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Worker Ownership and Participation in the Context of Social Change:

Progress is Slow and Difficult, But It Need Not Wait upon Massive Redistribution of Wealtb

By KENNETH O. ALEXANDER*

ABSTRACT. A massive volume of literature has been generated over recent years concerning the nature of *work organizations* and resultant effects upon *worker satisfaction* and *enterprise efficiency*. Between extreme radical and conservative views, a good deal of attention has focused on *worker ownership* and the locus of power in the organization. Worker ownership can lead to beneficial results, but only if carefully structured. *Worker participation* in decision-making is the key, but the transfer from *authoritarianism* is difficult. Any substantial transfer of *enterprise ownership* is remote. Even transformation to greater power-sharing, short of ownership change, will be slow and fragile.

I

Some Perspective on Worker Ownership and Participation

THE MANNER in which human beings organize themselves for productive effort, and the welfare of the individual within those organizations, are of fundamental concern for any society. They have been the topics for a staggering volume of literature that extends over centuries. In a recent examination of only a portion of the attention received, over only the last decade or so, the authors aptly described the literature as "galloping out of control."¹

Considering the multidisciplinary and historic scope of the writings, we may indeed be far beyond the point of any summarizing overview, at least within the confines of any portable volume. No such ambitious, and perhaps impossible, task is contemplated here. Rather, the hope is the more modest one of bringing some perspective to the topic from the standpoint of contemporary American society.

That society is marked by a basic contradiction often commented upon in the literature. Its ideals extol the dignity and worth of the individual. Its daily work processes submerge the individual as an inferior within a typically authoritarian hierarchy. Autocratic management evolved out of the interplay

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of historic forces including the legal rights of private property, expanding scale of production, technological change, subdivision of tasks, separation of ownership and control in the corporation, the rise of a professional management, and the influence of Taylorism early in the century.

Authoritarian work organizations currently are being subjected to extensive criticism on two grounds. First, they inhibit individual fulfillment and satisfaction at work. This can involve not only the reduced welfare from the loss of psychic income, but also the additional explicit costs of institutional treatment for mental and physical ailments associated with work.

Second, by excluding workers from decision-making, authoritarian work organizations fail to maximize efficiency or minimize cost. They fail to tap the potential of productivity-enhancing contributions that could emanate from the experience and talents of those actually performing the tasks of production.² Both this point and the above criticism concerning job satisfaction have become more significant with the historically rising educational level of the American work force. The Taylorism of early in the century, with its separation of thinkers from doers, has become less defensible as managerial philosophy with the passage of time.

Mainstream economics, while fundamentally concerned with both welfare and efficiency, has paid little attention to both of the above criticisms. It has concentrated on the welfare of the individual as a consumer but not as a producer. And it has not viewed the nature of work organizations as a significant determinant of productivity.³

Π

The Extreme Perspectives

THE MASS OF LITERATURE concerning the characteristics and results of alternative work organizations crosses a variety of disciplines and comes from many perspectives. From the vantage point of American capitalism, one end of the perspective spectrum could be termed conservative. As the term indicates, there is no threat to the capitalistic system, nor to the legitimate position of managerial authority within it.

In this view, changing circumstances merely pose a new challenge to the personnel management techniques of management. Some of the literature on such topics as flextime, job enlargement and job enrichment reflects this view If worker morale and performance depend upon adjustments in the conditions of work, then it is incumbent upon management to implement appropriate change. Indeed, because of its power, expertise and responsibility, it is only management that can bring about these adjustments.

The conservative label for this position stems from the key characteristic

that it entails no challenge to the traditional powers of management. There is no abrogation of Taylorism and the presumption of superior decision-making by the few. It is a more sophisticated Taylorism.

Criticism of the conservative extreme points out that no real change will result because there is no real change. Beneficial results by way of job satisfaction and productivity come about because of real opportunity for the worker to have an input into work decisions. This opportunity to participate in decision-making necessarily involves some sharing of power by management. If management is not prepared to share power, all that is left is manipulation of the worker. Any initial positive results from management changes are not likely to endure, as workers learn they continue to be powerless.

Again viewed from contemporary American capitalism, the other end of the perspective spectrum of the literature can be termed radical. It is only the abolition of capitalism that will result in more satisfying and meaningful work. Job dissatisfaction and worker alienation are the inevitable results of the system, with its inevitable conflict between worker and capitalist.⁴

Jobs are often meaningless, repetitive, boring, monotonous, etc. As industrialization progressed, tasks were subdivided, functions were specialized, old skills were eroded and the worker lost control of the work and an overall view of the productive function being performed. Such developments are viewed as not merely the result of a quest for efficiency. They are also regarded as a reflection of the capitalists' desire to keep labor divided, powerless and insecure; and thereby subject to exploitation in the production process and incapable of mounting a political attack against the holders of property and power. All this can end only with the end of capitalism and its replacement with collective ownership of the means of production, socialism. Only then will worker alienation cease and work become meaningful.

Criticism of the radical extreme points out that socialism in fact is not necessarily associated with any particular organizational characteristics for the workplace. Authoritarian hierarchies can come out of a state bureaucracy just as they can come out of capitalism. Consequently, a socialistic system also can be marked by the welfare losses of job dissatisfaction and the production inefficiencies emanating from authoritarianism's failure to draw out productive contributions from all participants in the work process.⁵

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The In-Between

WITHIN THE ABOVE radical and conservative extremes, a huge amount of discussion is focused primarily upon two key issues: 1. ownership of non-

human production inputs, and 2. the nature of work organizations and the locus of power and decision-making within them.

If capitalism and ownership are changed, it need not be a change to the broad collective ownership of socialism. There has been recent discussion of a system characterized by, to use terms usually associated with an earlier era, syndicalism or producers' cooperatives. Each productive enterprise is to be owned—in whole or at least in significant. part—by the workers of that particular enterprise. Vanek has set out the theory of such an arrangement, with the allocation of resources left to the market rather than to central direction.⁶

Theoretically, Vanek expects the system to be superior to capitalism in many respects. However, there is room for doubt, especially with regard to dynamic change, innovation, and assumption of risk.⁷ Doubt is inevitable. Whenever a substantial transformation of society is envisioned, results cannot be certain. Different outcomes can be envisioned when contemplating human behavior in a new institutional setting. Different views can be held concerning the evolutionary change over time that will occur in individual behavior, institutional details, or both. Historically, of course, it is just such differences which have split and factionalized reform groups.

In spite of a generally poor historic record for worker-owned firms in both Great Britain and the United States,⁹ they are receiving renewed interest—partially because of their promise in the two basic dimensions in which authoritarian work organizations have been criticized: job satisfaction and productive efficiency. Simply put, both should be improved if workers accept and adopt the goals of the work organization. And this identity of goals should come about, almost by definition, in an arrangement where the workers *are* the organization.

These expectations have been supported by recent research findings.¹⁰ However, improvement in job satisfaction and productivity are dependent upon the specific nature of worker ownership. At this point, beneficial results seem to depend upon whether worker ownership is total, direct, equal-voting and retained over time by the current work force. It was this form of ownership that was carefully stipulated by Vanek in his theoretical treatment of such organizations in a market system. But theoretical conclusions, just as real-world experience, will differ with different legal, financial and institutional specifics of worker ownership.¹¹

Contemporary worker ownership arrangements in the United States are indeed marked by wide variation in the specifics of ownership. Worker ownership may be: partial or full, by equal or unequal conventional share ownership, with or without voting rights in choosing policy-makers, by ESOP¹² or other forms of trust ownership with wide variation among these. Over time, workers may sell out to absentee owners or retain ownership when leaving the workforce. New workers may be hired without sharing in ownership. And worker ownership erodes and degenerates. In such cases, improvements in job satisfaction and productivity are either not realized or, if realized, not sustained.¹³

Over time, the worker-owned firm must face the market test when placed within a capitalist system. Historically, many have failed, with inability to attract competent management and difficulty in receiving necessary capital among the reasons. Even if successful, they face the threat of degeneration or erosion through partial or complete transfer to absentee owners. To forestall this danger of success requires careful structuring of the legal form of ownership.¹⁴

Worker ownership also has been proposed or consummated as a response to an impending plant shutdown.¹⁵ A shutdown, of course, can levy massive costs on workers, their families and local communities. These would be largely ignored by absentee ownership. Worker ownership would encompass them, promote a willingness to accept lower wages and make greater contribution to the plant's efficiency in order to sustain it.¹⁶ In some cases, a prior conglomerate was unfamiliar with functions performed locally, demanded a relatively high rate of local profitability and levied a substantial assessment on the local plant to sustain corporate administrative cost.

Because of the many private and public costs, a variety of measures have been introduced in state legislatures and Congress to ameliorate the effects of plant shutdowns. Since worker ownership can be a means of internalizing private costs into the shutdown decision, thereby reducing attendant public 342

costs of shutdown, a case can be made for public assistance in making the transfer to worker ownership in shutdown situations.¹⁷ Led by Michigan in 1979, at least nine states have passed legislation to assist, in some manner, in the establishment of employee-owned firms.

Society faces the persistent question of the nature and degree of public efforts to ameliorate the costs of transition and adaptation to the demands of a market economy. Public assistance for worker ownership in shutdown cases is another option. Administration of any such program, however, would sometimes find it difficult to distinguish between those cases in which worker ownership would result in a continuing, viable enterprise and those in which the dictates of the market made shutdown and attendant costs for workers and the community unavoidable.

IV

Participation and Ownership

IN GENERAL, there is no neat, predictable relationship between worker ownership and worker participation.¹⁸ Indeed, Cooper, in her survey of worker ownership, points out that most companies with employee ownership plans are not democratically structured.¹⁹ Bernstein points out that participation can occur without ownership, and that ownership does not guarantee participation. Hammer, Stern and Gurdon document stock ownership by employees resulting in no change in managerial control.²⁰

Relationships between different forms of worker ownership and different degrees of worker participation can vary widely in specific circumstances. They are subject to a host of intervening variables by way of historic, social, political, economic, organizational and other differences. No all-encompassing theory exists which can be "plugged in" for accurate prediction. It is not an unusual condition for the social sciences.

But there is encouragement in the consistency of findings through empirical research and case studies. As indicated earlier, greatest improvement in job satisfaction and productivity results from worker ownership which most closely approaches full, equal and continuing ownership. Why this result? O'Toole, as a result of his survey, concluded that, in addition to worker education, the key consideration lay in real worker ownership shifting managerial control and transferring responsibility for success or failure to the workers. "The more worker ownership in a company, the better."²¹

Long, more than any other researcher, has been investigating interrelationships between ownership and participation and consequent effects on the enterprise and the worker. In 1978, results of his case study led him to observe:

Although share ownership does, in and of itself, appear to have beneficial effects on certain job attitudes, employee participation in decision-making appears to generally have stronger effects. Since it cannot be assumed that employee share ownership will automatically lead to this increased participation, conscious efforts to develop effective employee participation need to be made.²²

In 1980, Long examined effects on job attitudes and organizational performance of recent conversion to employee ownership at three firms. His results were summarized as follows:

Favorable effects were most evident at the firm with the highest employee ownership and least evident at the firm with the lowest. The concept of employee participation in decision making is believed to play a key role in these outcomes.²³

Results of another field study were reported by Long in 1982. In the same consistent vein, he reported that:

First, employee ownership does not necessarily result in the beneficial consequences claimed by its advocates. Second, employee participation in decision making may be a key factor in realizing positive effects from employee ownership and preventing negative consequences from arising.²⁴

Finally, Russell, Hochner and Perry examined the experience of a group of worker-owned refuse collection companies in the San Francisco area. Their results in terms of worker ownership, participation, productivity and work attitudes led them to conclude:

It now seems clear, for example, that no instance of worker-ownership should be established without explicit provisions for the inclusion of rank-and-file worker-owners in decision making and for discouraging the use of hired labor.²⁵

Thus, the key factor for improvement in job satisfaction and productivity appears to be the extent to which workers participate in decision making. Full employee ownership is more likely than other forms of ownership to yield beneficial results because it is more likely to bestow upon workers the power to make decisions in the production process. Of course, many other impinging social, economic and other aspects of the environment in which change occurs must be envisioned as constant or equivalent in assessing the results of ownership and participation. The impact of other factors can doom an enterprise fully owned by workers, as the history of producer cooperatives in both Britain and the United States, as well as more recent experience, attests.²⁶

The consistency of recent empirical research emphasizes the importance of clearly distinguishing between ownership and power. Beneficial results by way of worker satisfaction and enterprise performance are largely dependent on something hapening in the production process, on the shop floor, at the work site. A change in the specifics of ownership does not necessarily bring this about. Worker ownership which is partial, indirect, transitory, etc. brings no necessary change in the locus of decision-making. Management directs, workers perform; some give orders, some take orders. The traditional authoritarian hierarchy continues with little or no improvement in morale and performance.²⁷

The crucial role of shared power in production decision-making, the question of ownership aside, indicates that significant gains in worker satisfaction and performance can be accomplished within traditional capitalism. Net improvement in social welfare need not wait upon the basic transformation of society to some form of producer cooperatives or new ism, a transformation not likely for the forseeable future.

In recent years, prompted by foreign competition, recession, and the spreading influence of research findings, American capitalism has moved toward participatory systems. The movement has been slow, halting and dispersed and likely to continue in that vein for two basic reasons. First and most fundamental, it is difficult for American management to voluntarily share its legitimate power. The heritage of Taylorism is a strong one. For many managers, sharing authority is equated with abdicating responsibility, losing control and "giving away the shop." Power in itself confers personal status and prestige in current society, not easily abandoned. Management will be tempted to try to have its cake and eat it too, by establishing circumscribed and manipulative arrangements to tap worker ideas but with no real change in authoritarian philosophy. Any beneficial results likely will be transistory.

Making the rather heroic assumption of genuine willingness on the part of management to share decision-making, there remains the second consideration of the very real difficulties in making the transition from authoritarianism. Experience to date is enough to demonstrate that it is not enough to announce, "Let us all labor together." Competitive and sometimes adversarial struggle does not easily transfer to cooperation on mutual goals. There must be structure, there must be rules, a town meeting cannot be held on every decision, functionaries of vastly diverse expertise must communicate, information must be shared, etc., etc. And the many challenges of the transition typically have not been part of the traditional training and talent of American management.

Vital as it is, management willingness to change must be viewed as a necessary, but not necessarily sufficient, condition for successful and enduring change in the workplace.²⁸ Both the worker and the union can be impediments

to success.²⁹ They function in the context of a long-standing adversarial relationship with management. The greater informality and flexibility of participatory structure challenges protective work rules and other contract clauses established by the union.³⁰ Participation asks the worker to substitute cooperation and team effort for individualistic competition and self-protection. All this makes for difficult transition and tempts the parties to revert to the old adversarialism when faced with the new problems of shared authority. Participatory systems frequently erode.³¹

By way of final observation, the movement toward participatory systems is sometimes portrayed as progress toward some idyllic society. But participatory enterprise in America will still be buffeted by the change and adjustment necessary to a market system. Some observers see no implications for the market system growing out of participatory enterprise. Others see expanded worker power as a "nose in the tent" that eventually will result in worker power utilized to protect the enterprise from the dictates of the market. Depending on the observer's perspective, this, in turn, is viewed either as an undesirable compromise to market efficiency, or as a desirable and humanitarian step toward socialism. For the more foreseeable future, movement toward participatory enterprise promises to be slow and halting, with some successes and some failures, falling far short of transforming the basic character of American work organization.

Notes

1. Jeanne M. Brett and Tove Helland Hammer, "Organizational Behavior and Industrial Relations," *Industrial Relations Research in the 1970's: Review and Appraisal*, Industrial Relations Research Association, 1982, pp. 221-81.

2. For a recent attempt at assessing the efficiency-enhancing effect of participatory work organizations, see Derek C. Jones and Jan Svejnar, *Participatory and Self-Managed Firms: Evaluating Economic Performance*, (Boston: Lexington Books, D. C. Heath and Co., 1982).

3. For discussion of this, see Kenneth O. Alexander, "Work and Welfare in Economics," *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (October, 1982), pp. 333-38.

4. Examples: Bengt Abrahamsson and Anders Brostrom, *The Rights of Labor*, Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1980; Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974) Andrew S. Zimbalist, *Case Studies on the Labor Process* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979).

5. See: Murray Yanowitch, Soviet Work Attitudes, (White Plains, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1979) and Miklos Haraszti, A Worker in a Worker's State (New York: Universe Books, 1978).

6. Jaroslav Vanek, *The General Theory of Labor-Managed Market Economies* (Ithaca and London: Cornell Univ. Press, 1970).

7. See: J. E. Meade, "The Theory of Labour-Managed Firms and of Profit Sharing," *Economics Journal*, Special issue in Honour of E. A. G. Robinson, March 1972, pp. 402-28, esp. Section 8.

8. William Foote Whyte and Joseph R. Blasi, "From Research to Legislation on Employee

Ownership," *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (August, 1980), pp. 395-415. Quote at page 408.

9. Chris Cornforth, "Some Factors Affecting the Success or Failure of Worker Co-operatives: A Review of Empirical Research in the United Kingdom," *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (May, 1983), pp. 163–90; Howard Aldrich and Robert N. Stern, "Resource Mobilization and the Creation of U.S. Producer's Cooperatives, 1835–1935," *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (August, 1983), pp. 371–406.

10. Richard J. Long, "The Effects of Employee Ownership on Organizational Identification, Employee Job Attitudes, and Organizational Performance: A Tentative Framework and Empirical Findings," *Human Relations*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (1978), pp. 29–48; Edward S. Greenberg, "Participation in Industrial Decision Making and Work Satisfaction: The Case of Producer Cooperatives," *Social Sciences Quarterly*, Vol. 60, No. 4 (March, 1980), pp. 551–69; Michael Conte and Arnold S. Tannenbaum, "Employee-Owned Companies: Is the Difference Measurable?" *Monthly Labor Review*, Vol. 101, No. 7 (July, 1978), pp. 23–28; Michael Conte, Arnold S. Tannenbaum and Donna McCulloch, *Employee Ownership*, Research Report Series, Survey Research Center, University of Michigan, 1981.

11. Frank H. Stephen, "The Economic Theory of the Labour-Managed Firm," Ch. 1 in Frank H. Stephen, ed., *The Performance of Labour-Managed Firms*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982).

12. Employee Stock Ownership Plan, developed by Louis Kelso, who interested Senator Russell Long in the Plan, which led to implementing federal legislation in 1974. For references to some of the literature on ESOP's, see Mary Vance, *Employees as Stockbolders*, Public Administration Series: Bibliography P. 1162, Vance Bibliographies, Monticello, Ill., March 1983.

13. See: James O'Toole, "The Uneven Record of Employee Ownership," *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. 57, No. 6 (November-December, 1979), pp. 185–97. A recounting of a variety of specific cases can be found in Daniel Zwerdling, *Workplace Democracy*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1980).

14. See: David Ellerman, "On the Legal Structure of Workers' Cooperatives," Ch. 15 in Frank Lindenfeld and Joyce Rothschild-Whitt, *Workplace Democracy and Social Change*, (Boston: Porter Sargent Publishers, Inc., 1982).

15. Warner Woodworth, "Collective Bargaining: Concessions or Control?", *Proceedings of the Thirty-Fifth Annual Meeting*, Industrial Relations Research Association, 1983.

16. Robert N. Stern, K. Haydin Wood, Tove H. Hammer, *Employee Ownersbip in Plant Sbutdowns*, (Kalamazoo, Mich.: W. E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research, 1979).

17. For an interesting attempt at federal legislation to provide public support for the transfer of ownership to workers, see Whyte and Blasi, *op. cit.* An international discussion of worker ownership and public policy can be found in Keith Bradley and Alan Gelb, *Worker Capitalism*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1983).

18. Edelstein comes to the same conclusion for Britain. "Clearly, self-management and industrial producers' cooperation are not synonymous." J. David Edelstein, "Trade Unions in British Producers' Cooperatives," *Industrial Relations*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (Fall, 1979), pp. 358-63. Quote at page 362. After a broader overview, including Yugoslavia's self-management and Spain's Mondragon cooperatives, Brannen states, "The main thrust of the chapter has been to show that there is no clear relationship between economic democracy, that is the communal ownership of the means of production, and workers' participation in and control over the running of the enterprise." Peter Brannen, *Authority and Participation in Industry*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983). Quote at page 144.

19. Mary H. Cooper, *Editorial Research Reports*, Vol. 1, No. 23 (June 17, 1983), pp. 455-71.

20. Paul Bernstein, "Necessary Elements for Effective Worker Participation in Decision-Making," Ch. 2; and Tove Helland Hammer, Robert N. Stern and Michael A. Gurdon, "Workers' Ownership and Attitudes Towards Participation," Ch. 3, in Frank Lindenfeld and Joyce Rothschild-Whitt, *op. cit.*

21. O'Toole, op. cit. Quote at p. 194.

22. Richard J. Long, "The Relative Effects of Share Ownership vs. Control on Job Attitudes in an Employee-Owned Company," *Human Relations*, Vol. 31, No. 9 (1978) pp. 753-63. Quote at p. 761.

23. Richard J. Long, "Job Attitudes and Organizational Performance Under Employee Ownership," *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (December, 1980), pp. 726-37. Quote from Abstract.

24. Richard J. Long, "Worker Ownership and Job Attitudes: A Field Study," *Industrial Relations*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (Spring, 1982), pp. 196-215. Quote at p. 214.

25. Raymond Russell, Arthur Hochner and Stewart E. Perry, "Participation, Influence, and Worker Ownership," *Industrial Relations*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (Fall, 1979), pp. 330–41. Quote at p. 340.

26. For discussion of specific experiences and some of the difficulties faced in achieving worker ownership and participation, see William Foote Whyte, Tove Helland Hammer, Christopher B. Meek, Reed Nelson and Robert N. Stern, *Worker Participation and Ownership*, (Ithaca, N.Y.: ILR Press, Cornell University, 1983), esp. Chs. 3 and 4.

27. See Long, "Worker Ownership . . . ," *op. cit.* and Tove H. Hammer and Robert N. Stern, "Employee Ownership: Implications for the Organizational Distribution of Power," *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (March, 1980), pp. 78–100. For an interesting case of 51 percent stock ownership by workers resulting in no change in managerial style, see Janette Eadon Johannesen, "VAG: A Need for Education," *Industrial Relations*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (Fall, 1979), pp. 364–69.

28. John F. Witte, *Democracy, Authority, and Alienation in Work: Workers' Participation in an American Corporation,* (Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1980). This book traces failure even with genuine and enthusiastic management support.

29. Kochan and Dyer have observed that much of the literature simply ignores unions. Thomas A. Kochan and Lee Dyer, "A Model for Organizational Change in the Context of Labor-Management Relations," *Journal of Applied Bebavioral Science*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (January, 1976), pp. 59-78.

30. Thomas A. Kochan and Harry C. Katz, "Collective Bargaining, Work Organization, and Worker Participation: The Return to Plant-Level Bargaining," *Proceedings*, Industrial Relations Research Association, Spring 1983, pp. 524–30.

31. See some of the cases in Zwerdling, op. cit. and in Robert Zager and M. P. Rosow, The Innovative Organization, (New York: Pergamon Press, 1982).