

# Workers' Control: Toward a Revolutionary Transformation

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Immanuel Ness and Dario Azzellini. *Ours to Master and to Own: Workers' Control from the Commune to the Present*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2011. 443 pages. Notes. Bibliography, Index. Paperback \$19.

Virtually every crisis of modern capitalism from the late nineteenth century to today has been accompanied by workers' strikes, insurgencies and sometimes revolutions in which workers have taken over and run their workplaces. Workers took control of their factories through their strike committees, factory committees, and workers councils. Sometimes they did so in collaboration with a working class political party that was also fighting to create a workers' government, at other times they saw their workplace committees themselves as the government. Always workers fought the capitalist class of financiers, industrialists, and merchants, and sometimes they struggled with a socialist government or against a dictatorial communist state. Sometimes the experiments in workers' control, hamstrung by capitalist or state bureaucracies, were strangled in red tape and buried in government decrees. At other times, often in the most important cases, they were crushed by bloody counter-revolution. Almost always briefly, workers showed that they had the capacity not only to work, but also to manage a factory, and sometimes even to administer an industry. In the course of these all too brief experiments in workers' control, they showed how an entire society might be run differently, for the benefit of all and not only for the wealth and power of a few.

Now, in the first comprehensive volume since the nearly forty year-old *Workers' Control: A Reader on Labor and Social Change*, edited by Gerry Hunnius, G. David Garson, and John Case (Vintage, 1973), Immanuel Ness and Dario Azzellini have produced *Ours to Master and to Own: Workers' Control from the Commune to the Present*, a collection of essays by 23 authors describing a wide variety of these experiences of workers' control from a remarkable number of countries: France, England, Germany, Russia, Italy, Spain, Yugoslavia, Poland, Indonesia, Algeria, Argentina, Portugal, India, Venezuela, Brazil, Canada and the United States. In all of these countries between 1870 and 2010 we see efforts by workers to run everything from industry and agriculture to government offices and public services. When workers in the face of a crisis—economic collapse, war, or revolution—find themselves forced to reorganize production, they often also make it both more efficient and more humane, as well as more gratifying because they have taken ownership and control of the workplace. All of the essays provide fascinating accounts of workers' struggles for control while dealing with the particular historical realities of their time.

There are too many different experiences here to review them all, but we might mention a few: In David Mandel's essay "The Factory Committee Movement in the Russian Revolution," we see workers take control of their factories under capitalism, then play a part in a socialist revolution, and finally deal with the centralization of power by the newly founded Soviet State. In Andy Dugan's essay "Workers' Democracy in the Spanish Revolution, 1936-1937," dealing with the period of the civil war and the struggle between Francisco Franco's fascist Falange and the Spanish Republic, we see the anarchist workers of Catalonia decreeing and managing collective property under workers' control, as they face opposition not only from the capitalists but also from the Spanish Republican government. Jafar Suryomenggolo's essay "Workers' Control in Java, Indonesia, 1945-46," shows how the workers' control that emerged during the independence revolution against Japan and then the Netherlands became stifled by the new nationalist state. Samuel J. Southgate's essay "From Workers' Self-Management to State Bureaucratic Control: *Autogestion* in Algeria," presents a similar

account of developments there following the Algerian revolution.

Today, as workers and those on the left are attempting both to create a new labor movement and a new conception of socialism, these essays challenge us to think about the complicated relationships between workers' rebellions, labor unions, workplace organization, political parties, and the state. These essays suggest that meaningful change will have to come from below, from democratic movements of working people in their workplaces, and that a fight for a democratic socialist society will have to be one that forces unions, parties and a genuinely democratic government to express the needs and desires of those working people. Sheila Cohen, author of one of the four introductory essays, hers titled "The Red Mole: Workers' Councils as a Means of Revolutionary Transformation," argues, as her title says, that the most important thing about all of these experiences is that they were the first step, the partial expression, the beginning of a revolutionary transformation. When workers begin to control their workplaces, the experiences recounted in this book suggest, it is also possible that working people might control the society and transform the government to create a truly human society.

*Manny Ness has generously donated copies of this book to the UE Research and Education Fund in order to support the cross-border work of the United Electrical Workers (UE) and Frente Auténtico del Trabajo (FAT). For each tax deductible contribution of \$25.00 or more, UEREF will send you a copy of this book. To make a contribution, [click here](#).*

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