subject to an „iron law" of degeneration and adaption to a capitalist environment or would elsewise perish. Until today, many self-managed enterprises successfully stand their ground in central sectors of raw material extraction and industrial production. Likewise, it was emphasized that more workplace democracy does neither lead to a loss of efficiency, not even in capitalist companies. However, it would come along with a loss of power for the middle management, which is why such attempts would only be realized in exceptional cases. Thus, it must be underlined that the conference did not only contribute to clarifying the use of terminology and categories, but also reassessed and partly disproved some important propositions and wide-spread concepts on workplace democracy and workers' self-management. The absence of examples from Latin America, Asia and Africa and examples from field of agri-

culture remain a shortcoming. Maybe the ITH Conference 2019 on „Working on the Land" can field this gap.

Conference overview:

Keynote Lecture

Dario Azzellini (ILR School, Cornell University, Ithaca): Liberating Labour? The Multiple Facets of Workplace Democracy in Space and Time

Panel I: Strike, Occupation, Control: Exercising Workers' Power

Ralf Hoffrogge (Institute for Social Movements, Ruhr-University Bochum): Councils and
Revolution – Workers' Self-Management as Theory and Practice of Political Mobilisation in the German Revolution 1918/1919

Ugnė Marija Andrijauskaitė (Vytautas Magnus University, Kaunas): Taking Matters into Their Own Hands: Lithuanian Bakers in 1920s-1930s

Ettore Bucci (Scuola Normale Superiore, Pisa): Autogestion (1965-1970): A Transnational Sign of Change?

Dietmar Lange (Freie Universität Berlin): Workers' Autonomy and Workers' Control in the Largest European Automotive Plant: The Factory Council at FIAT Mirafiori

Panel II: Involving the Workforce – Changing Workers' Subjectivities

András Tóth (Institute of Political Sciences, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest) / Eszter Bartha (Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest): Role of Craft Unions in Ensuring Practical Ownership of Workplaces in the Pre-War Period in Hungary

Frank Georgi (Centre d'Histoire Sociale du XXème Siècle / Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne): The Iron Law of Self-Management? The Boimondau „Community of Work" Experiment (France, 1941-1971)

Orestis Varkarolis (Nottingham Trent University) / Daniel King (Nottingham Trent University): Co-Evolving Decision-Making for Integrated Self-Management: The Case of the Worker Cooperatives Network of Athens

Panel III: Self-Organizing, Market and Democracy in State-steered Economies in Eastern and Southern Europe During the Cold War

Vladan Vukliš (Archives of the Republic of Srpska, Banjaluka): Self-Management in the Bosnian Ljubija Iron Mines in the early 1960s: A Case Study

Dirk Dalberg (Institute of Political Science, Slovak Academy of Sciences, Bratislava): (Workers') Self-Management as Alternative Model to Socialism with a Human Face and Bourgeois Democracy: The Czech Perspective

Anna Delius (Freie Universität Berlin): Social Necessity or Human Right? Workers and Intellectuals discussing Self-Organization in Alternative Press Publications in Francoist Spain and in State Socialist Poland in the 1960s and 1970s

Panel IV: Labour Participation and Nation Building

Brigitte Pellar (Vienna): „The People are also ready to hold Economic Democracy": Participation, Empowerment and Self-Management in Austria after both World Wars

Nikolas Lelle (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin): National Socialism and the „German Worker"

Jasmin Ramović (University of Manchester): Economy and Inter-Ethnic Cohesion in Former Yugoslavia: Reflections on Socialist Self-Management

Peyman Jafari (University of Amsterdam / International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam): Workers' Control during the Iranian Revolution: The Case of the Oil Industry

Panel V: Institutionalizing Workplace Democracy under Trans/National Regulatory Regimes

Holger Czitrich-Stahl (Förderkreis Archive und Bibliotheken zur Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung, Berlin): The Development of German Labour Law between Revolution and Domestication: The Struggle over Laws as a Means for the Democratisation of Work in the 19th Century

Stan De Spiegelaere (European Trade Union

Institute, Brussels): The Non-Advent of Economic Democracy in Belgium: A Focus on the Christian Trade Union

Sara Lafuente Hernández (European Trade Union Institute, Brussels) / Sophie Rosenbohm (University of Duisburg-Essen) / Mona Aranea (Cardiff University): Forging European Co-Determination: The Experience of Board-level Employee Representatives in European Companies (SE)

Panel VI: Participatory Impulses and the Dynamics of Neoliberal Cooptation

Cian McMahon (National University of Ireland, Galway): The Political Economy of Worker Cooperative Development in Ireland

Benjamin Ferschli (Johannes Kepler University Linz / Vienna University of Economics and Business): Capitalism without Bosses: Control over the Labour Process in the Self-Managing Firm

Wolfgang G. Weber (University of Innsbruck) & Christine Unterrainer (University of Innsbruck): The Specific Practice of Democracy in Democratic Companies and their Psychological and Societal Potential

Roundtable: Classifying Workplace Democracy across Geographic, Cultural and Historical Contexts

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