

"Crisis and workers' control"

Talk at *Athens Biennale*. 16.12.2015

Dario Azzellini

Workplace occupations in order to produce, in the following referred to as recuperated enterprises, are mainly known because of the take-overs around the Argentinian crisis 2000-2001. There the recuperations adopted the slogan "occupy, resist, produce" from the Brazilian landless movement MST. At the end of 2015 there were about 360 self-managed enterprises in Argentina that had been recuperated by their workers after the owners had closed them (CDER 2014). There had been a few recuperations in earlier years, but it was around the crisis when it became a wider spread practice (Sitrin 2012). What is less known is that there are 69 recuperated enterprises with 12.000 workers in Brazil and almost two dozen in Uruguay (Azzellini 2016b; Chedid et al 2013; Rieiro 2015). In Venezuela the situation is more complex because of the government's declared support for the company recuperations, nevertheless exact data is more difficult to obtain, but we can find at least about 100 recuperated enterprises, a part is managed by former employees of the companies, some are managed by communities, and some are managed by the state which is supposed to prepare the workers to manage the companies on their own. Moreover there are struggles for workers control in state owned companies and new communal enterprises self-managed by communities and workers (Azzellini 2016a; 2014; 2012; Azzellini/Ressler 2006). A few cases of company recuperations are also known from Mexico, Indonesia and India. Among the recuperated enterprises we can find any kind of industrial production sector: metal, textile, ceramics, food processing, plastic and rubber, print shops and others. In the service sector there are recuperated clinics, newspapers, radio stations, public transport services, restaurants, and hotels.

In the course of the contemporary crisis enterprise recuperations are strongly back on the agenda, especially in Argentina, where some 50 companies were recuperated since 2009. Interestingly an important number are restaurants, among them even two fast food restaurants, which are usually work places with a low workers' organisation and often semi-familiar relationships that make a strong workers organisation difficult. Some factory recuperations even happened in the U.S., Italy, France, Greece, Egypt and Turkey. At least six companies in Europe and one in the US can be characterized as recuperated enterprises (Azzellini 2015b). And moreover we find also a few recuperated farms in Spain and Italy. There have been more business take overs by workers in Europe during the course of the current crisis. Several hundred "workers' buy out" occurred, mainly in France, Italy and Spain. Those are not taken into account here, because several criteria of the commons don't apply to them. Many do not have a distribution of equal shares

among the workers, kept hierarchies, have individual shares of property, some have even external investors owning part of the business, many turned into classical cooperatives not holding weekly meetings, etc. Some of these enterprises might have nevertheless developed similar characteristics to recuperated workplaces.

Over the past 135 years, in all kinds of historical situations and during various political and economic crises and in different political systems, workers have taken control of their workplaces. Yet this story of workers self-administered production is rarely told. Capitalists, bourgeois governments and administrators of systems based on the exploitation of workers usually have little interest in disseminating the history of self-organized workers; those who have successfully run factories without bosses. In the early 20th century workers tried to gain control over production in social and socialist revolutions, like those in Austria, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Russia and Spain, and under state socialism, as in Yugoslavia, Poland, Czechoslovakia or Hungary; they did so as well in anti-colonial struggles and democratic revolutions in Argentina, Algeria, Indonesia and Portugal, to just name a few examples; and workers also took over their work places to guarantee production against capitalist speculation as in France or Japan after the end of WWII. Factory take-overs by workers and the perspective of workers' control was also present in labour struggles against capitalist restructuring in the last third of the 20th century in France, Switzerland, the UK, Italy, Canada, Australia, Mexico and elsewhere. Since the 1990's company occupations and workers' self-administration have again manifested themselves strongly and workers and communities have recuperated hundreds of factories and companies in Latin America and in lesser numbers also in other world regions, contending against the consequences of global capitalist crises (Azzellini 2015a; Ness/Azzellini 2011).

What can be seen from all these examples is a common struggle of workers for the democratic control of production. Workers' councils and assemblies discuss, decide and work in a horizontal and directly democratic way. In the long run workers' control has not been able to impose itself on a large scale. Media and expert discourses often suggest that the many problems worker-controlled companies faced internally were the reason for their failure. But despite all claims that workers' control is not viable or the supposed loss of enthusiasm of workers and the adverse conditions of the capitalist context surrounding them, workers' control almost always failed because of the threat or use of violent repression.

Historically the collective administration of workplaces has frequently emerged as an inherent tendency among the rank and file, even without knowledge of previous worker control initiatives or an explicit socialist consciousness. But while in the past workplace take-overs happened in the context workers' or revolutionary offensives, the recuperations of the last 15 years are born out of a defensive situation. In a general context of crisis workers do not see an alternative to the occupation and recuperation of their workplace, they have no other job perspective or means of

survival, in most cases they don't have the support of unions, which often are not able or willing to cope with the form and goal of the recuperations. The workers usually cannot count with the support of institutional political forces or government programs. Often the machinery is obsolete, in need of repair or has been taken away by the owner; the old company relations do not exist anymore or want old bills paid before having business relations again. The workers do not have prior experience in self-management, less of a whole company, and do not have access to finances in order to invest. Against all odds, in the midst of a capitalist crisis and a crisis of traditional unionism, the workers develop self-organized offensive struggles transforming labour into a self-controlled and common resource. Under these disadvantageous conditions, the workers decide to restart production.

The few known existing cases of workers' recuperations in Europe – two in France, two in Italy, one in Turkey and the internationally known case of the former factory for chemical construction material Vio.Me. in Thessaloniki, Greece, have huge differences. Some factories have modern machinery and are fully functional from the technical point of view. Others have been looted by the former owner and have to start from scratch. Especially the French factories could avoid that the machines were taken away and count on the support of local authorities and the communist union CGT. Nevertheless, several common features can be identified and the combination of certain characteristics transforms the recuperations into laboratories and motors of the desired alternative future.

All recuperation processes and recuperated factories are democratically administered. Decision-making is always based on forms of direct democracy with the equality of vote among all participants, be it through councils or assemblies. These direct democratic mechanisms adopted by worker-controlled companies raise important questions, not only about individual enterprises, but about how decisions should be made throughout the whole of society. In doing so, it challenges not only capitalist businesses, but also liberal and representative "democratic" governance.

Another obvious common feature is the occupation. Occupying a factory entails committing an act considered to be illegal and therefore to do so is to enter into a conflict with the authorities. It is a direct action by the workers themselves. They are not "representatives" nor do they wait for a representation – a union or party – or even the institutions of the state to solve their problem before they spring into action. As Malabarba correctly states: "The action has to be turned upside down: first the initiative, you occupy, and then you get in touch with the institutions that failed more or less consciously" (Malabarba, 2013: 149). Massimo Lettiere from Ri-MafLOW explains:

"Illegality is a quiet elastic concept. We have thought about it. Laws are made in parliament and usually regulate things that have already happened. The only law

that has defended the workers, which they passed for the workers, was Law 300 in 1970, The Statute of the Workers. Why did they make it? Because there was a movement and because the content was already part of the metalworkers' national contract. The workers had already won that right, and then the law has actually made what was in the contract worse.... The law has regulated a state of affairs that was already a fact. If someday there is a law on expropriation that establishes that when a company wants to de-localize production or fails it must be given to workers because they can get going, if we want a law on expropriation, we must first take the factory. You have to start from illegality. Once there is a movement of re-appropriation of the means of production there will be a law for us. We are beginning to build this path." (Massimo Lettiere, Ri-Maflow, author interview, January 31, 2014).

This is also confirmed by the Latin American experience. In Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay and Venezuela the workers have always been in front of political parties, unions and institutions in their practical responses to a situation. Expropriations, nationalizations, laws, financial and technical support always followed the workers' initiative and are a reaction to their direct action and struggle. The same is true for the productive activity developed by the recuperated workplace: strictly following the law, waiting for all legal authorizations and paying taxes would simply mean the activity would never start.

Most factories have to reinvent themselves, often the previous productive activity cannot be carried out in the same way (because the machines have been taken away by the owner, because it was a highly specialized activity with very few customers, whom the workers do not have access to, or because the workers decided so for other reasons). In all the better documented cases we find that ecological aspects and questions of sustainability became central, be it an orientation to recycling, as in Officine Zero and in RiMaflow in Italy, changing from producing industrial glue and solvents to organic cleaners in Vio.Me in Thessaloniki, or switching to organic products and using local and regional raw materials and also distributing their products locally and regionally, as in former Fralib and in former Pilpa in France. The problematic is seen by the workers in the larger context of the future of the planet, as well as on a smaller scale related to health threats for workers and surrounding communities. The importance of ecological awareness is part of the new society envisioned by the workers, as are the democratic practices they put in place.

The company recuperations have to be seen much more as a social process than an economic process. Every worker of a recuperated work place will confirm that through the recuperations and the collective democratic administration everything changed: From the labour process to social relations among the workers and with the surrounding communities to the value and values produced by the company. The struggles of the workers and the occupied or recuperated workplace have

become a space in which new social relations are developed and practiced: Affect, reliability, mutual help, solidarity among the participants and solidarity with others, participation and equality are some of the characteristics of the new social relations built. Therefore the recuperated enterprises are not only a way to gain back initiative in struggles, but also a kind of Benjaminian Now-Time, a glimpse what a future alternative society could look like.

The recuperated factories usually develop a strong connection with the territory. They support close by neighbourhoods and in turn are supported by them. They interact with different subjectivities present in the territory and develop joint initiatives. Connections with different social movements and social and political organizations are built and strengthened. All the factories mentioned here have developed direct relations with social movements and especially the new movements that were part of the global uprising since 2011. This is a clear parallel with Latin America where successful factory recuperations are characterized by having a strong foothold in the territory and close relations with other movements (Ness and Azzellini 2011; Sitrin and Azzellini 2014).

This anchorage in the territory helps also them to face another important challenge. Changing forms of work and production have radically diminished the overall number of workers with full-time contracts, as well as reducing the number of workers in each company. While in the past job and production processes automatically generated cohesion among the workers, today work has a dispersive effect, since workers of the same company often work under different contracts and with a different status from each other. Generally, more and more workers are pushed into precarious conditions and into self-employment (even if their activity depends totally on one employer). How can these workers be organized and what are their means of struggle? This is an important question the Left must deal with to achieve a victory over capital.

RiMaflow and Officine Zero in Italy have built strong ties with the new composition of work practices by sharing their space with precarious and independent workers. Officine Zero declares: "We want to restart from the origins of the workers' movement by connecting conflict, mutual aid and autonomous production" (Blicero, 2013). Territorial organizing has been mentioned and even practiced more often during recent years. In Italy in 1997, Marco Revelli advocated in *The Social Left* (Revelli, 1997) a territorial organizing model based on houses of labour, like those that existed at the beginning of industrialization, connecting all workers in one district.

References

- Azzellini, Dario (2016a): *Communes and Workers' Control in Venezuela: Creating 21st-Century Socialism from Below*. Leiden: Brill Press (forthcoming).
- Azzellini, Dario (2016b): *Besetzen, Widerstand leisten, produzieren – Betriebsbesetzungen in Argentinien, Brasilien, Uruguay und Venezuela*. In: *Journal für Entwicklungspolitik*, 2/2015.
- Azzellini, Dario (Hg.) (2015a): *An Alternative Labour History. Worker Control and Workplace Democracy*. London/New York: Zed Books.
- Azzellini, Dario (2015b): *Contemporary Crisis and Workers' Control*. In: Azzellini, Dario (Hg.) (2015): *An Alternative Labour History. Worker Control and Workplace Democracy*. London/New York: Zed Books, 67-99.
- Azzellini, Dario (2014): *Venezuela's social transformation and growing class struggle*. In: Spronk, Susan/Webber, Jeffery R. (Hg.): *Crisis and Contradiction: Marxist Perspectives on Latin America in the Global Economy*. Leiden: Brill Press. 138-162.
- Azzellini, Dario (2012): *From Cooperatives to Enterprises of Direct Social Property in the Venezuelan Process*. In: Piñeiro Harnecker, Camila (Hg.): *Cooperatives and Socialism. A View from Cuba*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 259-278.
- Azzellini, Dario/Ressler, Oliver (2006): *5 Factories – Workers Control in Venezuela* (film). Caracas/Berlin/Vienna.
- Centro de Documentación de Empresas Recuperadas (CDER) (2014): *Nuevas Empresas Recuperadas 2010–2013*. Buenos Aires: Continente.
- Chedid Henriques, Flávio/Moreira Sígolo, Vanessa/Rufino, Sandra/Santos Araújo, Fernanda/Nepomuceno, Vicente/Baptista Giroto, Mariana/Paulucci, Maria Alejandra/Nogueira Rodrigues, Thiago/Rocha Cavalcanti, Maíra/Sardá de Fari, Maurício (2013): *Empresas Recuperadas por Trabalhadores no Brasil: Resultados de um Levantamento Nacional*. Rio de Janeiro: Editorial Multifoco.
- Malabarba, Gigi (2013): *L'autogestione conflittuale del lavoro*. In: Bersani, Marco (Ed.): *Come si esce dalla crisi*. Rome: Edizioni Alegre. 137-154.
- Ness, Immanuel/Azzellini, Dario (Eds.): *Ours to Master and to Own: Workers Councils from the Commune to the Present*. Chicago: Haymarket.
- Rieiro, Anabel (2015): *Collective Self-management and Social Classes: The Case of Enterprises Recovered by Their Workers in Uruguay*. In: Azzellini, Dario: *An Alternative Labour History: Worker Control and Workplace Democracy*. London: Zed Books, 273-297.
- Sitrin, Marina (2012): *Everyday Revolutions. Horizontalism and Autonomy in Argentina*. London/New York: Zed books.
- Sitrin, Marina/Azzellini, Dario (2014): *They Can't Represent Us!: Reinventing Democracy from Greece to Occupy*. London/New York: Verso.

Weitere Publikationen des Redners:

Die endlich entdeckte politische Form
Fabrikräte und Selbstverwaltung von der Russischen Revolution bis heute
Dario Azzellini / Immanuel Ness (Hrsg)
Neuer ISP Verlag, 2012
<https://www.neuerispverlag.de/verweis.php?nr=142>

An Alternative Labour History
Worker Control and Workplace Democracy
Dario Azzellini (Ed.)
Zed Books, 2015
<https://www.zedbooks.net/shop/book/an-alternative-labour-history/>