

## **Workers Creating Hope: Factory Occupations and Self-Management**

### Worker Occupations Are Spreading

A few years ago, it would have seemed crazy to even suggest that workers across the world would be starting to once again occupy their factories to stop closures and retrenchments. The only place this seemed to happen up until recently was in Argentina. With the crisis in Argentina in 2001 hundreds of workplace occupations occurred. In the end, over 200 factories were recovered by workers and in many cases they became democratically run by the workers themselves.

Within the last several months, however, factory occupations have occurred in at least a dozen other countries besides Argentina. Once again direct action and even talk of worker self-management are back on the agenda of many workers.

Similar stories of workplace occupations have also occurred in the Republic of Ireland. Earlier this year, workers at the Waterford Crystal factory were informed by the companies liquidators -- Deloitte and Touch -- that they no longer had jobs and that they would not even receive severance pay. The workers decided to defend their livelihoods by staging an occupation. In response Deloitte and Touch sent in a private security force to threaten and intimidate the workers. Eventually, however, 10 million Euros was made available for a severance fund and negotiations are now underway for some of the workers to keep their jobs.

Factory and workplace occupations have also been taking place in several countries on continental Europe. When the current crisis first struck, in late 2007, 300 workers at Frape Behr in Spain occupied their workplace to stop retrenchments. As part of this, community activists and supporters surrounded the building and protested in solidarity with the workers inside. At the same time as this was occurring, workers in Serbia were occupying their factory, Shinvoz, to prevent it being privatized. In France, workers under the threat of retrenchments have also charged into the offices of their bosses and held them until their demands have been met. For example, at FM Logistics 125 workers invaded a managers meeting and held the bosses hostage. The reason the workers did this was because the company had formulated a plan to retrench over 470 workers due to the current economic crisis. After only one day of 'captivity,' the managers of FM Logistics agreed to re-examine their retrenchment plans. Similar 'bossnappings' have also occurred at the French holdings of Sony, 3M, and Catepillar. The majority of the French public have supported these 'bossnappings.' This support has meant that the French state has not been able to move against the workers involved.

Over the last few months, factory occupations have also been taking place in Turkey. Workers in Turkey have been hit extremely hard by the crisis with over 500,000 people losing their jobs since September 2008. In order to stem this, workers in a number of factories -- such as MEHA textiles and Sinter Metal -- embarked on workplace occupations. The Turkish state, however, has reacted harshly and used security forces to drive the workers out. Nonetheless, the workers then camped outside of the factories and their resistance has continued. Recently, the workers at Sinter held a celebration to mark their 100th day of resistance.

With the current global economic crisis, Argentina has once again been taking the lead in occupations and turning occupied factors into worker self-managed institutions. Under the threat of downsizing and pay cuts, 10 factories have been occupied in Argentina since 2008. The workers have taken this action to stop the owners from declaring bankruptcy. Indeed, it has been a strategy of the Argentine business elite to use crises to declare insolvency, then fraudulently liquate assets and suddenly open the business under a new name a few months later. A number of the newly occupied factories have also received major support from the older self-managed factories. Already, workers at least one of the 10 occupied factories -- Arrufat Chocolate -- have elected to take over the factory permanently and operate it on a democratic basis. They have already gone into production using generators and are turning Arrufat into a viable worker self-managed operation.

<https://libcom.org/library/workers-creating-hope-factory-occupations-self-management>

### Decision Making, Nonhierarchy, and Self-management

The difference in behaviour, attitude, participation effort, politics, and commitment between individuals involved in alternative workplaces and collectives – operating right now within capitalism- is often more disappointing than one would hope. How much of this has to do with structural problems or failures of vision in the particular workplace, how much has to do with individuals, how much has to do with problems of hiring in the first place, or inadequacies of training, or lack of clarity of job descriptions or expectations, or how much has to do with the many constraints of operating under capitalism, and the personal baggage we bring from our otherwise hierarchical backgrounds and lives is not easy to determine. But for whatever reason, building a workplace without formal and informal hierarchies, in which workers manage their own affairs, take their own initiatives, set their own collective norms regarding pace and work expectations, in which empowering and rote tasks are balanced, and in which workers effectively participate as equals in the overall decision-making process of the business – is much easier said than done.

Burrows P Chapter 22 In Spannos C 'Real Utopia – Participatory society for the 21<sup>st</sup> century' pp. 294-295

### Political relevance and transition

Workers can democratically control their own workplaces, set production goals, decide what is an acceptable average effort and pace, and determine their own wages without running a business into the ground, and we do this without turning our backs on 'activism' as it is typically understood.

We need to be realistic about the pace of social change, but we also need to be building self-sustaining and growing alternative networks right now. And we need to be doing it in a way that will leave the next generation of activists better equipped to press their demands, intensify or widen the struggle, and assume an even greater degree of control over their own lives and work. It is absolutely unrealistic to think that an egalitarian, participatory, feminist, socialist, anarchist, or any other paradise can be created in a day, or for that matter, ever, and unrealistic expectations are a fast road to burnout and despair. But equally paralyzing is the belief that everything is hopeless, or all our efforts are trivial, or everything short of some sweeping revolution is reformist. We need to strike a balance between hope and reality if we want our efforts to be truly sustainable. And we need real positive examples to point to, which embody the principles we hold and incorporate aspects of the vision we aspire to.

Burrows P Chapter 22 In Spannos C 'Real Utopia – Participatory society for the 21<sup>st</sup> century' pp. 304-305

### Mondragon Corporation principles

#### Democratic organisation

The basic equality of worker-members in terms of their rights to be, possess and know, which implies acceptance of a democratically organised company based on the sovereignty of the General Assembly, electing governing bodies and collaborating with managerial bodies.

#### Sovereignty of labour

Labour is the main factor for transforming nature, society and human beings themselves. As a result, the systematic recruitment of salaried workers has been abandoned, full sovereignty is attached to labour, the wealth created is distributed in terms of the labour provided and there is a will to extend the job options available to all members of society.

#### Instrumental and subordinate nature of capital

Capital is considered to be an instrument subordinate to labour, which is necessary for business development. Therefore it is understood to be worthy of fair and suitable remuneration, which is limited and not directly linked to the profits obtained, and availability subordinate to the continuity and development of the co-operative.

#### Participatory management

The steady development of self-management and, consequently, of member participation in the area of company management which, in turn, requires the development of adequate mechanisms for participation, transparent information, consultation and negotiation, the application of training plans and internal promotion.

#### Payment solidarity

Sufficient and fair pay for work as a basic principle of its management, based on the permanent vocation for sufficient collective social promotion in accordance with the real possibilities the co-operative has, and fair on an internal, external and MCC level.

#### Inter-cooperation

As the specific application of solidarity and as a requirement for business efficiency, the Principle of Inter-cooperation should be evident: between individual co-operatives, between subgroups and between the Mondragón co-operative experience and Basque co-operative organisations, and co-operative movements in Spain, Europe and the rest of the world.

#### Social transformation

The willingness to ensure fair social transformation with other peoples by being involved in an expansion process that helps towards their economic and social reconstruction and with the construction of a freer, fairer and more caring Basque society.

<http://www.mondragon-corporation.com/eng/co-operative-experience/our-principles/>

## **Anarchist Visions Argentina**

### **Mutual Solidarity**

Many of Argentina's labor organizations like the subway workers, public health workers and several worker run enterprises have fostered a broad mutual solidarity network. Pannekoek describes this as mutual help, which appears spontaneous and then takes an organized and lasting form. Argentina's mutual solidarity network has become extensive and very effective.

The general assembly at the worker controlled FaSinPat ceramics factory has regularly voted to use funds from production for workers' strike funds. During the months long conflict at the Garrahan children's public hospital, FaSinPat provided funds for employees who had their salaries cut for participating in the strike.

Beyond strike funds, direct action is another element of a mutual solidarity network. When a group of men physically attacked and tortured a wife of a Zanon worker, social organizations quickly mobilized to denounce the attacks. Subway workers said that they would paralyze the Buenos Aires subway

system if the attacks continued. "Zanon has helped to coordinate workers in struggle. We are ready to do whatever is necessary to defend the struggle of the compañeros in Neuquen," said Arturo, a subway delegate.

### **Worker self-determination**

A fundamental characteristic of these worker organizations fighting today is their commitment to democratic organizing. This past year the workers at the Garrahan children's hospital have led a fight for a basic liveable salary. They've also had to put up a fight against the legacy of a bureaucratic union that has acted in accomplice to the privatization and destruction of public health. 700 nurses, technicians, and janitors are organized in a worker assembly that functions as an internal commission of the ATE state-employees union. The internal assembly values direct democracy and non-hierarchical organization – motions are made by the assembly's body and then the workers vote on the motion.

On January 20, Subway workers presented a draft for a new collective labor contract they are set to negotiate with the Metrovias company. This is the first time in Argentina's history that a body of workers (over 300 in this case) drafted a labor agreement. The draft is titled "The workers building their own destiny." They published the book explaining how workers can use a collective labor contract to protect themselves against employers. They printed over 3,000 copies so that each worker can review the draft and give his or her opinions. The draft lays out the parameters for workday, vacation, safety standards, wage scales, etc.

<http://mujereslibres.blogspot.co.uk/2006/07/anarchist-visions-argentina.html>