

Worker's Control in America

By John Reed

IN every large Soviet of Workers' Deputies in Russia, in the Factory-Shop Committee of every important Russian industrial plant, there is usually some Russian who has worked in America, and who is valuable because of the knowledge he has picked up here of highly-organized industrial production.

However, the fact remains, that in spite of the technical efficiency of American industrial workers—considerably greater than that of Russian workers—workers' control of industry would be very difficult here.

This is, because the American skilled worker is so specialized and so driven, that as a rule he only knows his business as a cog in the machine. This is particularly true in such plants as the Ford Factory in Detroit, where a man goes on operating a stamping-press eight hours, day after day, week after week, turning out a moon-shaped little piece of metal whose use he does not even know, and the relation of which to the other manufactured parts is a mystery to him.

He has, for example, no idea of the relation of his function to that of the axle-maker, the piston-rod department (if there is such a department), the assembling department. And naturally he has no conception of the various preliminary processes of production which precede his—the rolling-mills, the smelters, railroad transportation, iron and coal mines.

He knows nothing of the cost of the article he is manufacturing, nor the cost of the whole article of which it is a part. He hasn't the slightest idea of the value of the plant he works in, the depreciation in value of machinery and buildings, the amount of profits made by the owners, the capitalization of the business, or the amount of dividends paid out. If he is class-conscious at all, he knows he is being robbed and exploited on the job; but he hasn't the slightest conception *how much*. If you were to ask him how much his labor actually produces, he couldn't tell you. He cannot calculate a fair wage for himself. And when he goes on strike for higher wages, he does not base his demands on *what the business can pay him* but on *what he needs to live on*—which is the wrong way to go about it.

The financial aspect of the problem, however, is secondary. What is immediately necessary is that the workers *learn their places* in the vast machine of industry. I will explain why.

In the highly-complicated organization of modern American industry, as I have pointed out, the worker is in the position of a private soldier in an autocratic army: he fills a place, does what he is told to by his superiors and does not reason why. He has no access to the office where the books are handled. He doesn't know what orders come in, or the price paid for them. When the factory is running full, he works overtime; when times are slack, or when, for some political reason the boss closes down the plant, he is simply fired. The boss tells him that without a high tariff the factory will close down—and so he votes the Republican ticket. . . .

Take it a little nearer to him. Over him is a foreman, almost as ignorant as he is, whose interest it is to keep the workers speeded up; over the foreman, a superintendent, for the same purpose, who understands the relation of the different branches of his department, but not very much about the relation of his department to the other departments. Over the superintendent, we'll say, the factory superintendent, or the manager, who understands the relation of the different departments to one another. Over the highest superintendent the managing director of the plant, who understands the relation of the factory to the market and competing factories; and over him the Board of Directors, who understand the relation of the business to the financial system. . . .

Every technical function is in charge of a specially trained technical man—chemists, engineers, book-keepers—whose work cannot be understood by the workers, because it requires a special education.

Now if the Revolution were to come tomorrow, and the workers of America found themselves in control of industrial production, what would happen?

The Board of Directors would be ousted, and the office-force—clerks, book-keepers, stenographers, statisticians, etc.—who consider themselves members of the capitalist class, and not workers at all, would go away. This must be expected, and for the moment it is not of great importance. It will not be to improve a new system of distribution of products in the Industrial Commonwealth. . . .

The important thing, however, is to keep industry going in each factory.

What will the technically-trained engineers, chemists, industrial organizers, efficiency experts, and so forth, do? It must be understood that these specially-trained men have been educated in capitalist schools, that they depend entirely upon the capitalist class for their livelihood. The greater part of them will also

leave the factory—although not for long. These are primarily scientists; they want to do their work—and if Workers' Control can give them their same jobs, with the greater freedom which the Industrial Commonwealth will afford them, they will stick.

Meanwhile, what about Workers' Control? Workers' Control means literally what it says—control by the workers. But in order to control a highly-complicated mechanism like a modern industrial plant, the workers must know what it is they are doing. Delegates from each department will have to meet immediately and form a committee to carry on production, with a full understanding of the relation of their departments to each other.

For instance, they must know the answers to questions like these:

How many men are necessary in each department to carry on the present volume of production?

How many hours must each man work?

What are the essential functions of the factory? How much and what kind of raw materials are used?

Where do they come from, and how are they transported?

Which of the technically-trained men are necessary to production?

What are the relations of the factory to the railroads, the mines?

I merely suggest the first burning questions which arise in the minds of workers, whose first (and right) instinct is to keep their industry running.

Of course committees must be immediately elected to cooperate with the organizations of control in the mining and transportation fields, and to meet the representation men, to consider the problems of distribution of products. . . .

At the present time the American Trade-Union system intensifies the workers' ignorance of the process of production, by dividing the different crafts into water-tight separate compartments, whose most intimate contact is when they squabble over "jurisdiction." These craft unions scab on one another, fight one another, and all combine against the unorganized but essential day-laborers at the bottom of the scale.

In an Industrial Union, *the identity of all crafts employed in one branch of industry* is emphasized.

However, the Industrial Union, although absolutely necessary to the Industrial Commonwealth of the future, does not solve the immediate problem of how the workers in each factory shall be ready to take control of that factory and run it.

When the departmental delegates meet to form a committee of Workers' Control, they must have all the available information about their own departments, and in addition, they must understand how all the departments fit in together in the general scheme of manufacture. For instance, the punch-press men must not immediately vote to reduce their hours from eight to four, while the furnace men demand a 50 per cent. increase in wages, and the machinists insist upon the abolition of piece-work. Whatever changes are made in the factory must be based on the whole process of manufacture, and with a knowledge of the needs and demands of other groups of workers in other lines. . . .

It can readily be seen that what we propose is nothing less than to lay right now the broad foundations of the Industrial Commonwealth, in which the world will be ruled, as Russia is now ruled, by a dictatorship of the actual workers, determined to get the full product of their labor, and to pay profits to nobody. It is obvious that any organization with the avowed purpose of seizing control of industry by force would be suppressed at once. And we do not advocate the formation of any such organization. It is unnecessary; for the Revolution will not come until the vast majority of the working class in this country is ready for it—and until that time the seizure of separate factories by the workers would be futile. . . .

But there is a way to prepare for the day when Labor takes over the factories. This is by organizing *right now*, in all factories, committees of workers composed of delegates from each shop, to make a detail study of the relations of one department to another.

These committees must not only study the processes of producing the article they manufacture, but must also find out how much it costs to produce each section of the article, and the completed whole; how much time it takes; and the difference between the cost price (which includes production of raw materials, transportation, labor, depreciation, and overhead charges), and the price at which the article sells. Only in this way can Labor arrive at an understanding of its rightful share—all it produces.

Our comrades in the industries have in this knowledge the most formidable means of propaganda possible. No worker who hears and understands how fearfully he is robbed at his job (figures which cannot be disproven) can remain outside the Left Wing of the Labor Movement. And if, at the same time, the value of political action is explained to him, he must—he cannot avoid it—join the Socialist Party and affiliate himself with the Left Wing.

American workers will not be so apt to make the mistake sometimes made by the Russian workers in the first days of the Revolution—the mistake of thinking that they can run industry without technically-trained men. However on the other hand, when they *do* take control of industry in America, they will discover more technically-trained men here who are willing to work with them than they did in Russia. Already in this country the lively interest of engineers, efficiency experts and other scientific men in the possibilities of Workers' Control of Industry, is startling. Every honest industrial scientist knows perfectly well that the capitalist system, with its network of selfish private interests, its corruption, its commercial rivalries, hinders the development of science, and actually obstructs production.

From time to time in *The Revolutionary Age* we intend to publish detailed analyses of certain American industries, to show what waste, inefficiency and graft there is under the capitalist system, what useless destruction of life and happiness, of human strength and natural riches—and then to show how all this can be eliminated under intelligent Workers' Control during the proletarian dictatorship which is coming.

The workers must not make this mistake that industry under the Socialist Order will produce *less*: it will, as a matter of fact, produce infinitely more, and distribute products communistically to the working class—with all the minimum of effort that scientific management and new machinery make possible, and with all the results to the workers.

It is not only necessary to plan the political downfall of the capitalist class, but also to get into the minds of the workers some conception of the industrial frame-work which will underlie the new Socialist political commonwealth which is to rule during the dictatorship of the proletariat, and afterward to succeed it.

MASS MEETING

to demand

Freedom for Political Prisoners

Sunday, March 16, 1919, 2 P. M.

GRAND OPERA HOUSE

Washington and Dover Sts., Boston, Mass.

Speakers:

FRED BIEDENKAPP

PATRICK McCLELLAN

LOUIS C. FRAINA

ADMISSION FREE

Pamphlets and Books of Real Importance

THE SOCIAL REVOLUTION IN GERMANY

By LOUIS C. FRAINA

A comprehensive study of the revolution, which is equally a study in the purposes and policy of revolutionary Socialism.

108 pages; 25c a copy

THE CRISIS IN THE GERMAN SOCIAL-DEMOCRACY

By KARL LIEBKNECHT, FRANZ MEHRING and ROSA LUXEMBURG

Written some months after the war, this pamphlet is a splendid analysis of Socialism and war.

140 pages; 35c a copy

CHAPTERS FROM MY DIARY

By LEON TROTZKY

A description of events during two and a half years of the war. Interesting information on Socialists' attitude.

48 pages; 10c a copy

REVOLUTIONARY SOCIALISM

By LOUIS C. FRAINA

This book considers the fundamental problems of Imperialism and Revolutionary Socialism—war, moderate Socialism, the Socialist collapse, the nation, State Capitalism, unionism and mass action, proletarian dictatorship, etc.

248 pages; 75c a copy

Special prices to locals and agents

The Revolutionary Age Book Dep't

885 Washington Street Boston, Mass.