

WORKERS CONTROL : The Czechoslovak Experience

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The discussion about workers' control or the general extension of industrial democracy raises for most socialists some fundamental problems of power in society; but not, it should be noted, for some of the more recent advocates of the idea. When Anthony Wedgwood Benn, for example, came forward last year with his contribution he was quite explicit in his view that "real workers' control" would fit comfortably within the existing relations of power :

Certainly there is no reason why industrial power at plant or office level should be exclusively linked to ownership of shares, than that political power should have been exclusively linked to the ownership of land and other property as it was in Britain until the "voters control" movement won its **battle**.¹

When European managements, increasingly challenged by their trade union movements, insist that "Involvement is the key to industrial relations"² and when Robert Carr talks about the men and women in industry wanting "greater involvement in the decisions which affect their everyday working lives"³, we do not, of course, expect them to question ownership rights. Commenting, however, on what he terms Mr. Benn's "fairly full-blooded form of workers' control" a *Times* leader writer puts his finger on the dilemma of power :

Mr. Benn does not pause to consider the implication of that for the provision of capital, innovation, and restructuring of industry.⁴

When we turn to the debates among socialists, although the realities of power in capitalist society are at least explicitly recognized, there is often some confusion about the objectives of workers' control demands. The starting point for all, and the end for some, is the assumption that "once we have socialism all will be different". As Bill Jones wrote in a discussion published in *Marxism Today* :

It is only when the workers win political power that we will see an end to our profit society and its replacement by a service society in which the skill, knowledge and ability of our working class is used to the full. Only in such a society will the talents of our people be fully used: only in a new society will we be able to control our environment and obtain the full fruits to which our labour, skill and knowledge entitles us. That, for me, is the meaning of workers' **control**.⁵

These are certainly aims with which we can all agree, but merely to state them fails to advance the argument about how to achieve them or to clarify the concept of workers' political and economic power. A noteworthy feature in the debate is that those who display the greatest caution about using the slogan of workers' control in contemporary society tend to be equally sceptical about implementing it in a socialist economy. Bert Ramelson, a leading spokesman on the subject for the Communist Party, argued in the *Marxism Today* symposium already referred to that industrial democracy was a relative and not an absolute concept :

Only in the sense that the workers as citizens have a political say in determining the economic and social policies of the state, in determining the main lines and indicators of the overall plan and in contributing towards the plant plan, can it be argued that workers' control becomes feasible under socialism.⁶

The assumption here is, of course, that once the powers of ownership are in the hands of a socialist state, direct control, or "self-management" by the workers at the point of production, might conflict with the national interest. Admitting that at this stage of socialism differences between management and workers cannot be expected to disappear, the article sees in the present-day countries of Eastern Europe "a tremendous expansion of industrial democracy" thanks to the powers of the trade unions.

Unfortunately, events in some of the countries Ramelson had in mind hardly confirm this view; witness the accumulated problems, economic and political, that Czechoslovakia was trying to solve under Dubcek's leadership in 1968, and more recently, and more alarmingly, the unhappy events of December 1970 in Poland.

And in Czechoslovakia especially we have seen over the past two years not an expansion but an erosion of the industrial democracy which began to take shape through what has been known as the Prague Spring. The workers councils set up at that time have now been abolished and supremacy of state power in the economy has been reaffirmed.

The Socialist industrial manager, *Rude Pravo* wrote on 29 October 1970,

is empowered by the socialist state to direct and organize production in his enterprise in a qualified manner in accordance with the society-wide aims and in the interests of all members of the community. He performs his management functions within the socialist production relations which have abolished the contradiction between management and labour.

The job of the socialist manager, the article continues, is more demanding than that of his capitalist counterpart, for

whenever he makes an important decision he must consider not only the interests of the collective he leads, but also those of the entire national economy . . . Creating a continual harmony between society-wide interests and the interests of the enterprise collective is the feature of the decision-making process of a socialist manager.

We have here an emphasis on decision-making at the top by a manager who has to "master the art of leading and motivating people correctly and providing the preconditions for developing their working initiative". It was this system of "one-man management" under centralized state control—instituted under very **different** circumstances in the Soviet Union—that had already proved an unwieldy, undemocratic instrument long before 1968; and while the reference to the interests of the collective is perhaps a concession to criticism of rigid centralization, it is still the managerial and not the democratic voice that will decide. Therefore the dilemma of power still exists, and the whole experience of Czechoslovakia provides an interesting commentary on the realities behind the concept of "workers' power".



In the years between 1945 and 1948, when the Czechoslovak Communist Party was a member of a multi-party coalition and accepting a "special road to socialism" the organized working class movement turned as a matter of course to ideas and policies of workers' control in industry. A study of the economy in the immediate post-war years, which was published in 1968, summed up the situation in these terms:

Nationalization as it was carried out in Czechoslovakia in 1945 . . . was implemented by a people's democracy in which power rested with the popular masses . . . the working class had a big say in the management of national enterprises, primarily through works councils and the revolutionary trade unions.⁷

That these works councils were seen as an integral part of the change to public ownership is demonstrated by the fact that they were given official standing by a Presidential decree issued simultaneously with the decrees introducing nationalization in various sectors of the economy; they were set up by the trade unions and operated in many firms that were still in private hands. The trade union movement, through its Central Council, had a voice in appointing the directors of nationalized enterprises. And apart from the works councils the shop floor was represented on the managing boards that administered what came to be known as "national enterprises"; one-third of the members of these boards were elected by employees, **two-**

thirds were nominated by government authorities in consultation with the Central Trade Union Council. "In the light of these circumstances," the author of this study tell us. "factories, mines and other nationalized enterprises can be regarded as having been in socialist ownership from October 1945."

In those early years the works councils also played a revolutionary role in pressing for progress in nationalization. The miners of the North Bohemian coalfield, for instance, sent a delegation from their works councils to Prague in July 1945 with the message that they would not support a government that left the mines to private capital. The Ostrava miners called a strike on the issue, while employees of power stations, banks and other concerns also demanded nationalization.⁸

When, by February 1948, the Cold War tensions projected on to the domestic scene had plunged the democratic coalition into crisis, it was a national convention of works councils that voiced the working class demand for radical socialization of the economy. Yet these works councils which played such a powerful part in helping the Communist Party to emerge victorious from the crisis were not encouraged to go forward from their role of workers' control to socialist industrial democracy; in 1949 they were disbanded and the principle of one-man management, so emphatically reiterated in 1970, was rigidly applied, while the trade unions were gradually incorporated into the power machine.

Speaking in 1968, when the country was trying to bring power down from the abstract heights of "ownership in the name of the working class", Professor Sik described the consequences of that early departure from democracy :

The first ventures in progressive management were abandoned. Czechoslovakia went over to an administrative, centralized type of planning and management evolved in a different environment, under different conditions . . . Enterprises increasingly lost sight of their own wants and those of others, submitting meekly to the arbitrary directives, advice and orders from the top. The authorities at the centre literally confiscated all financial resources in the factories, doling them out as they thought best to investment, raw material supplies and wages. With their monopoly of wisdom they were the ones to decide what should or should not be left to the enterprises down below. And so, in time, the unhealthy principles that could at best be justified in time of war grew into a set and indisputable routine. Orders were passed down from the top about the size of the labour force, the level of gross output, the industrial branches to be given priority. The outcome was that the working people, who were supposed by law to be co-owners of socialist property, in fact lost this sense of ownership.⁹

The image of socialism as a matter of growth rates, construction of heavy industry and of Five Year Plans heroically fulfilled by mobilizing

the economy as one gigantic enterprise, and subjecting the economic processes to the indomitable will of the leaders, was born of the special conditions of the Russian revolution. "Industrialization," as the Czech Marxist Radovan Richta pointed out, "is one of the *preconditions* and *startings points*, rather than the goal of socialist progress."¹⁰ And in their study, which provided part of the theoretical basis for the 1968 Action Programme, Richta and his team showed how the industrial system with its separation of man and the machine, operative labour and management, perpetuated the gulf between the leaders and the led in both the economic and the political fields. The tragedy of Czechoslovakia was that although in 1949 she already possessed many of the preconditions for bridging the gulf, she was forced by the external circumstances of the Cold War and by Cominform pressure dictated by Stalin to take a step back. In the words of political economist Radoslav Selucky:

Paradoxical as it may seem, Czechoslovakia—one of the world's ten most highly industrialized countries—underwent in this period 1949-63 a second phase of industrialization very similar in structure and methods to that of the Soviet Union in the 30s.¹¹

What came to be known as the iron and steel concept of the economy put a stop to the promising ventures in flexible planning and workers' control belonging to the "special road".

The Czechoslovak working class movement, however, embarked in good faith on the new course. The enthusiasm of the rapid and successful post-war reconstruction period was, for a time, injected into what seemed the surest road to the socialist goal. For this the workers were willing to put their faith in the advantages of centralized management, the mobilization of resources and manpower, and the planing by decree. They could not know what even the economists began to understand only when the operation failed to yield the promised fruits—that is, that this type of *extensive* growth (building more factories, recruiting more manpower) could not, in a relatively advanced economy, achieve what was required; as soon as the industrial potential had been created, only *intensive* use of capacities, technological progress and free play for "the skill, knowledge and ability of the working class" could be effective. Nor could the Czechs and Slovaks know that, in addition to economic stagnation (which despite partial reforms in the late fifties was to be obvious to all by the winter of 1962-3), the course adopted, far from liberating the working class, would subject them to a political system matching one-man management in industry with one-man rule of the whole country, with both managers and the labour force figuring as cogs in the political and economic machine.

With the abolition of democratic control at the point of production one of the main ways of consolidating the dictatorship of the proletariat was seen to be the promotion of workers from the shop floor to positions in the economy and administration. One-year training courses were organized, but the majority received much shorter training for their new jobs, or none; it is estimated that during the early 1950s some 100,000 workers went into managerial, administrative and technical occupations.¹² The subsequent decade was to show that despite this seemingly admirable and democratic move, the "promotion" of individuals did not add up to workers' power—a discovery not surprising, perhaps, to British workers who have too often seen what can happen to trade unionists when, cut off from democratic control by their members, they are elevated to positions of power in industry and the administration. Although there were, of course, worker managers who did an excellent job, in many cases the efficiency which was supposed to be the reason for rigid one-man management was lost, for as economic difficulties continued lack of managerial skills proved a serious drawback; in 1953 some 60 per cent of enterprise directors had had no special training for their jobs and less than five years experience in them, while by 1962 only 29.1 per cent of enterprise and works managers matched up to the standards of qualification which had, by then, been prescribed as desirable. And this ill-conceived "working-class policy" deprived the country of one of its great initial advantages—a strong body of economists and technical intelligentsia willing to work for a socialist government (before February 1948, 35 per cent of the directors of industrial concerns had been members of the Communist Party)—men whose skills and experience were often wasted.

Bureaucracy flourished under this system, while the rank-and-file workers, despite the social prestige, job security and other undoubted advantages they enjoyed, were—as the most numerous section of the population—also the worst sufferers when the economic and other defects of the system made themselves felt; and both at work and as citizens they were excluded from the vital processes of decision-making. A report of 1969¹³ shows that when the population was classified according to selected indices of social status, "participation in management" (at work and through leisure-time political involvement) was confined almost exclusively to the two top strata (comprising respectively 2.3 per cent and 8 per cent of men of productive age) and these consisted of intellectual occupations with a strong emphasis on the middle-aged. (The top political and governmental office-holders were excluded from the survey).¹⁴

As another indication of the state of affairs in the late sixties we may quote the findings of a poll carried out among leading Party and

Government officials and directors of big enterprises in a district of southern Bohemia in April 1968 (that is, before the Dubcek reforms had got under way, but when people could speak freely). To the question whether power in the country rested with the working class only 54.4 per cent answered, yes; and 50.8 per cent agreed with the proposition that power was limited to the few, the working class worked but did not govern.¹⁵

As an epitaph on the era of "socialist industrialization" the words of a worker speaking in 1968 are revealing; he was referring to proposals sent from his plant to the Communist Party's Twelfth Congress in 1962: "When we steel workers pointed out that we were turning out steel for the scrap heap, they nearly put us in jail because, they said, we were throwing mud at our socialist industry . . . When we protested again about the 'steel concept' and showed it could only lead to bankruptcy, the people in Prague jumped down our throats — 'Aren't you ashamed,' they said 'you're steel workers and you criticize the steel concept. You're reactionaries.' Only I don't have to be dumb just because I'm a steel worker. What's the use of a thriving steel industry if the whole Republic is going to rack and ruin?"¹⁶ That, of course, was the voice of a politically conscious man, and although there were many such in all spheres of life, indifference to what "they" were doing in the seats of power was for many years an all too common reaction.



Tempting as it is to present the workers council movement of 1968-9 as a political revolt against Stalinist bureaucracy, the reality is more prosaic. The primary concern was to make the economy work and the self-management idea was, in fact, a logical extension of the economic reforms first mooted in the early sixties.

By 1962 it had become painfully clear that extensive industrial growth and the rigidly centralized system of planning and management associated with it had led the country to a dead end. Economists set to work on proposals for radical change, involving a switch to intensive operation; the spokesman for the proposed reforms was Professor Ota Sik, then a member of the Communist Party Central Committee. Subsequently, some well-meaning critics on the Left had suggested that the measures involved "a return to the market"; we should note in passing that nothing could be further from the truth. To bring dynamism into the system, the economists argued, it was necessary to allow *enterprises*¹⁷ to operate as genuine undertakings in a market economy controlled by overall planning. In

place of commands from the top the state would make extensive use of indirect pressures designed to create an atmosphere in which the interests of enterprises would tend to coincide with the national interest. This concept was at the very heart of the endeavour not merely to revitalize the stagnant economy but, more fundamentally, to advance from the simple negation of capitalism, represented by state ownership of the means of production, towards ownership in the hand of the "associated producers", to use the words of the *Communist Manifesto*. Perhaps only those who have lived in the system can fully appreciate what it means when "there is no link between producer and consumer to transmit a positive or negative verdict on the expenditure of effort by millions of people".¹⁸ As long as commodity production persists, that link is provided by the market as an instrument of the plan; without the existence of the socialist market as a democratic regulator, no amount of workers councils or decentralized planning can bridge the gulf between the producers, consumers and the power structure.

The concept of enterprise operation in a socialist market economy—which, of course, is not comparable to the Soviet NEP because it applies to a fully socialized economy—goes back, in a sense, to the point in Czechoslovakia's history before workers' control was abolished and before decision-making was elevated to higher spheres. It presupposes a democratic political system which precludes bureaucratic dictation of the overall plan.

Although the political implications were not spelled out in the proposals advanced by the economists, it took no great theoretical knowledge for the Party leadership of the day to appreciate the danger to the monolithic structure on which their personal power rested. Forced, however, to take some steps to salvage the economy, they ultimately accepted a watered down version of the original proposals, to be introduced without undue haste. Full implementation was supposed to date from January 1967, but features of the old system were still retained.

The result was, not surprisingly, disappointing and did much to discredit the whole idea. Although the more forward-looking and politically active among the industrial workers and technical intelligentsia were determined, nonetheless, to try and make a success of the venture, for many workers this seemed to be just one more reorganization from above and there was quite natural concern about possible redundancies, stricter demands on skills and so on. Insofar as this compromise reform did delegate responsibility to the enterprises, it was managements and not the workers who had to make the decisions. However, all through the preceding discussions the feature of the proposals that had been universally popular had been the demand for

improvement in management skills, replacing the politically reliable amateurs by trained men.

Progress already made during the sixties in improving the level of management had been generally welcomed, although many people grumbled when new brooms in the shape of the technical intelligentsia presumed to disturb the even tenor of their inefficiently organized labours. And the situation was complicated by the efforts of the regime to sow discord between the workers and the intellectuals—the working class being commonly identified with manual workers only, with "origin" by birth holding pride of place. It is a tribute to the political maturity of the Czechoslovak workers that when it came to the point—in 1968—they not only joined forces with intellectuals, but also refused to be baffled by the allegedly knotty problem of technocracy versus democracy, a matter we discuss below in describing the development of the workers councils.

To understand both the limitations of the working class attitudes in those years of chronic crisis, and also the soil from which the experiment in self-management ultimately sprung, it should be realized that the dissatisfaction in the workshops was due not solely to a decline in the standard of living and the irritations of an ineffective economy; there was also a sense of frustration peculiar to a system that was socialist at least in name. Workers under capitalism faced with such a situation would have fought back against the bosses. But for the workers of Czechoslovakia there was no easily identifiable enemy who could be held responsible. The fact of socialization and the constant assurances that they were indeed the owners of the nation's wealth had kept alive some sense of involvement in the conduct of affairs and so, when things went wrong, many felt, over and above a natural concern about their own lives and jobs, a frustrated desire to help put matters right. The "participation" through trade union committees, production conferences and so on, especially in the early years, had given thousands of devoted volunteers some insight into the problems of their everyday working lives—although as one who has experienced all this at shop floor level this author can confidently venture the opinion that shop stewards in capitalist Britain exert a greater influence on working conditions than Czechoslovak trade unionists did under the "directive administrative" system of what purported to be socialism.

While these attitudes help to explain the widespread faith in skilled management as the cure for economic disorders, they were also a potential source of more direct action. It is interesting to note that when the first steps were being taken in applying the new economic measures some groping attempts were made by employees to take matters into their own hands at plant level. Thus in 1966, in a big

Prague engineering works, the trade unions and Party committees were forced by pressure from below to go beyond the customary limits of formal participation to intervene in management, even setting up temporary bodies of a self-managing type to cope with a crisis threatening their enterprise.¹⁹

In the political atmosphere of the day, however, these were isolated ventures; at that time, as again after the fall of Dubcek,²⁰ anything which smacked of self-management was officially regarded as an attack on state power. The people of Czechoslovakia were learning to their cost that the reforms for which the economy was crying out were cramped and confined by the political interests entrenched in the seats of power, while it was equally clear that the most perfect democratic system would be doomed if it failed to cure the economic ills.

The opportunity to escape from the dilemma was offered in January 1968. Throughout the preceding year the political and economic pressures had been building up to crisis point and the target of criticism was the man who personified the "one-man management" of society—Antonin Novotny, who since 1957 had combined the posts of President and First Secretary of the Communist Party. It was the decision taken by the Party Central Committee in January 1968 to replace Novotny in the post of Secretary by Alexander Dubcek that released the pent up opposition and precipitated the events now known as the Prague Spring.

Discussions that had been going on more or less quietly and discreetly were now conducted openly at meetings and through the mass media. While democracy in the political sense was the chief topic during the first exciting months, the economic reform was not ignored. Ideas about industrial democracy which the economists had seen theoretically as a necessary component if their schemes were to advance socialism, as they hoped, and some of the thinking that had been going on in the higher echelons of the trade unions could at last be confronted with the opinions current in the factories. At a pragmatic level the views coincided: if enterprises were to have powers of decision, the people who would feel the consequences in their pay packets should be able to take a hand in that decision-making. In these simple terms the point was made in the Communist Party's Action Programme of April 1968:

The economic reform will increasingly place the working communities of socialist enterprises in the position of bearing the direct consequences of good or bad management. The Party therefore considers it essential that those who bear the consequences should exert an influence. There is a need for democratic bodies in the enterprises with well-defined powers in relation to management. The directors and top executives should be res-

possible to these bodies for overall performance and would be appointed by them,

The debates before and after publication of the Action Programme touched on more fundamental issues as well, most important, that of ownership. Previously it had been the state, ostensibly in the name of the people, that had appeared in the role of owner of all nationalized enterprises (others, including co-operatives, had been so hemmed in by regulations that there had been little scope for "group ownership" to assert itself). The directors of these establishments had been in effect civil servants answerable to the state. But the economists assumed that under the new system the state, which would exercise control, would have to be separated from the enterprise sphere. To whom, then, would the directors be responsible? Now a socialist enterprise, it was argued, like any other firm, consists of three parts—employees, management and owner (the owner being whoever bears financial responsibility and the risk of the undertaking). Insofar as the state relinquished the role of direct and exclusive owner its place could be taken in a nationalized concern either by management (the technocratic or managerial concept) or by a workers council (the democratic concept). Whereas before 1968 the reform could not go beyond the technocratic measure of giving more power to managements, the Action Programme came out in favour of the democratic alternative, which was what Professor Sik and the other authors of the reform had had in mind.

If, however, the enterprises were to operate as self-governing units would this mean breaking up state ownership into group ownership? Would, in fact, the enterprises be handed over to enterprise ownership? This, in the opinion of many people, would mean relinquishing one of the advantages of socialism, that is, the concentration of the entire production process in public hands. Though finding much of interest in the Yugoslav system, Czechoslovak economists never set out to copy their model. In general, with differences of emphasis, the argument on this subject ran as follows: Social ownership is never, even under the most rigid centralism, an undifferentiated whole, it can only be expressed through its parts. The reform would encourage elements of group ownership that would help to overcome the situation where property belonged "to everyone and to no one", but the economy should not be split into separate units of enterprise ownership. Overall social ownership would operate through the groups to the benefit of the group and of society as a whole. Brought down to the realm of practical operation these considerations led to various proposals about the composition of the self governing bodies. Some urged caution—and this was the official view—suggesting that it

would be wise to have some outside members of enterprise councils (specialists, representatives of local and consumer interests, banks, the firm's suppliers) as guardians of the wider interests. There was disagreement between those who thought these members should be democratically elected by the enterprise personnel and those who favoured nomination by management or even governmental authorities.

The issue of democracy and expert management was hotly debated. The less democratically-minded suggested giving the managerial side a strong foothold in the workers councils to prevent the untutored masses from riding roughshod over the province of the experts. Others, including many trade unionists, saw the solution in a careful definition of managerial and council competency. When ultimately the movement came into being, however, the prepared schemes were often swept aside.

For the trade unions the economic reform had meant something of an upheaval even before the events of 1968. As long as orders came from the top they had carried out their job of transmission levers in orthodox Stalinist style, with defence of their members' interests taking second place. Even the partial measures of reform, however, made this position more and more untenable. The unions found themselves under crossfire—on the one hand they were not serving their members (the question, "What does one get out of it?" had long been heard among the rank and file), on the other hand they were accused of blocking progress by trying to protect established practices and inefficient concerns. It took political change and the infusion of new blood in the trade union leadership to bring clarity to the discussion.

Previously, while not turning down the idea of some kind of employee involvement in management, the official union view had been, as it is in Britain, that this would be the prerogative of the unions themselves. The new standpoint that emerged from the rethinking of the spring of 1968 was that the trade union branches and the workers councils should each perform a different job. The argument for this is interesting because it ties in with the discussion on ownership mentioned above.

People working in a socialist enterprise, it was said, have a dual status—on the one hand they are employees, on the other they share in social ownership (whether in the group or the wider sense). The two sides cannot be satisfactorily represented by a single body. Therefore, the employee status should be the concern of the trade unions, while the workers councils would fulfil the ownership function. Implicit in this approach is the realization that what we call the workers' side in Britain could not withdraw from decision-making, should a conflict arise, to assume its defensive role in confrontation with management

or employers. But the benefits of the trade union role in industrial democracy were not discarded; the unions did a great deal to prepare the ground for setting up workers councils—indeed, some two-thirds of the preparatory committees for councils were formed on their initiative.²²



In the spring months of 1968, then, people in industrial and other enterprises began to explore the idea of setting up democratic bodies to take a hand in management; the move was seen as a necessary part of the economic reform which, it was hoped, could now be operated without the compromises imposed in the Novotny era.

Apart from the statement in the Action Programme, there was no firmly organized lead from the top, so that it was a matter of local initiative whether anything was done or not. Where interest existed preparatory committees were set up to sound out opinion in the workshops, examine the practical aspects and, if things seemed favourable, to arrange for workers councils to be formed by due process of democratic election. Figures based on inquiries in 93 enterprises where preparatory committees had been formed during 1968 show that the trade unions were the initiators in about 65 per cent, Communist Party branches 17 per cent, managements 14 per cent, groups of technicians 2 to 3 per cent and groups of workers around 1 per cent of cases.

In view of the conflicting attitudes on the role of the projected councils, official quarters tended to slow down these developments. Nevertheless, reports from government departments during the summer showed some 350 enterprises expected to be operating with workers councils by January 1969. Interestingly enough, while the formation of preparatory committees had reached a peak in June and July and then showed a downward trend, the number of actual councils set up by these committees soared in the month following the invasion by the Warsaw Pact countries to a high point that was only exceeded by a new peak in December; many reports show that the feeling in the factories was that in the face of such a crisis it was even more important to assert their democratic rights. A decline in the graph of council formation after September is accounted for by a Government pronouncement in October calling a halt until legislation had been passed (with the fall of Dubcek in April 1969 this was shelved). The opponents of industrial democracy, especially among top-ranking bureaucrats, began to take courage and succeeded in scotching plans in some places or even in disbanding some existing councils. All the more remarkable, then, is the new rise in December,

evidently due to the determination at trade union branch level, encouraged by a still progressive leadership. The net result was that at a conservative estimate (from trade union sources) 120 workers councils were in existence by the beginning of 1969 and they represented some 800,000 employees, or about one-sixth of the labour force in the productive industries. At a delegate meeting held in January, with notable lack of publicity or official support, there were 101 councils and 64 preparatory committees represented. A publicity black-out then prevented further figures being published, but repeated calls from Party and Government for a halt until legislation had been passed suggests that in the first half of 1969, at least, the movement had not been stifled. Finally, the article in *Rude Pravo* on 22 July 1970, ringing the death knell of the councils, mentions the figure of 300 still operating in June 1969.

There was of course little time for the success of the venture to be judged in the field of performance. But surveys and statistical information on the election, membership and powers of the councils did appear in the first half of 1969. In reading the reports one is struck by the varied picture given, suggesting that this was a voluntary movement refreshingly free from regimentation, while also reflecting the divergent attitudes and the pressures at work. Most of our information is based on data from 95 workers councils, 69 in the manufacturing industries, 26 in other sectors. The bulk of the membership consisted of people elected from the shop or office floor, their share ranging from two-thirds to four-fifths of all council members. With many variations, the balance was made up of *ex officio* members from management and other departments within the enterprises, of people nominated by directors and, exceptionally, by government departments. Outsiders, specialists and others, were very much in a minority; in some cases they were nominated, but more often they were co-opted by the elected councils, and their voting rights on purely domestic matters were usually restricted. In brief, the evidence indicates that while considerations of expert know-how and of safeguarding the wider interests were not ignored, the emphasis was on the democratic element.

A review of the conduct of the elections shows a degree of freedom remarkable to anyone acquainted with how such matters were handled in the past. Nominations came in from all organizations within the enterprises—the trade unions, Communist Party branches, youth organizations—and directly from working groups on the shop floor, in departments, offices and so on. The latter and the unions each accounted for one quarter of the nominations, only 8 per cent coming from managements and 10 per cent from Party branches. No outside bodies were allowed to put forward candidates. From a total of 3,622

candidates in the 95 cases investigated, 1,421 were elected. Eighty-three per cent of the people eligible cast their votes.

Before looking at information on the membership of the councils it will be useful to see what powers they possessed. A survey of their constitutions, made in 1969, shows that in all cases they were responsible for appointing the enterprise director and top management staff; this in its very procedure was a more revolutionary step than appears at first sight because, in many cases, posts were advertised, candidates were interviewed and the selection made on merit—something unheard of in the days of "cadre policy" dictated from the top. As an example we may cite the Skoda Works. When the wind of change was blowing in the summer of 1968 the General Director resigned and his place was taken by a member of the management staff. In September a workers council was established. In *Rude Pravo* of 18 December 1968 we read: "The Workers Council of Skoda, in accordance with its constitution approved by the Ministry of Heavy Industry, decided at a meeting on 31 October to advertise the post of General Director." Ten applications were received—one from a Deputy Minister. The candidates submitted references and statements about how they envisaged doing the job, they were given psychological tests and interviewed by a special committee of council members. A short list of five having been drawn up, the candidates came before a full council meeting where they spoke and answered questions. The meeting then voted by secret ballot; by 22 out of 29 votes the man who had been holding the post since August was elected and engaged on a six-year contract.

The councils also fixed the director's salary and the share of enterprise earnings that he and the executive staff should draw; they had powers of decision on such matters as mergers with other enterprises, dividing into smaller units or liquidating a concern. In general it was their business to decide the overall lines of development and the principles of operation (usually in the light of proposals put forward by the enterprise director), and to keep control of financial policy, including the distribution of profits after paying the prescribed charges to the state (an important attribute of ownership, entirely lacking under the old system when the bulk of enterprise funds were appropriated by the government). Some constitutions gave the workers councils full powers of decision on these matters, others allowed for consultative powers on proposals put forward by management, in which case, however, they did have a right to veto projects that might conflict with the workers' interests. In short, the survey revealed two main trends in the constitutions, the one subordinating management to the democratic body on overall matters of policy, the other giving greater rein to management decision. The day-to-day direction of

production was, however, always left to the qualified staff appointed by the councils. In general, we find here, too, a predominance of the democratic over the technocratic or managerial concept.

Moreover—and this is the most striking fact to emerge from an analysis of the elected membership of the **95** councils—the vexed question of whether interference by laymen might not run counter to efficient management was resolved in a remarkable way: **70.3** per cent of the council members turned out to be technicians, **24.3** per cent were manual workers and **5.4** per cent administrative staff. Since at least two-thirds of the voters were manual workers, many must have cast their votes for candidates who were technicians. Czechoslovak commentators said that this was a unique feature, not found in Poland or in Yugoslavia, and surprising in a country where, as we have noted, antagonism between workers by hand and brain had been diligently fostered by the Novotny regime; it was seen as a protest against the amateurism of the old system. Figures for skill and education follow the same pattern: of the worker members, **68** per cent were recorded as highly skilled (in the metal-working trades **85** per cent), while **55** per cent of the technicians were highly qualified; **26** per cent of council members were university trained, **26** per cent had higher secondary education.

There might be reason to fear an undemocratic or technocratic element in this and obviously one would want to see what the workers electorate felt after, say, a year's operation. But in a country where the economic base for class distinctions between manual worker and technician had long since disappeared, where higher education was not the prerogative of a privileged class, and all were equally in the position of wage earners (with, moreover, surprisingly small wage differentials), it looks as if the voters knew what they were doing. In any case, most important was probably the democratic climate of opinion; in elections to trade union committees at plant level there had never been this emphasis on skill and education, yet in an authoritarian set-up they were only too often bureaucratic. And people on the spot, evidently aware of the possibility that the workers councils might, in their turn, become a new, self-managing bureaucracy, were already suggesting ways to ensure they should not become alienated from their constituents: by making certain, for instance, that there was a steady turn-over of membership.

The election results also showed that people voted for candidates they knew well and who knew the enterprise concerned and its problems. By length of employment in the given enterprise the members were divided as follows: **72** per cent with **10** and more years employment, over **50** per cent with **15** and more years in the firm and only **4** per cent less than 5 years. But age was not equated with wisdom

and experience—71 per cent of the successful candidates were between the ages of 35 and 49 years.

It is worth recording that the political composition of the councils also produced a surprise. There had been some idea that popular revulsion against the bureaucratic methods employed by the ruling party in the past might lead to a majority of non-Communists being elected. In fact, all 83 councils where the political structure was recorded included Communists, in 44 they were a majority, in 6 the balance was even, and in 33 non-Communists predominated. In all, 52 per cent of members were Communist Party members, and only in the building trades (49 per cent) and agriculture (37 per cent) were the figures below the average, interestingly enough both sectors where a higher than average proportion of manual workers and a lower of the highly educated were elected.

Among the dramatic events of 1968 and 1969 the workers council movement was not, of course, in the forefront of public interest and not everyone was informed about its purpose. Nevertheless, we have some pointers to the state of public opinion, including two polls conducted by the Institute for Public Opinion Research,²² one in July 1968 (nation-wide sample of 1,610 people questioned), the other in May 1969 (sample 1,603). To the question, "Do you consider the establishment of workers councils in the bigger enterprises would or would not be useful?" the affirmative answers were 53.3 per cent in the first and 59.1 per cent in the second poll; opinion against the councils was 9.9 per cent in the first and 3 per cent in the second, while the don't knows were 33.1 and 35.1 per cent respectively, the balance being made up of miscellaneous other views. We have given these results in some detail to bring out the interesting point that the swing between July 1968 and March 1969 in favour of the self-management idea was at the expense of the opposition which, as more detailed figures show, consisted in July 1968 in part of technocratically inclined people; many of the latter, after the shock of the August invasion, were to change their minds about industrial democracy. Support was strongest in Czechoslovakia's Black Country in northern Bohemia (70 per cent in 1969), followed by Prague (67), itself an important industrial centre.

It should be pointed out that the workers councils established or in course of formation were in enterprises often comprising several factories or plants, some of them the biggest concerns in the country. For instance, the Skoda Works in Pilsen, a stronghold of the movement, elected from 113 candidates a 29-member council; this worked out at one member to 1,500-2,000 employees, and some had to travel from the firm's branches in faraway Slovakia to attend meetings. An analysis of the press reports, however, showed that it was clear that

the pattern varied considerably according to the size and nature of the undertakings. The first council in transport (Czechoslovak Road Transport, Usti nad Labem) had 24 members elected by 11 depots with a total of 6,200 employees.

Rude Pravo of 3 October 1968 published an interview with the chairman of the newly-formed workers council, the enterprise director and the Party chairman at Slovnaft, the big chemical combine in Bratislava, Slovakia. Here they had taken time in preparing the ground—responding in April, to the idea put forward in the Party's Action Programme, they finally held the elections to their council at the end of September, after the August invasion. All employees at work that day—4,285 of them cast their votes, electing 15 council members from different departments (5 manual workers, 10 technicians); five co-opted members from outside the firm included the director of the other big chemical works in Bratislava; five members were to be appointed by government authorities—making a total of 25. In its make-up, then, this council tended towards the official concept of limited or managerial democracy, and its chairman, too, spoke in the interview of partnership with management; there was to be joint decision-making on investment policy, technological development and so on. The first meeting had discussed and approved proposals from the directors of chemical enterprises in Slovakia for the development of the industry in the region. The feeling was that there would now be scope for new ideas and expansion that had been stultified under the old system.

There was a danger, of course—especially in the big enterprises or where the managerial concept predominated—that council activities would be rather remote from the shop floor. In late 1968 and early 1969, when self-management could still be openly discussed, the argument was being voiced that the next step would be to have councils at plant level, too, and although this was not the government view, the movement would probably have advanced in that way. For short-lived as it was, this was a genuine movement, enjoying, as we have seen, considerable public support. Of all the features of the "Prague Spring", this essentially working class undertaking, though perhaps slow to develop, was among the longest to survive. Today we can only surmise what potentialities it possessed; but in the summer of 1968, when the prospects for both economic and political democracy seemed fair, Professor Sik, for instance, ventured the suggestion that the workers councils might one day prove to be the nucleus for a new self-governing system in the political as well as the economic field—producer groups might be associated in a chamber of Parliament, thereby exercising more fully the power deriving from ownership.

Of course, as things are this is speculation. Nor, it should be noted,

did the Czechoslovak experiment ever presume to offer a model for other countries. The workers council movement emerged in the special circumstances of a country where the relations of production were entirely non-capitalist, but where owing to the bureaucratic barriers that were holding back an advance to fully socialist relations there was a tragic wastage of human potential. In examining the implications of workers' control both as an instrument of attack on capitalism and as a means for enabling the skill and talents of the working class in the broadest sense to be fully used in a future socialist society, socialists in other countries can learn much from the post-war history of Czechoslovakia. It should be borne in mind, however, that the course taken by Czechoslovakia cannot be attributed solely to Cold War pressures. It has been pointed out by Czechoslovak historians²⁵ that whereas in 1945-8 there were ideas about a special road to socialism, no theoretical or programmatic statement was ever made suggesting that any model was envisaged at the end of the road other than that evolved in the very special circumstances of the Soviet Union. True, Yugoslavia did choose a different model, but it should not be forgotten that up to 1950 she was following the Soviet example far more rigidly than Czechoslovakia; it was the upheaval of the Cominform excommunication that led her to question the dogmas and begin dismantling her Stalinist structure. The special circumstances of a backward economy and a multinational state have made Yugoslavia's path exceptionally difficult. The strategy of socialist revolution aiming from the outset to overcome the tensions and contradictions inherent in industrial society and to place power truly in the hands of the workers by hand and brain ~~has~~ yet to be worked out.

NOTES

1. *New Politics: a Socialist Renaissance*, Fabian Tract, 1970.
2. *The Times*, 8 September, 1970.
3. *The Times*, 28 January, 1971.
4. *The Times*, 5 September, 1970.
5. *Marxism Today*, March, 1969, p. 96.
6. *Ibid.*, October, 1968, p. 299.
7. *The Czechoslovak Economy 1945-1948*, Acta Oeconomica Pragensia, State Pedagogical Publishing House, Prague, 1968, p. 17.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 13 (footnote).
9. Television talk in Prague, summer 1968.
10. Radovan Richta, *Civilization at the Crossroads*, International Arts and Sciences Press, New York and Prague, 1969, p. 50.
11. Radoslav Selucky, *Czechoslovakia, the Plan that Failed*, Nelson 1970, p. 28.
12. *Revue dejin socialismu* (Review of the History of Socialism), Prague, Special Number 1968, from an article on "Development of the Structure

and Position of Czechoslovak Industrial Workers and Technicians in the 1950s.²⁹

13. *Polžtžka*, Prague, 13 March, 1969, p. 15.
14. An account of the sociological and statistical methods employed in this survey is published in *Co-existence* (Pergamon Press), January 1968, pp. 7-16. The results quoted are from *Reporter*, Prague, 15 May, 1969, p. 23.
15. *Reporter*, Prague, 6-13 November 1968, p. 24.
16. *Politika*, 31 October 1968, p. 35.
17. Enterprises are the basic units of the Czechoslovak economy, often consisting of several plants, works etc.
18. *Ibid.*, Selucky, p. 38.
19. See *Odbory a spolecnost* (Trade Unions and Society), 4/69. This number of an official journal of the Czechoslovak Trade Unions was devoted to the subject of enterprise self-management. Much of the information in the latter part of the present article has been drawn from its pages, but to avoid a multiplicity of footnotes, references to the separate items are not given.
20. See *Rude Pravo*, 22 July 1970, "Why the Workers Councils Were Abolished".
21. *Odbory a spolecnost*. The further figures on workers councils are also from this source.
22. *Reporter*, 24 April, 1969.
23. See "Some Problems Regarding the Czechoslovak Road to Socialism" by Josef Belda in *History of Socialism Yearbook 1968*, Prague, 1969.