

**THE DEBATE ON  
WORKERS'  
CONTROL**

**Ernest Mandel**



*Howe's Collection*



**Ernest Mandel**

# **The Debate on Workers' Control**

**(December 1968/January 1969)**

---

From **International Socialist Review**, [Vol.30 No.3](#), May-June 1969, pp.

Marked up by [Einde O'Callaghan](#) for the **Marxists' Internet Archive**.

---

*In trade union and political circles of England and Western Europe there is intense interest and growing debate around the question of workers' control of production. This is a contribution to this discussion by Ernest Mandel, the noted Marxist economist, which appeared in five consecutive issues of the Belgian weekly newspaper Mandel edits, **La Gauche**: December 21, 1968 to January 18, 1969.*

---

## **1. What is Workers' Control?**

The demand for workers' control is on the order of the day. The FGTB [Federation Generale des Travailleurs

de Belgique – General Workers Federation of Belgium] is calling a special congress on this subject. Many British trade unions have adopted it. In France the most left-wing workers and students have made workers' control one of their main demands. And in numerous plants and factories in Italy the vanguard workers not only call for workers' control but do their utmost – as at Fiat – to put it into practice at the right times.

This is an old demand of the international working class. It arose in the course of the Russian revolution. The Communist International adopted it at its third congress. It played an important role in the revolutionary struggles in Germany in 1920-23. The Belgian unions raised this demand during the twenties. Trotsky incorporated it into the Transitional Program of the Fourth International. Andre Renard [Belgian left-wing trade union leader] took it up again towards the end of the fifties.

But in the course of the past two decades, the demand for workers' control has fallen into disuse in the broader labor and trade-union movement. Two generations of workers have received no education on this subject. It is, therefore, an urgent matter to define the meaning and the implications of workers' control, to show its value in the struggle for socialism, and to demarcate it from its reformist variants – co-determination [mixed labor and management decision-making in the plants] and “participation.”

Workers' control is a transitional demand, an anti-capitalist structural reform par excellence. This demand stems from the immediate needs of broad masses and leads them to launch struggles that challenge the very existence of the capitalist

system and the bourgeois state. Workers' control is the kind of demand that capitalism can neither absorb nor digest, as it could all the immediate demands of the past sixty years – from wage increases to the eight-hour day, from social welfare legislation to paid holidays.

At this point we can dismiss an objection raised by sectarian “purists”: “Calling for anti-capitalist structural reforms makes you a reformist,” they tell us. “Doesn't your demand contain the word ‘reform’?”

This objection is infantile. It is also dishonest – at least on the part of those who do not oppose fighting for reforms on principle. We might be able to understand the argument, difficult as it may be, if it came from certain anarchists who reject the fight for higher wages. These people are wrong, but at least they can be given credit for being logically consistent.

But what can be said of those who support all the struggles for increasing wages, for decreasing the workweek, for lowering the pension age, for double pay for vacations, for free medical care and free medicines, but who, at the same time, reject anti-capitalist structural reforms?

They don't even realize that they, too, are fighting for reforms; but the difference between them and us is that they fight only for those reforms that capitalism has time and again proved it is capable of giving, of incorporating into its system, *reforms which thus do not upset the system itself*.

On the other hand, the program of anti-capitalist structural reforms has these very special characteristics: it cannot be carried out in a normally functioning capitalist system; it rips this system apart; it creates a situation of dual power; and it rapidly leads to a revolutionary struggle for power. Wage increases – as important as they may be for raising the level of the workers' fighting spirit, as well as their cultural level – can do nothing of the soil.

Actually, the whole argument of our “purist” opponents is based on a childish confusion. Fighting for reforms doesn’t necessarily make one a reformist. If that were the case, Lenin himself would be the number one reformist, for he never rejected the struggle to defend the immediate interests of the workers. The reformist is one who believes that the fight for reforms is *all that is needed* to overthrow capitalism, little by little, gradually, and without overthrowing the power of the bourgeoisie.

But we proponents of the program of anti-capitalist structural reforms are not in any way victims of this illusion. We believe in neither the gradual advent of socialism nor the conquest of power by the electoral, parliamentary road. We are convinced that the overthrow of capitalism requires a total, extra-parliamentary confrontation between embattled workers and the bourgeois state. The program of anti-capitalist structural reforms has precisely this aim – bringing the workers to start the struggles that lead to such a confrontation. Instead of this, our “purist” critics are generally satisfied with struggles for immediate demands, all the while talking in abstractions about making the revolution, without ever asking themselves, How will the revolution really be made?

### **An eloquent example: May 1968 in France**

The general strike of May 1968, following the one in Belgium in December 1960-January 1961, offers us an excellent example of the key importance of this problem.

Ten million workers were out on strike. They occupied their factories. If they were moved by the desire to do away with many of the social injustices heaped up by the Gaullist regime in the ten years of its existence, they were obviously aiming beyond simple wage-scale demands. The way they rejected, en masse, the first “Crenelle agreements” [reached between the de Gaulle government and the union federations May 27], which would have given them an average wage increase of 14 per cent, clearly reflects this wish to go farther.

But if the workers did not feel like being satisfied with immediate demands, they also did not have any exact idea of precisely what they did want.

Had they been educated during the preceding years and months in the spirit of workers’ control, they would have known what to do: elect a committee in every plant that would begin by opening the company books; calculate for themselves the various companies’ real manufacturing costs and rates of profit; establish a right of veto on hiring and firing and on any changes in the organization of the work; replace the foremen and overseers chosen by the boss with elected fellow workers (or with members of the crew taking turns at being in charge).

Such a committee would naturally come into conflict with the employers’ authority on every level. The workers would have rapidly had to move from workers’ control to workers’ management. But this interval would have been used for denouncing the employers’ arbitrariness, injustice, trickery and waste to the whole country and for organizing local, regional and national congresses of the strike and workers’ control committees. These, in turn, would have furnished the striking workers with the instruments of organization and self-defense indispensable in tackling the bourgeois state and the capitalist class as a whole.

The French experience of May 1968 shows one of the main reasons why the demand for workers' control holds a prime position in a socialist strategy aimed at overthrowing capitalism in industrialized countries.

In order for united struggles around immediate demands, culminating in the general strike with occupation of the factories, to lead to the struggle for power, workers cannot initiate the most advanced form as something abstract, artificially introduced into their battle by the propaganda of revolutionary groups. *It has to grow out of the very needs of their fight.* The demand for workers' control (which involves challenging the power of the bourgeoisies at all levels and which tends to give birth, first in the factory, later in the country at large, to an embryonic workers' power counterposed to bourgeois power) is the best bridge between the struggle for immediate demands and the struggle for power.

There are two other reasons why this demand is so important at the present stage of capitalism and of the workers' anti-capitalist struggle.

Capitalist concentration, the growing fusion of the monopolies with the bourgeois state, the ever-increasing role played by the state as guarantor of monopoly profits in imperialist countries, the growing tendency toward organization and "programming" of the economy under neo-capitalism – all these main characteristics of today's economy transfer the center of gravity of the class struggle more and more from the plant and from the industrial branch to the economy as a whole.

In the "managed" capitalist economy, everything is tightly interlocked. An increase in wages is annulled by a rise in prices and taxes, or by indirect fiscal manipulations (for example, increasing social security taxes or reducing workers'

benefits). Regional employment levels are upset by capitalist rationalization or by moving investments to other areas. Every effort is made to impose an “incomes policy,” tying wages to productivity, but at the same time denying workers’ the means of accurately determining productivity.

The trade-union movement cannot make any serious headway if it limits itself to periodic fights for adjusting or increasing wages. All the logic of the national (and international) class struggle brings the unions to *challenge the relationship* between prices and wages, wages and money, wage increases and increases in productivity, which the employers – and the governments in their pay – seek to impose on them as “inevitable.” But this challenge cannot be mounted effectively, that is, in an informed way, unless the books are opened, unless secrecy in banking is done away with, unless the workers drag out and expose all the secret mechanisms of profit and of capitalist exploitation.

It goes without saying that, in the same spirit, workers’ control must be exercised by the elected delegates of the workers *in view of the entire working class and the nation as a whole*, and not by a few trade-union leaders meeting in secret with a few employers’ leaders. We shall come back to this, because the distinction is extremely important.

We are living in a period of more and more rapid technological change – the third industrial revolution. In the course of these changes, various branches of industry, various occupations, various jobs, disappear in the space of a few years. The capitalists constantly strive to subordinate the work of men to the demands of more and more expensive and more and more complex machines.

At the same time that manual labor is little by little disappearing from the factories, the number of technicians directly involved in production is increasing. The level of



training and education of workers is rapidly rising. The tendency towards general academic education up to the age of seventeen or eighteen, which is becoming more common, is a very clear indication of this.

But the more education workers have, the more inclined they are to fight for their rights – and the less will they stand for the fact that those who run society, the directors and the executives, often know less about production and the functioning of machines than the workers themselves, yet tell the workers what they must produce and how they should produce it. The hierarchical structure of the enterprise will weigh all the more heavily on workers as the gap in technical knowledge between workers and employers dwindles and becomes maintained only by an artificial monopoly on the details of the functioning of the enterprise as a whole, which the employer jealously keeps to himself.

It is a fact that statistics on the causes of strikes, in Great Britain as well as in Italy, reveal that industrial conflicts less and less concern questions of wages per se and more and more concern the organization of the work, the process of production itself. Belgium is a little backward in this connection but it will catch up soon enough!

The demand for workers' control, by involving the immediate right of inspection and veto for workers in a whole series of aspects of the life of the enterprise – while declining all responsibility for its management, as long as private property and the capitalist state are still in existence – thus answers a need born out of social and economic life itself. The structure of the enterprise no longer corresponds to the needs of the economy nor to the aspirations of the workers.

In this sense, this demand is eminently anti-capitalist, because capitalism is not definitively characterized by low salaries nor even by a large number of unemployed workers

(although periodic recessions remain inevitable and important). It is characterized by the fact that capital, that capitalists, rule men and machines. Challenging this right to rule, and counterposing another kind of power to it, means taking concrete actions to overthrow the capitalist system.

## **2. Participation, No! Control, Yes!**

Experience teaches workers that their immediate and future fate depends on the functioning of the economy *as a whole*. They more and more conclude from this that it would be useless to fight just to defend their purchasing power or to raise their wages without concerning themselves with prices, with the cost-of-living index, with fiscal problems, with investments, and with the capitalist “rationalization” of the enterprises.

In fact, the capitalist class too often manages to “recoup” wage increases by way of price increases or increases in direct or indirect taxes which are saddled on the workers.

It cheats at the escalator-clause game by faking the index or by applying the notorious “index policy” (price increases that avoid or skirt around those products selected for calculating the index).

It nibbles away at the power of trade unions in areas where the working class is very militant by systematically removing investments and enterprises from those areas, thus recreating unemployment (the Liege metalworkers know a thing or two about this!). It always assures itself a reserve supply of

labor by arranging the coexistence of rapid-growth areas with areas that are underdeveloped or on the decline.

In short, it pulls all the strings of economic life and economic policy to defend its class interest.

If from now on workers are content with demanding wage increases, they are sure to be fleeced. This does not mean that struggles for wages and immediate demands are no longer needed or useless – indeed, the contrary is true. But it means that we must not *limit ourselves* to demanding for labor a larger portion of the new value it alone has created. It means that labor must challenge the functioning of the capitalist economy as a whole.

In the old days, employers were content to defend their divine right to be “captain of the ship” – the sacred right of property. Every trade-union demand that required some sort of interference in the management of the enterprise (to say nothing of the management of the economy as a whole) was rejected with indignation as a “usurpation,” a first step toward “confiscation,” “theft.”

But today the capitalists’ arguments have become more flexible. From the argument of the divine right of employers, the bosses have prudently retreated to the argument of “defending the enterprise.” They admit implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) that workers should “have something to say” on what happens in their enterprise, their locality, indeed the economic life of the country as a whole (certain international treaties, such as the one creating the European Economic Community or the Common Market, even circumspectly mention the right of workers to be “associated” with solving the problems of the international economy).

This evolution in the thinking of the owners of industry obviously corresponds to an evolution in the relationship of forces. When capital was all-powerful and labor feeble and

divided, the employers were able to rule by brute force. When capital becomes weak, because its system has entered the stage of incurable structural crisis on a world scale, and labor organizes and becomes considerably strengthened, more subtle means of domination have to be invented; otherwise, the whole system of domination runs the risk of disintegrating.

Thus we pass almost imperceptibly from the cynical doctrine of the “sacred rights of property” (that is, “might makes right”) to the sugar-coated and hypocritical doctrine of “human relations.” Thus is born the mirage of the “plant community” in which capital and labor should be associated “in due regard for their legitimate interests.”

But the evolution of industrial doctrine is not simply a passive reflection of the evolution of the relationship of forces between social classes. It also reflects a tactical aim of the capitalists. This tactic seeks to involve the trade-union organizations, or even representatives elected by the workers, in a *daily practice of class collaboration*. It is supposed to defuse the explosive character of the social conflict and immerse the working class in a permanent climate of conciliation and bargaining – a climate that blunts all militancy and all attempts to *counterpose* the organized power of the workers to the financial power of the capitalists.

An analogy can be made between the change in the bourgeoisie’s attitude beginning in 1914, first with respect to the social democracy, then the trade-union leaderships, and now this evolution towards a more flexible attitude concerning the “exclusive and sacred rights of private property.”

In all three cases, the bourgeoisie sought to weaken its class adversary by seduction, after having vainly tried to smash it by violence, repression, or economic pressure. Thus social-

democratic ministers have been “integrated” into coalition governments. Union leaders have been “integrated” into labor-management committees. Why not “integrate” workers’ delegates into factory councils “associated with management”?

The experience with codetermination in West Germany is especially revealing on this subject. It has been a powerful means of sapping the strength of the trade unions and militancy of the workers.

The workers had the illusion of having acquired “rights” within the plants; the plants became, in their eyes, to a certain extent “their” plants. But when a turn in the economic situation took place, they lost not only their bonuses (accorded by the capitalists in the period of great labor shortage), but even a part of their “normal” income, if not their jobs.

The *capitalist* plants once again revealed their nature: that is, a domain where the employer is the reigning monarch, leaving to his beloved workers only the illusion of an “association” – a booby-trapped “association.”

De Gaulle invented nothing new with his “participation.” Having to sell their labor power to employers who are free to hire them when the “profitability of the enterprise” requires it, workers remain proletarians. Having free command over men and machines (very often acquired with the money of others, that is to say, the state’s), employers remain what they were before – capitalists.

Naïve pundits, advocates of class collaboration, retort: “You, wicked Marxists that you are, preach class warfare to the bitter end, while the sweet and reasonable capitalists are ready to make concessions and to put their class struggle under wraps.” Obviously, the reality is nothing like this.

Seeking to ensnare the workers' organizations and the workers in the trap of class collaboration, the employers pursue, from their side, a *relentless class struggle*. They keep their weapons intact: financial riches, capitalist ownership of industry and banks, subordination of economic life to their profit needs.

But, at the same time, they paralyze or seek to destroy the sole weapon workers have at their command: their capacity to organize and to launch a common struggle for their class interests, that is, operating workers' organizations for the benefit of workers. In looking to subordinate these organizations to "the general interest," while the economy is more than ever dominated by capitalist profit, the capitalists have obtained a resounding victory in the class struggle against the wage workers.

This is why trade unions and workers must refuse to make the slightest concession to the "team spirit" the employers spread around. Workers must systematically refuse to take the slightest particle of responsibility for the management of capitalist enterprises and the capitalist economy. Inspection in order to challenge, yes; participation in, or sharing of, management, no. That is where the interests of the workers lie.

Two arguments are often counterposed to this traditional position of the working-class movement, which Andre Renard was still strongly defending in **Vers le Socialisme par l'Action [Towards Socialism Through Action]**.

First of all, it is claimed that the workers have, despite everything, a stake in the survival of the enterprises: Doesn't the disappearance of a large plant mean the loss of thousands of jobs, an increase in unemployment? This argument overlooks the fact that in the capitalist system competition and capitalist concentration are *inevitable*. In "associating"

the fate of the workers with that of the plants, one not only risks tying them to the losers in a fierce battle. One also carries capitalist competition into the ranks of the working class, when all experience has shown that it is only by their class organization and their class unity that the workers have any kind of chance of defending themselves against the capitalist system.

The same argument has no more validity when applied to regions. “We don’t want socialization of cemeteries; that’s why we have to join the bosses to save our [!] industries,” certain trade unionists say.

The sad thing about this that these industries are not at all “ours” but the capitalists’, even if nine-tenths of the capital does come from state subsidies. These industries are subject to the laws of capitalist competition. To drag the workers onto that path is to subject them to the dictates of profit making and profit. It is to acquiesce to “rationalization,” to increased productivity, to the speed-up, to intensified exploitation of the workers. It also means accepting reductions in the number of jobs. From that to accepting layoffs, even reductions in pay, is only a step.

As soon as you take the first step on this path, the employers’ blackmail becomes all-powerful. In order to smash it, it is necessary to reject collaboration from the very beginning and start to enforce maintenance of the level of employment by structural anti-capitalist reforms.

**‘Workers’ Control and ‘Participation’ are  
exact opposites**

And then there is a more subtle argument. “In order to control, you have to be informed. Why not participate with the sole aim of gleaning information?” The sophist adds that there is no absolute distinction between participation and control.

The answer is very simple: everything depends on the objective to be achieved by the action and on the practical course that is followed. Is it a question of “participating” but not accepting the slightest responsibility for the management of the enterprise? But what opportunity should we wait for then, before revealing to all the workers the much touted “gleaned information”? Such a course is out of the question; the capitalists would refuse to play this game; the cards are stacked against them! Right! But if we didn’t reveal this information, if we accepted secrecy, “cooperation” and bits of “co-responsibility,” wouldn’t we be playing the capitalists’ game? *In appearance*, the difference between “participation” and “confrontation” is hard to establish; but all we have to do to realize the difference is to record, in each instance, the reaction of the employers, even the most “liberal” employers.

“Then you just want agitation for the sake of agitation, demanding the impossible,” reply the defenders of the bourgeois order. Not at all. We want to replace one system with another, the class power of capital with the class power of the workers.

To this end we want the workers to have a very clear understanding of the thousands of ways the bourgeoisie has, in the present system, of deceiving them, exploiting them, fleecing them. That’s why we demand workers’ control. And if a radical change in the relationship of forces makes this demand realizable – for a brief transitional period – we would want, in order to realize this demand, the workers to organize



in such a way as to create, within the plants and the economy as a whole, a counter-power that would rapidly become the nucleus of a new state power.

“Participation” means: associating the workers with capital; accepting secret arrangements with capital, permanent secret meetings, economic “coordinating” committees, and even “control committees” (such as those in gas and electricity), where the workers actually control nothing at all but become co-responsible, in the eyes of public opinion, for the exorbitant rates charged and for the fat profits of the monopolies.

“Workers’ control” means: full and complete disclosure; discussion of all “secrets” of the enterprise and the economy in front of general assemblies of the workers; baring all the intricate machinery of the capitalist economy; “illegal” interference of the workers in all the prerogatives of Property, Management, and the State. This in itself signifies birth of a new kind of power, infinitely more democratic and more just than that of bourgeois “democracy,” a power in which all the workers (85 per cent of the active population of this country) together would make the decisions that determine their destiny.

### **3. The CSC’s Position: Participation, Yes But**

...

On several occasions the CSC [Confederation des Syndicats Chrétiens – Confederation of Christian Unions] has tried to bend its efforts toward the problem of the nature of the plant. In 1964 it had already devoted a report to the problem. The report,

*Responsible for the Future*, presented at its twenty-fourth congress in October 1968, goes back to that subject at great length. The swan song of Gust Cool, as president of the CSC, was precisely the presentation of that report to the congress. A special resolution on *The Reform of the Plant* was presented to the same congress.

All these documents bear the seal of the same contradiction. The CSC holds a certain doctrine: class collaboration. Its rank and file activists, and especially its members, engage in a practice and are subjected to an experience which, whether one likes it or not, is called: class struggle. What the leadership of the CSC is trying as hard as possible to do is to reconcile these two irreconcilable elements.

When the leaders of the CSC *describe* what the workers go through in the enterprise system – which they don't want to call by its proper name, *capitalist* system, so that they have to resort to all kinds of meaningless and innocuous euphemisms, such as “today's enterprises,” “present-day enterprises,” “the modern system,” etc. – they often put their finger on their members' sorest spots.

Plants are often closed (without sufficient grounds, adds the resolution of the twenty-fourth congress. But “insufficient grounds” from what point of view? From the point of view of the stockholder who wants to protect his interests?). There are mass layoffs. Even in good times, unemployment reappears, because production, which has increased, is accomplished by a decreasing number of workers. This unemployment stands to increase still more, because of the “successive waves of automation, the continuous installation of computers, or very pronounced mechanization.” The

individuality of the man on the job is more and more threatened by “new techniques of organization, of production and management.” The hopes of the younger generation are cruelly dashed by the way in which economic life is developing. Etc., etc.

Those are contentions which undoubtedly would meet with the approval of the majority of the 900,000 members of the CSC. They live through this, daily or periodically, and feel it in the marrow of their bones. It is not necessary to add any lengthy discourse to explain these elementary truths: in the factory, it is the capitalist who is in command. His profits come before the interests of the workers and of “human people.”

What Cool, Keulers, Dereau and Houthuys – the new president of the CSC – did not add, but which nonetheless is of very great importance, is that these wounds result neither from the bad will of the employers nor from lack of mutual understanding between employers and workers, but from the implacable logic of the *capitalist system*.

If the employer does not subordinate the operation of the enterprise to the imperatives of profit-making, he will realize less profit than his competitors; he will receive less credit; he will be able to accumulate less capital; he will not be able to keep up with the latest techniques. At the heightened tempo of today’s competition between capitalists, nationally and internationally, he would soon be liquidated by his competitors.

It follows, therefore, that it is *impossible* to eliminate these sore spots and at the same time maintain the capitalist system. “Humanizing” production relationships while maintaining private property and the capitalist economy, is like wanting the animals of the jungle to stop eating one

another while maintaining the jungle itself, with all that it implies.

Listen to the worthy Mr. Cool as he sheds a tear on the altar of the “economy of service”:

“We are really at the service of the worker, at the service of his real happiness, and doesn’t our era prove that happiness consists in ‘being’ as well as ‘seeing’? Happiness, that is to say, is not only thinking of one’s self but also of others in the world who are hungry, who not only know poverty but who die of starvation ...? Don’t we attach too much importance to money, to material well-being, even to the extent of sacrificing to them our freedom as producers and consumers, our freedom as human persons? Doesn’t material well-being feed a growing selfishness, to the detriment of the solidarity that unites us, not only with the workers in our plants, in our community, in our country, but with all workers, with citizens throughout the world, especially those who are bent beneath the yoke of injustice?”

A beautiful flight of eloquence – even if we find the reproach aimed at Belgian workers that they attach “too much importance to money” in rather bad taste, considering the average level of wages (especially for youth, women, the less skilled, who are especially numerous in the ranks of the CSC).

But where does this “growing selfishness” come from, if not from the sacrosanct “free enterprise” system, which has elevated to the level of a religious dogma the principle of “every man for himself? Can private ownership of the means of production, the market economy, lead to anything but competition? Can competition, in a money economy, lead to anything but the desire to obtain the maximum income? The whole social climate, the whole educational system, all the mass media, the entire economic life, don’t they inculcate in

everyone, day and night, that what matters most, above all else, is to “climb the ladder of success” – if you have to step on the necks of others to do it?

That celebrated “freedom of the producer,” how can it be achieved under the iron rod of capital, which produces for profit and not for the self-realization of the human being? That celebrated “freedom of the consumer,” how can that be achieved under the rule of the advertising industry, behind which lurk the ten financial groups that control the economic life of the nation?

Gust Cool, Keulers, Dereau and Houthuys don’t want to abolish private ownership of the means of production. They don’t want to get rid of capitalism. They don’t want to eliminate national and international control of the economy by holding companies, trusts and other monopolies. They don’t want anyone to touch competition or the market economy – those beauties of the jungle.

But how will “participation” by the unions in the management of plants based on profit prevent shutdowns when profits are threatened or disappear? How will “participation” by the unions in the management of the economy prevent the concentration of enterprises, when these are precisely the result of competition? How will “participation” by the unions reestablish the “freedom of the producer and the consumer,” when in the framework of capitalist economy, which is more and more automated, man more and more becomes simply an appendage of the machine, and the consumer more and more becomes a victim of television commercials, more and more manipulated?

The leaders of the CSC are inextricably entangled in a web of theoretical contradictions. They will not be able to get out of it, except by verbal gymnastics which serve only to reflect the lack of respect they have for their members.

But among these members, the number of those who will grasp these contradictions will not stop growing. To the extent that the members of the CSC experience class struggles, experience the contradictions of the capitalist system, they are brought to the point of asking themselves questions about the *nature of that system*, questions that the CSC heads seek only to dodge. And the more the members grasp the nature of the system, the more they will understand that their interests and their convictions demand that, far from collaborating with it or “participating” in it, they have to overthrow it and replace it with a socialist system based on the collective self-management and planning of the workers.

In France, this idea has made enormous progress among the members of the CFDT [Confederation Francaise et Democratique du Travail – French Democratic Confederation of Labor] during the last few years. This progress was further accelerated during the last few months, after the bracing experience of the May 1968 general strike. We can bet that Cool would like to avoid, at any price, such an explosion in Belgium, lest the members of the CSC draw similar conclusions from analogous experiences.

After having denounced the innumerable “violations of the human person” of which the capitalist economic system (excuse me, the *present* economic system) is guilty, the leadership of the CSC is satisfied with demanding – passage of a law on bookkeeping records, extension of the rights of the plant councils, and constitution of a labor-management study commission with a view to reforming the plant. The mountain labored and brought forth a mouse – and the poor little animal seems pretty sickly and unlikely to survive.

Let’s pass over the farce of the labor-management study commission for a reform of the enterprise that would eliminate all the sore spots mentioned above. Does anyone

believe for a single minute that the employers can accept keeping surplus personnel on the payroll – given the laws of competition? But all the “progress” they boast of, including the famous “technological progress,” has the exact aim of eliminating these workers. We can bet that the results of these talk-fests will not be the curing of the -sore spots but the adoption of lots of bandages and sugar-coated pills, so that the patient won’t suffer too much. That, of course, is right in line with the noblest of charitable motives, but it eliminates neither the ills nor their more and more frequent appearance.

The law on bookkeeping records constitutes a useful reform, *on condition that it serve a policy of workers’ control*. If not, it represents only a measure for rationalization of capitalist economy, which the workers should not get involved with, and which will, moreover, wind up being used against them.

But, of course, workers’ control is not what the CSC has in mind.

The CSC talks a lot about layoffs and “groundless” shutdowns. But wouldn’t the first thing to demand, in line with this, be the opening of the company’s books? And not only those of the employers who went bankrupt, but those of *all* the employers, especially since the coal crisis taught us how holding companies and financial groups can manipulate their accounting procedures so that losses appear in all sectors that claim (and receive) public subsidies, while profits appear in all the sectors that “rely on private initiative,” and where they want prices to rise on the stock exchange? Since these groups balance off, on an over-all basis, “profit and loss” of the companies they control, it is therefore necessary to open the books of all these companies.

How can we determine which shutdowns are “justified” and which are not, without opening the books and eliminating

secrecy in banking? But doubtless the leaders of the CSC don't like to "violate the rights of property," that is of capital. They actually prefer, regardless of what they say, that capital constantly violate those famous "rights of the human person" that they do so much talking about – except when it comes to drawing some conclusions about the demands necessary to gain those rights.

#### **4. The FGTB: Differences Between Theory and Practice**

The problem of workers' control was reintroduced into the doctrine of the FGTB by the "Renard Tendency" during the fifties. It ripened in the aftermath of the great strike of 1960-61, the culminating point in the radicalization of the workers of this country since the 1932-36 period.

Inasmuch as "participation" is in fashion, and inasmuch as the CSC has several times taken up "reform of the enterprise," the FGTB cannot in all decency remain silent on the subject. It is, therefore, preparing a special congress on the problem of workers' control – the preparations for which are taking place, unfortunately, in secrecy, as if they were of no interest to trade-unionists as a whole! The discussions on this merit very careful attention.

The FGTB obviously finds itself at an ideological crossroads. For a good ten years now, a more and more distinct cleavage has appeared between its theory, which is becoming more and more radical (at least in Wallonia as well as in Brussels and in certain Flemish regions), and its practice, which keeps turning to the right in Flanders and



which has also begun to deteriorate in Wallonia during the past few years.

For a problem as clearly defined and of such burning importance as workers' control, we must know if this doctrine will be interpreted as class collaboration in practice or if a new radicalization in theory will force practice to bend to the left, as was the case, in part, between 1956 and 1962.

From the point of view of theory, all co-responsibility in capitalist management is excluded. We are thus talking only about *control*. When the demand for nationalization of the electric plants was abandoned in exchange for the establishment of a control committee, a great deal of care was taken to distinguish the latter from the "management committee," which was reserved for employers only.

*Control* under a capitalist system; *co-determination* under a socialist system: that was the praiseworthy principle that was invoked.

Let us see, however, how it worked in practice.

By being satisfied with a sham control, which respects the secrecy of company books and which, moreover, introduces a new secrecy in the relationships between union leaders and union members, one can in fact serve as a *cover* for capitalist management. It is a participation that doesn't dare call itself "participation," but which in practice is close to that principle of class collaboration.

Thus, after several years of the "committee of control of electricity," Andre Renard and the comrades who led the Gazelco sector realized that they controlled nothing at all; they were running the risk of getting a capitalist management off the hook, in the eyes of the workers and consumers – a capitalist management that was more than ever imbued with the profit motive and not at all with the spirit of the "common

good.” They therefore began by demanding *real control over the calculation of cost prices*, which is inconceivable without opening the books and without an on-the-spot confrontation (right in the plant) of the employers’ accounting figures with the economic and financial reality as directly perceived by the workers and technicians. They added to that, moreover, exact demands, calling for a kind of veto right over rate-fixing, investments, and rationalization.

None of this was obtained. They were satisfied with stretching the “Round Table” agreements to cover the gas business, at the time of the renewal of the agreement in 1965. As for the Gazelco sector, the union once again put forth – and very opportunely – the demand for nationalization of the electric companies, but without ever succeeding in getting the FGTB to wage a genuine campaign on this demand.

Allocating the distribution of natural gas from the Netherlands to private industry compounded the scandal of profit from a public service monopoly going to the gas and electric trusts. But the FGTB put this scandal on ice. It doesn’t even conduct an educational campaign any more for its members and for the public on the theme of nationalization under workers’ control.

At the end of the brochure that it devoted in 1962 to nationalization of the electric companies, the Gazelco sector wrote as follows:

“Our joining the institutions of the ‘Round Table,’ the management committee and the control committee, thus has a definite meaning. In a capitalist system the trade-union organizations have, in fact, to fulfill the mission of control. That mission cannot always lead them toward associating themselves with private management of industry and toward sharing the responsibility for it.”

The authors of this brochure themselves call attention to the contradiction present in this doctrine, in this era. Actually, they do not reject every program of rationalization, but state:

“We cannot lose sight of the fact that, in a capitalist system, rationalization is almost always accomplished at the expense of the working class.”

They are then led to add (in bold-face type):

“Also, never will we permit workers, manual or intellectual, to become victims of rationalization measures.”

Several years later, the FGTB Metalworkers Federation was confronted with an analogous problem. Having gone astray in agreeing that the resplution of regional problems – independent of the class nature of the economy! – be given priority, this federation decided to enter the Comité de Concertation dela Politique Siderurgique [Iron and Steel Industry Policy Coordinating Committee].

It was inevitable that this committee would engage in rationalization. The FGTB trade-union movement thus accepted associating itself with rationalization measures. Practice as well as theory had slipped a notch as far as the excellent principles of 1959 and 1962 were concerned. They *did* permit rationalization measures that victimized the workers (that is, a big reduction in employment). They were satisfied with demanding palliative social-welfare measures, so that the workers wouldn't suffer too much.

Their practice slid from workers' control towards codetermination and that under the worst conditions: codetermination of a sector in relative decline, where the

problem of cutting down employment was posed. Will theory follow practice? This is one of the things we shall learn at the special congress of the FGTB.

This is also one of the tasks of the militants of the FGTB: to prevent the introduction into trade-union theory of the disastrous confusion between workers' control and codetermination (or participation). The latter transforms trade-union organizations from instruments for the defense of the interests of the workers against the bosses into instruments for the defense of capitalist enterprises (including interests against those of the workers).

If trade union doctrine continues to reject codetermination at the plant and industrial branch level, the same doesn't hold true, and hasn't for a long time, for its practice as far as the economy as a whole is concerned.

In the Central Economic Council, in the National Committee for Economic Expansion, in the Programming Bureau, and in numerous similar bodies, representatives of the unions amicably sit side by side with employers' representatives and together draw up analyses, diagnoses, syntheses and programs. Sometimes their formulations do not agree. Often, they arrive at common conclusions.

An atmosphere of mutual understanding and collaboration – not to mince words, class collaboration – stems from this. It is this atmosphere that enabled Louis Major to exclaim, in the speech ending his career as general secretary of the FGTB (to start a new one as king's minister):

“The relationships between unions and employers in Belgium are the best in the world.”

We do not believe that knowing whether to sit on this or that committee is what matters. What is important is the *reason* you sit there, and what you do in practice.

To take a seat for the purpose of gathering information useful for the day to day trade-union struggle; to denounce short-changing and abuses on the part of employers; to bare the structural deficiencies of the capitalist mode of production, so flagrant and so visible throughout the country, to improve the quality of, the audience for, and the forcefulness of the agitation conducted among the workers – we do not see what would be wrong in such a tactic of challenge, to use a fashionable term.

But that is obviously not the tactic of the FGTEB representatives. They don't challenge anything; they collaborate.

Speaking at the study weekend held by the Andre Renard Foundation November 26-27, 1964, at Ronchiennes, Jacques Yerna commented about the Programming Bureau:

“We have let neo-capitalism absorb planning, just as it has absorbed so many other things in our program; and instead of going a step further, of forcing acceptance of our concept, the trade-union movement was satisfied to pick what suited it from what was offered, and to reject the rest.”

Note that at the regional level in Wallonia, the FGTEB leadership is now running the risk of repeating the same experience, but on a much bigger scale, and with repercussions that may be even more disastrous.

Haven't they associated themselves with the capitalists of the Wallonian Economic Council to formulate jointly all kinds of “regional programs,” programs that cannot help but respect and enforce the capitalist profit motive? That is a far cry from “forcing acceptance of our concept.” They are no longer even

prepared for “rejecting the rest.” They are content, humbly content, to beg for a minimum agreement with the “Wallonian” employers before defending the interests of X trust or holding company against Y trust or holding company, which is accused of favoring “Flanders.” “Our concept” of structural anti-capitalist reforms, especially the principal idea of seizing control of the economic life of the country from the holding companies, no longer serves as a guide to action.

When they study the documents on the subject of workers’ control that some day will have to be submitted to them, FGTB activists will have to avoid three dangers:

1. that of seeking to adapt theory to practice, that is, of developing theory around, and accepting as doctrine, the concept of co-determination and participation. We shouldn’t jump to the conclusion that such a thing is impossible. There is a temptation – especially among the Flemish leaders of the FGTB – to systematically align themselves with the positions of the CSC. And in other countries, such as West Germany, there are examples to show that an entire generation of trade-union militants can become bewildered in the face of the confusions to which “participation” gives rise.
2. that of the “whistling in the dark,” that is, throwing a veil of modesty over the contradiction between theory and practice, and being satisfied with theoretical tinkering while doing nothing to change the

practice (which obviously implies that such theory would be condemned to remain a dead letter).

3. that of deliberate confusion, which would consist in mixing “confrontationist” and “participationist” formulas and objectives, under the pretext of “unity,” “realism,” and “comradely compromise.” This will only emasculate theory still more and accentuate the slide towards generalized class collaboration and intensified integration into the capitalist system.

FGTB activists, who are conscious of the workers’ interests and of the crisis of the system under which we live in this country, will have to counterpose to the above three dangers a *concrete program* of workers’ control, which, taking off from the immediate concerns of the masses and from the problems the country faces, tries to raise to a higher level the total challenge to the capitalist economy and the unitary state [that is, a centralized government which rides roughshod over the interests of the two nationalities combined in the Belgian state – the Walloons and the Flemings]. This is the only realistic possibility for assuring the future of the working class.

I must insist on the fact that the adoption of an *action program* would be just as important as the adoption of a program of demands going in that direction. Such an action program would signify a willingness to break with the practice

of class collaboration and would outline a plan for phased mobilization of all the energies and all the fighting potential of the workers, with the perspective of winning workers' control by any and all means necessary.

## **5. Six Propositions, in Conclusion**

How can the theme of workers' control be integrated into real struggles waged by the workers? How can agitation for workers' control contribute to stimulating the combativity of the toiling masses, to raising their level of class consciousness, to triggering struggles that go beyond the framework of the capitalist system, that is, contribute to creating a pre-revolutionary situation?

I have tried to answer these questions first by an analysis of the problem in general, refuting the current objections to this strategy and critically examining the timidity of the CSC and the FGTB in dealing with, if not a genuine struggle for workers' control, at least the problems raised by this slogan.

Obviously, I don't pretend to close the question in this way. I want to set off a real debate. I hope especially that the rank and file, union activists, genuine representatives of the workers in the plants, will participate in this discussion.

The more that workers' control is discussed among the workers, the more will controversy be aroused by this problem, and the more numerous will become the blue-collar workers, the white-collar workers, and the technicians who will enlarge the horizon of their perspectives beyond the limits of reformism and neo-reformism.



But theoretical discussion, abstract discussion (it makes little difference if it is directed toward grasping the question as a whole), is not enough to stimulate the kind of perspective-changing discussion we refer to above. Something else is needed, a complementary factor, in the way of practical proposals, and I am anxious to end this series of articles with these proposals.

They must all correspond with the criteria set forth in the beginning of our analysis: they must be based on the immediate needs of the workers; they must be of such nature that capitalism cannot integrate them into a normal functioning of its system; they must thus create a situation of dual power which will tend towards a global confrontation between capital and labor; they must enlarge the workers' practical experience as to the fundamental nature of the capitalist system and the ways in which it can be challenged in its entirety, that is, they must prepare the masses to approach this challenge under optimum conditions of consciousness and organization.

## **1. Open the Books**

Innumerable sources – most of them non-Marxist, indeed distinctly bourgeois in origin – attest to the impossibility of relying on employers' statistics to learn the truth about the economic life of this country (as well as all capitalist countries). The employers' balance sheets, their financial statements, their declarations of inheritance, falsify economic reality.

These falsifications are not manufactured gratuitously. They have very definite ends in view, whether it be cheating

on taxes; understating profits in order to justify refusing a wage increase; or deceiving the public about the real facts behind a particular trade-union demand.

Every time negotiations with the employers are opened, whether they be on wage increases, an increase in productivity, or on the economic consequences of a trade-union demand, we must routinely reply:

“We refuse to discuss this blindfolded. Lay the cards on the table! Open your books.”

The value of this demand as an anti-capitalist structural reform, that is, as a transitional demand, will be all the greater if three conditions are added to it:

First, opening of the company's books must be done publicly and not be limited to a closed meeting with a few trade-union leaders, whose tendency towards good fellowship with the bosses is well-known. Secondly, analysis of the balance sheets and of the bookkeeping system should be facilitated by the adoption of legal measures for uniformity in accounting procedures. Finally, and especially, verification of the balance sheets and the general accounts need not necessarily be made on the basis of the figures, but must be effected at the plants themselves, so that the mass of workers are in on this examination.

It is easy to doctor a balance sheet by undervaluing a supply of raw materials. But this value, although it has disappeared from the figures, cannot remain hidden from the workers who receive, warehouse, maintain, and regularly check this same merchandise.

The objection is often heard that workers would be incapable of verifying balance sheets. We shall soon publish in **La Gauche** some concrete suggestions, advanced in Great Britain by the comrades of the Campaign for Workers'

Control, that will facilitate study of balance sheets and of capitalist accounting procedures by workers' representatives. Generally, these objections are greatly exaggerated by those who wish property "rights" to remain untouched. They are the identical twin of objections that used to be advanced by reactionary regimes to justify their denial of universal suffrage: the workers are too "ignorant," "badly educated," "unprepared to assume this grave responsibility," etc. etc.

## **2. Right of Veto Over Layoffs and Plant Shutdowns**

The major motivating force behind the workers' struggles for the past few years has without doubt been fear of unemployment, layoffs, and reduction in the volume of employment, in Wallonia and in many Flemish regions.

The reclassification and occupational retraining program has proved a failure. It has not been able to prevent a rapid decline in the level of employment in the target districts. As far as industrial re-conversion is concerned, experience teaches that you can rely neither on big business nor on its unitary state, neither on various bourgeois governments nor on coalitions with the bourgeoisie, to make re-conversion operational.

In these conditions, the workers more and more have the feeling that it is wrong for an economic system, for which they do not have the slightest responsibility, to make them bear the brunt of the costs of industrial changes. To obtain an effective guarantee of the volume of employment, what the workers

must demand from now on is an effective veto right over layoffs and shutdowns.

This concrete application of the principle of workers' control involves the forcible reopening of plants shut down by their owners and the management of these plants by the workers themselves. It also involves making funds available, at the expense of the capitalist class as a whole, to enable these plants to operate during the transitional phase, before newly created modern plants, publicly owned and administered under workers' control, outdo these old rattletraps.

Our comrade Pierre Le Greve proposed a bill along this line when he was a deputy [in parliament]. It is useful to come back to this every time a shutdown or a layoff of workers occurs – not to encourage any illusions that that particular item of workers' control can be obtained through electoral or parliamentary means, but to stimulate the critical awareness of the workers and oblige the leaders of the mass organizations of the working class, which are making the demand, to take a position on these proposals.

### **3. Workers' Control of the Organization of Work in the Plant**

The hierarchic structure of the plant seems more and more anachronistic, to the extent that the level of technical and cultural qualifications of the workers is raised.

In the most streamlined, modern industrial plants, where a high percentage of personnel is composed of technicians with middle or high level technical education, this anachronism is

especially striking. But even in industry as a whole, the growing complexity of production processes results, for example, in teams of maintenance workers often understanding the exact mechanics of manufacturing, and the bottlenecks that periodically arise, better than highly placed engineers – not to mention members of the board of directors!

To the many on-the-job conflicts that stem from the hierarchic character of the relationships between blue- and white-collar workers on the one hand, department heads and foremen on the other, must be added the stresses in the workers' life occasioned by the more and more frequent changes in organization of the work.

Changes in techniques often do away with trades and skills acquired through hard work and years of experience. Speed-up increases workers' nervous tension and fatigue, and adds to the number of occupational accidents. The principal victims of these changes cannot be satisfied with the modest right to make suggestions, accorded them by legislation presently on the books, in the plant councils and the health and safety committees. They have to demand overall workers' control of organization of the work, a control that involves not only the right of being informed in advance of all proposed changes, but also the right to be able to oppose and prevent these changes.

When workers adopt the habit of answering each incident that sets them against a department head or a foreman with the demand for workers' control, a big step will have been taken in the direction of overturning hierarchical relationships and of replacing the "heads" by workers elected by their fellows, recallable at any time, and responsible only to the rank and file, not to the boss.

## 4. Workers' Control of the Consumer Price Index

In Belgium we live under the system of a sliding wage scale, that is, automatic adjustment of wages to every increase in the official cost-of-living index above a certain threshold, which varies according to the parity agreements (generally, 2.5 or 2 per cent). This system *partially* protects the workers against the erosion of the purchasing power of their wages and salaries. This guarantee is only partial for reasons explained many times in this newspaper. In this article it is sufficient to demonstrate one of these reasons: the lack of the representativeness and honesty in the retail price index.

The index is, of course, put out by the government. And the government is only too often tempted to give a bit of a push in the direction of its "index policy," (i. e., it's cheating), not only to please the employers, but also and especially to space the periodic adjustment of civil service workers' salaries – which weigh heavily on the budget.

It is true that the Price Commission has the right not to recognize the honesty of the index, to oppose this or that decision of the government concerning prices or price increases. But this right of opposition carries with it no power to enforce any changes.

A genuine workers' control over the consumer price index – an indispensable measure to efficiently protect the purchasing power of the workers against the permanent rise in the cost of living – would therefore involve some power of the trade-union opposition to act (right of veto) on the government index. It also involves this control being instituted at the

bottom, where teams of workers and housewives would regularly determine the real price increases in different parts of the country.

## **5. Elimination of Secrecy in Banking**

Fiscal manipulation has been one of the bonanzas for all those who have claimed to rationalize management of the capitalist economy of this country in the course of the last fifteen years. This is reflected in one of the most striking swindles of the system, a swindle that results in wage and salary earners paying, at the same time, the major part of both indirect and direct taxes.

The proliferation of legal measures, fiscal reforms, administrative controls, is admittedly unable to eliminate this flagrant injustice. Elimination of secrecy in banking and introduction of workers' control on all financial operations, would quickly put an end to this scandal.

We recently witnessed a tremendous flight of capital from France. Everybody wondered who started it. The de Gaulle government was very careful to state that it isn't hard to answer that question, at least in large part.

Actually, in the private property system, confidence between bankers and large depositors never prevails to the point that vast financial operations can take place without leaving any written traces. A workers' control over bank records – especially one exercised by bank employees devoted to the people – would quickly ferret out most of the guilty.

## 6. Workers' Control Over Investments

One of the most striking characteristics of neo-capitalism is that there is a socialization of a growing part of production and overhead costs, while profits and property obviously remain private. In this country, a large part of long-term investment has been financed by the state in the course of the last twenty years. The study of successive balance sheets of the Société Nationale de Crédit à l'Industrie [National Industrial Credit Society] is particularly instructive on this question. *Sidmar* as well as *Chertal* have in large part been financed with the help of public funds. It will be the same for the rationalization proposed by the Cockerill-Ougree-Providence-Esperance merger.

But while an increasing part of the funds come from the pocket of the taxpayer (that is, mostly from the pocket of the workers), profits and stocks and bonds are not the only things that remain in the private domain. The right of decision on the regional distribution of investments and on their destination also remains in the private domain.

To demand workers' control over these investments is thus to demand not co-responsibility of union leaders for capitalist management of industry, but the right of union veto over these investments, as to the geographical apportionment, form, and destination projected by the employers.

It is clear that this kind of control opens the way to formulating a developmental plan for the economy as a whole, based on priorities established by the workers themselves. The MPW [Movement Populaire Wallon – Walloon People's



Movement] used to speak about this a great deal, when the “Wallonian People’s Plan” was being discussed. But this “plan” was discarded along with a lot of other things when Andre Renard’s successors trod the path leading to their re-absorption by the PSB [Parti Socialiste de Belgique – Socialist Party of Belgium].

The campaign for workers’ control forms a whole which, without neglecting the day to day problems of the workers, acts in a definite direction: accentuating their distrust of the capitalist system, increasing their confidence in their own strength, and resolving to take their economic future into their own hands – by their own anti-capitalist action.

---