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Factory Committees and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat

Maurice Brinton

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It is a welcome sign of the times that a serious exchange of radical opinion is now under way concerning the formative period of the Russian state, and *Critique* is to be congratulated on having played a part in the initiation of this discussion. How deep the confrontation goes will, of course, depend on how open the journal remains to those in the revolutionary movement who do not accept the label of "Marxist", but who feel they may nevertheless have something of relevance to contribute.

In your last issue, Chris Goodey claims that "it is only the current practice and experience of the world movement for socialist revolution that is beginning to allow us an overall view of the battle-stations which we have unthinkingly maintained for a long time". In a very general sense that is, of course, true. But elements of a serious critique antedated - and by a considerable period - "May 1968 in France, the Prague events and the Chilean Revolution". Some of those who initiated this critique would moreover shudder to find themselves subsumed under

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the "we" that Goodey refers to. They did not wait until the late sixties to express their views. As early as 1918 they had clearly seen the direction in which Russian society was moving and proclaimed a principled opposition, often at the cost of their lives. It is a tragic fact, for which Leninists of all kinds (Stalinists, Trotskyists, Maoists, and the advocates of various theories of "state capitalism", i.e. International Socialists, Bordigists, "Marxist Humanists", etc.) must carry their full share of responsibility, that we know less today about the early weeks of Russian Revolution than we do, for instance, about the history of the Paris Commune.

"Unfortunately it is not the workers who write history. It is always 'the others.'"¹ "Official" historians seldom have eyes to see or ears to hear the acts and words which express the autonomous activity of the working class. They think in terms of institutions, congresses, leaders. In the best instances they will vaunt rank-and-file activity as long as it coincides with their own conceptions. But they "will radically condemn it or impute the basest of motives to it as soon as it deviates from that line".² They seem to lack the categories of thought necessary to perceive life as it really is. To them an activity which has no leader or programme, no institutions and no statutes, can only be conceptualized as "troubles", "disorder", "anarchy". In the words of Cardan "the spontaneous activity of the masses belongs, by definition, to what history suppresses".³

Goodey is correct when he claims it is "part of the revolutionary process to demystify our own history" and when he points out that the struggle for "direct forms of working people's power at the point of production" has been "hidden

¹ Paul Cardan, "Le Rôle de l'idéologie bolchevique dans la naissance de la bureaucratie", *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, no. 35 (January-March 1964). This text was subsequently published in English as Solidarity Pamphlet 24, *From Bolshevism to the Bureaucracy* (1967).

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

and ignored". (The formulation in the passive is, however, disingenuous. By whom was it hidden? And why was it ignored?) But he is profoundly wrong when he attributes this silence of the "Marxist left" to such ideological shortcomings as lack of "temerity" or insufficient "capacity for self-criticism". A proper evaluation of these matters cannot but lead, for anyone with even moderate pretensions to intellectual honesty, to a complete break with Leninism in all its aspects and to a re-examination of certain basic Marxist beliefs.

A steady trickle of documentation is now coming to light concerning the role of the Factory Committees in the Russian Revolution.⁴ Goodey sees these Committees as "the most powerful institution in Russia by the end of 1917" and in this he is certainly right. He is also correct in claiming that "this power later submerged". What is lacking in his article, however, is the serious attempt to explain what happened in between, when it happened, why it happened, and to whom it happened. The "submergence" of which Goodey speaks was well advanced, if not virtually completed, by May 1918, i.e. *before* the Civil War and the "Allied" intervention really got under way. The traditional explanations of the degeneration of the Russian revolution are just not good enough.

In my view, Goodey's silence on these essential questions is unavoidable. It flows directly from his honestly declared political position. He sees Party and State as "indirect forms of workers' power", and explicitly absolves the Leninist Party from any blame in the degeneration. He claims that "even in our present world, in spite of the fact that bureaucratic degeneration is inherent in the 'workers' state' and the 'workers' party, these are still the necessary complement to forms of direct work-

⁴ Carr's *The Bolshevik Revolution, 1917-1923* (Macmillan, 1952), Daniels's *The Conscience of the Revolution* (Harvard University Press, 1960), Avrich's *The Russian Anarchists* (Princeton University Press, 1967) and Kaplan's *Bolshevik Ideology* (Owen, 1969) provide an excellent starting point for anyone interested in the discussion.

ers' power". He only conceives these forms of direct workers' power as "effective anti-bodies against that degeneration". He nowhere posits them as the necessarily dominant units in the initiation of policy, in other words as the basic nuclei of the new society. With this kind of overall outlook a serious analysis of the smashing of the Factory Committees is virtually impossible, for the Bolshevik Party was to play a dominant role in this tragedy. There is nothing more utopian than the belief that the Russian working class could have maintained its power through a "workers' party" or a "workers' state" when it had already lost that power at the point of production.

I have elsewhere⁵ sought to bring together material from disparate sources and to document as concisely and yet as fully as possible the various stages of a process which led, within the short period of four years, from the tremendous upsurge of the Factory Committee movement (a movement which both implicitly and explicitly sought to alter the relations of production) to the establishment of unquestioned domination by a monolithic and bureaucratic agency (the Party) over all aspects of economical and political life. I argued that as this agency was not itself based on production, its rule could only epitomize the continued limitation of the authority of the workers in the productive process. This necessarily implied the perpetuation within society at large.

It is impossible, within the space available, to recapitulate all the evidence here. The first stage of the process under discussion was the subordination of the Factory Committees to the All-Russian Council for Workers' Control in which the unions (themselves already strongly under Party influence) were heavily represented. This took place very shortly after the coming to power of the Soviet Government. The second phase - which almost immediately followed the first - was the incorporation of this All-Russian Council for Workers' Control

One fact such a search will reveal - and of this there can be little doubt - is that this group had perceived (as early as 1921, without the privilege of hindsight, and far more clearly than does Chris Goodey) that the "dictatorship of the proletariat" had been liquidated *pari passu* with the liquidation of the Factory Committees.

⁵ *The Bolsheviks and Workers' Control, 1917-1921* (Solidarity, 1970).

with these conceptions the Party soon lost all contact with the class?

Goodey seeks to prove his point that the Factory Committees belong to the nascent bureaucracy by looking at the later careers of certain Factory Committees' leaders: men such as Chubar, Matvei, Zhivotov and Skrypnik. That non-Bolshevik leaders of the Factory Committees later supported the Bolsheviks is indisputable. But so what? It is not unknown for individual shop stewards to end up as foremen. Does this really prove anything beyond the capacity of established power, in its various garbs, to recuperate dissent? Does the fact that Alexandra Kollontai later became a Stalinist ambassador invalidate her earlier writings on the emancipation of women? Does Trotsky's later Bolshevism invalidate his prophetic warnings of 1904 on the subject of the Party substituting itself for the working class?¹⁷

If Goodey is really interested in the history of what happened to the personnel of the Factory Committees (and not to just a few of their leaders) a fruitful area might be the history of the various syndicalist groups, and in particular of the "Revolutionary Centre of Factory Committees", a body of anarchist inspiration which competed for a while with the All-Russian Council of Factory Committees, without ever succeeding in supplanting it, so many were the obstacles put in its path. The search will, I suspect, prove disappointing. Systematic persecution of "left" dissidents soon became a way of life. Proletarian partisans of the individual Factory Committees tried to resist and to regroup but their resistance was easily overcome.¹⁸ The search also might encompass the fate of groupings of Bolshevik origin, such as Masnikov's *Workers' Group* (an offspring from the Workers' Opposition) and of Bogdanov's *Workers' Truth*.

¹⁷ See *Our Political Tasks*.

¹⁸ Maurice Dobb, *Soviet Economic Development since 1917* (New York, 1948), pp. 89-90.

into the Vesenka (Supreme Economic Council), even more heavily weighted in favour of the unions, but also comprising direct nominees of the state (i.e. of the Party). By early 1918 the Bolsheviks were actively seeking to merge the Committees into the trade union structures. The issue provoked heated discussions at the First All-Russian Congress of Trade Unions (January 7-14, 1918) which saw desperate attempts, led mainly by anarcho-syndicalists, to maintain the autonomy of the Committees, against the advice Ryazanov who urged the Committees "to commit suicide by becoming an integral element of the trade union structure".⁶ During the next two years a sustained campaign was waged to curb the power of the unions themselves, for the unions, albeit in a very indirect and distorted way, could still be influenced by the working class. It was particularly important for the new bureaucracy to replace this power by the authority of direct party nominees. These managers and administrators, nearly all appointed from above, gradually came to form the basis of a new ruling class. The important point, as far as the re-evaluation of history is concerned, is that each of these steps was to be resisted, but each fight was to be lost. Each time, the "adversary" appeared in the garb of the new "proletarian" power. And each defeat was to make it more difficult for the working class itself directly to manage production, i.e. fundamentally to alter its status as a subordinate class.

Goodey claims that the "essence of the libertarian argument is that the level of the productive forces plays a less determining role in the development of history than the existence of hierarchy: in the revolutionary process that hierarchy takes the form of 'authoritarianism' among the leaders (in this case the Bolshevik Party) and 'false consciousness' among the masses

⁶ D. B. Ryazanov in *Pervy vserossiiskii s'yezd professionalnykh soyuzov, 7-14 yanvarya 1918 g.* (First All-Russian Congress of Trade Unions, January 7 to 14, 1918) (Moscow, 1918), p. 235.

in submitting to what they consider their natural leaders". It is difficult to know from where he can derive such a crudely psychological formulation of the libertarian case. As far as I know, no libertarian has argued that the level of the productive forces is either "more" or "less" important than the role of ideas and attitudes in influencing historical development. Both are important. What libertarians have stressed (and most Marxists have signally refused to recognize) is that the conceptions and attitudes of the dominant Party were as much an objective fact of history - influencing the evolution of events at critical moments - as were production statistics for electricity or steel.

Goodey claims that the libertarian argument "can be nailed quite easily" and I find it a compliment that he should choose my essay on which to practice his skills as a carpenter. He focuses attention on one particular episode I describe in the hope that by challenging its factual accuracy he can somehow impugn the credibility of the rest. He correctly defines the area of the discussion. "The argument is that Lenin and Bolshevik leaders suppressed the factory committees immediately on the seizure of Power, because they held too much real power". Right on! Goodey is also correct in attributing to me the view "the legislation on workers' control immediately after October was elaborated in totally different ways by Lenin and by the committees' leaders". Again, right on! There is abundant evidence (summarized in my text) to substantiate this view. The Achilles' heel of my thesis is allegedly my reference to a document drawn up by certain members of the Central Council of Petrograd Factory Committees on how the economy should have been run immediately after the October events. I am quite prepared to take up the challenge on this rather narrow basis.

According to Goodey (and he devotes three pages to the matter) my knowledge of the document in question was "fifth

⁷ Didier Limon, "Lenine et le controle ouvrier" (*Autogestion* (Paris), no.

from Pankratova. No Limon changing the authorship of the document. No truncating of quotations. All these are figments of Goodey's imagination and he should clearly stop prattling about "attitudes to verifiable facts". If this is really the best your contributor can do to "nail" the libertarian argument those who manufacture bandages for sore thumbs are in for a boom.

But let us return to the main argument. Goodey claims that "if ... there was a nascent bureaucracy in 1917, then the Factory Committees were part of it". This is totally to misunderstand the concept of bureaucracy. It attributes to the word a restricted meaning, of little value to those who seek radically to change society. The classical Marxist conceptions are here totally inadequate. A bureaucracy is not just "officialdom" or a "social stratum enjoying certain material privileges" or a "gendarme, ensuring a certain pattern of distribution under conditions of want". If the concept of self-management is to have any meaning a bureaucracy must be seen as a group seeking to manage *from the outside* the activities of others. If that group has a monopoly of decisional authority, its bureaucratic potential will be vastly enhanced. In this sense if there was a nascent bureaucracy by the end of 1917 in Russia it was certainly not to be found in the Factory Committees. It was to be found in the Party itself. Certain Party attitudes here played a very important role. Trotsky himself (if we must refer to him) perceptively described all this. Referring to the Third Party Congress (April 25-May 10, 1905) he spoke of "the young revolutionary bureaucrat already emerging as a type. They were far more intransigent and severe with the revolutionary working men than with themselves, preferring to domineer".¹⁵ No less a man than Lenin had written that "a worker-agitator who shows any talent should not work in the factory".¹⁶ Is it any wonder that

¹⁵ Leon Trotsky, *Stalin* (London: Hollis and Carter, 1947), p. 61.

¹⁶ Lenin, *Sochineniya*, IV, p. 44.

the leaders of the Factory Committees. First the very real difficulties Lenin experienced in getting wide support for his "Draft Decrees on Workers' Control". These were originally published in *Pravda* (on November 3, 1917) but only ratified by the V.Ts.I.K. (All-Russian Central Executive Committee of the Soviets) eleven days later, after heated opposition from the rank and file of the Factory Committees.¹³ Secondly the fact that *Izvestiya* (December 13, 1917) found it necessary to publish a text ("General Instructions on Workers' Control in Conformity with the Decree of November 14") which became widely known as the "Counter-Manual".

Concerning the substance of the passage under dispute Hoschiller's text makes it crystal clear that Limon has "amputated" nothing. Quoting from the introduction to the "Manual", Hoschiller (p. 167) writes that workers' control "*ne doit pas être considéré dans le sens étroit d'une révision mais dans le sens plus large de 'l'ingerance'*". Full stop. (A full stop put by Hoschiller, not by Limon. And a reasonable place, I would have thought, at which to end a quotation.) That my own reference to this document included, through the carelessness of a misplaced unquote, a few words that were Limon's hardly constitutes "rewriting the text" and alters precisely nothing to the substance of the matter.¹⁴

So there you have it. No plot. No "fifth hand knowledge" of a "shop-soiled" quotation. No Lozovsky as the "evident" original secondary source of all the rest. No wrong dates inherited

¹³ According to Carr (*The Bolshevik Revolution*, Vol. 2 (Pelican edition, 1966), p. 73) "in the controversy behind the scenes which followed the publication of Lenin's draft, the trade unions became the unexpected champions of order, discipline and centralized direction of production; and the revised draft decree finally presented to V.Ts.I.K. on 14-27 November 1917 was the result of a struggle between the trade unions and the Factory Committees which repeated the struggle at the October Conference". (The First All-Russian Conference of Factory Committees had been held on October 17-22, 1917.)

¹⁴ Brinton, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

hand". I had inherited from one Didier Limon⁷ "an amputated quotation, bearing the wrong date, the wrong title, and the wrong authors". I had then "rewritten the text". Strong stuff. Unfortunately, on every single point Goodey is wrong.

According to Goodey the fateful history of this document was as follows. It was originally published in part in *Izvestia* (December 7, 1917) and fully in *Narodnoe Khozyaistvo* (no. 1, 1918). Lozovsky, a Bolshevik trade unionist, allegedly altered its title from "Draft Instructions on Workers' Control" to "Practical Manual for the Execution of Workers' Control". This was done in his book, *Rabochii Kontrol*, which according to Goodey was written "in November of 1917". (Goodey does not explain how Lozovsky could, in November 1917, have been distorting the title of a text that had not yet been published, but this is a minor point.) Then, still according to Goodey's chronology, Pankratova took up the text in her writings of 1923.⁸ For reasons of her own she dated it February 6, 1918 (i.e. after the First Trade Union Congress, which sought to "fuse from above" the Factory Committees and the Unions). Goodey is to be congratulated in detecting this early piece of falsification by one of Stalin's pet historians. But the relevance of this to what either Limon or I wrote totally escapes me: neither of us gave the wrong date for the text under discussion.

According to Goodey, Limon takes over from Pankratova "the wrong title and the wrong date and adds his own embellishments". He truncates a quotation in the text and changes the authorship of the original document, attributing it to the "non-Bolshevik leaders of the All-Russian Council of the Factory Committees". On all these scores, Goodey is wrong. Limon did *not* get his facts⁹ via Pankratova. The "secret" can now be

4 (1967)).

⁸ Pankratova's article on "The Factory Committees in Russia at the Time of the Revolution (1917-1918)" was published in the previously mentioned issue of *Autogestion*.

⁹ Personal communication from Didier Limon.

let out of the bag. Limon got his facts from someone who had seen the documentation at the first hand, and before Pankratova had even thought of writing about it. I have also seen this original source. Even Goodey could have had access to it, had he been less concerned in proving the bad faith of those he disagrees with politically, and had he chosen to check with Limon. (Limon is, after all, on the Editorial Board of *Autogestion*, for which Goodey is the "correspondent for Great Britain".)

The "original" source is Chapter 8 ("Les Soviets d'usine à l'oeuvre") of Max Hoschiller's book *Le Mirage Soviétique* (Paris: Payot, 1921). Hoschiller was a French revolutionary who spoke Russian well. The authenticity of his account is vouched for by no less a figure than André Merrheim who wrote the Preface to Hoschiller's book.¹⁰ It was in fact at Merrheim's suggestion that Hoschiller went to Russia.

Now what does Hoschiller say as to the authorship, the title, and the content of the controversial document?

Hoschiller makes it clear that in the weeks preceding the revolution it was the anarchists who were striking the tune ("*donnaient le la*") in the Factory Committees and that the Bolsheviks could only trail along after them ("*étaient bien obligés de marcher à leur remorque*"). On December 7, 1917, the decree setting up the Vesenkha (Supreme Economic Council) was promulgated.¹¹ The Vesenkha comprised some members of the All-Russian Council of Workers' Control (a very indirect sop to the Factory Committees), massive representation of all the new Commissariats and a number of experts, nominated from above, in a consultative capacity. According to Hoschiller the leaders of the Factory Committees, dissatisfied with Lenin's concessions ("*mécontents en dépit de toutes les concessions du*

¹⁰ Merrheim, one-time secretary of the French Metalworkers' Federation and co-author of the Charter of Amiens, was one of the important figures of the anti-war movement in France during the First World War. He was an active participant in the Zimmerwald Conference of anti-war socialists.

¹¹ *Sobraniye uzakonenii 1917-1918*, no. 4, art. 58.

chef du gouvernement"), did not implement the decisions but elaborated their own decree in the form of a "Practical Manual for the Implementation of Workers' Control" ("*élaborèrent leur pro-pre décret sous forme d'un 'Manuel Pratique pour l'Execution du Contrôle Ouvrier'* "). Hoschiller describes how jealously he had kept the eight great in-folio sheets, printed in double columns, that had been widely distributed in the streets of Petrograd. He has clearly seen the original, which is more than can be said with any confidence of Lozovski, Pankratova ... or even of Goodey.

Goodey then takes issue with Limon's attribution of this text to the "non-Bolshevik leaders of the All-Russian Council of Factory Committees". Is he really suggesting that the "Manual" was a Party document? Reference to the Hoschiller text shows that it was no such thing. One particular prescription of the "Manual" epitomizes this point. The "Manual" spoke of "Regional Federations of Factory Committees" and of the need for a "National Union of Factory Committees". But even Deutscher is forced to point out that such demands were diametrically opposed to Party policy at the time. "A few weeks after the upheaval the Factory Committees attempted to form their own national organization ... The Bolsheviks now called upon the trade unions to render a special service to the nascent Soviet State and to discipline the Factory Committees. The unions came out firmly against the attempt of the Factory Committees to form a national organization of their own. They prevented the convocation of a planned All-Russian Congress of Factory Committees".¹² It ill behoves various Bolsheviks, after all this, to denounce the Factory Committees as only having had parochial preoccupations.

Two other facts stress the wide divergence of approach already obvious at this stage between the Leninists and

¹² Isaac Deutscher, *Soviet Trade Unions* (London: Royal Institute for International Affairs, 1950), p. 17.