

# OWNERSHIP AND CONTROL

## Bring back the Institute for Workers' Control

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The movement for workers' control in the 1970s was among the most promising of the many roads not taken in the forgotten history of the left.

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**M**cKenzie Wark, in *Molecular Red*, his recent book on theory for the Anthropocene, argues that we need new ancestors for our next civilisation. It's an arresting suggestion, and one that stems from willed optimism in the face of mounting difficulties. The book opens with a parched vision of the Aral Sea in what used to be Soviet Central Asia, a stark signifier of our cataclysmic present. Its feeder river the Amu Darya diverted by Soviet engineers to irrigate a vast basin of mechanised cotton production following the Second World War, the Aral Sea has all but dried up, shrunk to a tenth of its former size, its fishing fleet grounded, one of the world's worst environmental disasters, a man-made desert and monument to the Promethean productivity of industrial agriculture.

It would be a mistake, we are cautioned, to view this as a purely Soviet folly, for 'the collapse of the Soviet system merely prefigures the collapse of the American one' (Wark, 2015, xii) as a consequence of what Karl Marx understood to be our 'metabolic rift' with nature (Foster, 2000, 141). In volume one of *Capital*, Marx wrote of

the degradation of the soils and alienation from natural systems that accompanied the transformation of production under the sway of capital (Marx, 1974, 474-5). This process is now sufficiently far advanced as to have leapt to an entirely different level, beyond localised ecological disasters to geophysical change on a planetary scale:

The Anthropocene is a series of metabolic rifts, where one molecule after another is extracted by labor and technique to make things for humans, but the waste products don't return so that the cycle can renew itself. The soils deplete, the seas recede, the climate alters, the gyre widens: a world on fire. (Wark, 2015, xiv)

Whether it is potassium nitrate, dihydrogen monoxide, or atmospheric carbon dioxide, the molecules in question are increasingly deviating from their established routines, and the consequences of the enormous complacency involved in production systems predicated on unending growth are rapidly bearing down upon us. Anthropogenic climate change, the mother of all metabolic rifts, is a game-changer, transforming our previously self-correcting and -balancing relationship with planetary ecosystems in irreversible ways that call for similarly huge shifts in our economics, politics, and culture. For Wark, this means our abrupt ejection from pre-history and entry into history-proper where there are radical limits to the boundless commodification of everything: 'We all know this civilisation can't last. Let's make a new one' (Ibid, 225).

With precious few exceptions, the traditional left, globally and taken as a whole, could scarcely be less prepared for such a world-historical challenge. For decades now the left has been traversing a desert plain of its own, arid, featureless, Ozymandian, without pity. Soviet communism and social democracy, its two great twentieth-century political projects, are only the closest of the rusting hulks rising out of the sand; similar ruins lie beyond – of representative democracy, the liberal state, and more. The recently launched *Salvage* magazine ('because we are wrecked. Because we need a strategy for ruination') finds us scabbling for fragments amongst the stony rubbish (*Salvage*, 2015, 2). It is in this context of widespread ideological systems failure that Wark urges a new kind of *low theory*, for designing integrated solutions on a collaborative basis' capable of mitigating the metabolic rift and creating the kind of world in which we'd actually want to live. It might, in fact, be a 'new-old' theory, since the place to begin is not from scratch but by excavating 'forgotten histories, neglected concepts and minor stories' (Wark, 2015, xvi), a doubling back to some earlier roads not taken in the left's long line of march.

For our first prospective new ancestor, Wark returns to a 'previous, failed attempt to end pre-history' (Ibid, xii) and offers up the neglected figure of Alexander Bogdanov. One of the original twenty-two Bolsheviks, a close associate of Lenin and onetime rival for the party leadership, if Bogdanov is remembered at all today it is usually only as Lenin's opponent in a 1908 chess game on the isle of Capri, watched over by Maxim Gorky and captured in a famous photograph (1). In fact, Bogdanov was a polymath of impressive range, a talented scientist, physician, philosopher, novelist, administrator, and revolutionary, masterminding the bank robberies that helped finance the Bolsheviks' activities in exile after 1905. He fell out with Lenin, becoming for a time leader of the left opposition within the party and developing an anti-authoritarian libertarian communism, but eventually retreated from politics into organisational science and 'proletkult', the workers' cultural movement he helped found before 1917. For Wark, Bogdanov is worthy of recovery because of the extraordinary body of work he produced attempting to unify the social, physical, and biological sciences by understanding them as systems of relationships and seeking out their common underlying principles. The result was an attempted super-science of organisation he called 'tektology', a forerunner of cybernetics and an early form of critical systems theory. The central proposition of his work, that 'our species-being is as builder of worlds', was an insight that allowed Bogdanov to anticipate anthropogenic climate change (Ibid, 3). It was also a powerful statement of the viewpoint of social labour.

Though Wark passes over it quickly, Bogdanov's engagement with political economy is also worth a second look. In 1923 Bogdanov was arrested by the GPU, predecessor to the KGB, on suspicion of being involved with Workers' Truth, a left opposition group whose platform included freedom of speech and elections for the factory soviets (Stokes, 1995, 261). He was released after five weeks, having demanded a personal interview with secret police chief Felix Dzerzhinsky, to whom he explained that he had views in common with the group but no formal connection. As it happens, Bogdanov had long espoused ideals of worker collectivism, although not the kind that had emerged during War Communism, which he criticised for fostering individualism and competitiveness and destroying working class solidarity, with each factory committee compelled 'to fight for the interests of its own enterprise, its own labor force, against those of other enterprises'. In this, his attitude was 'typical of that of the left opposition, who supported workers' control but not "anarcho-syndicalism"' (Ibid, 266). When Bogdanov died in 1928, while conducting an experimental blood transfusion on himself, his obituary in *Pravda* was written by Nikolai Bukharin, an admirer.

Perhaps the fullest exposition of Bogdanov's political economy is to be found in his farsighted 1908 novel *Red Star*, the 'first Bolshevik utopia' and foundational work of Soviet science fiction. The novel's narrator, Leonid the Bolshevik, having been transported to Mars, encounters an advanced post-capitalist civilisation in which everyone produces according to ability and consumes according to need in a fully automated economy built upon voluntary unpaid work, short hours, and flexible job rotation. Taking a tour of a Martian factory, Leonid is struck by the mesmerising spectacle of unalienated labour:

Hundreds of workers moved confidently among the machines, their footsteps and voices drowned in a sea of sound. There was not a trace of tense anxiety on their faces, whose only expression was one of quiet concentration. They seem to be inquisitive, learned observers who had no real part in all that was going on around them. It was as if they simply found it interesting to watch how the enormous chunks of metal glided out beneath the transparent dome on moving platforms ... To an outsider the threads connecting the delicate brains of the men with the indestructible organs of the machines were subtle and invisible'. (Bogdanov, 1984, 63-4)

Information about what to produce and in what quantities, and on corresponding labour shortages and surpluses, is compiled by an office of statistics, making for a regime of worker self-management within a planning system. But if the relations of production on Mars have been harmonised through social control over the means of production, Martian communism is still struggling with the metabolic rift. In their race to industrialise, the Martians have begun to rapidly exhaust their natural resources and horribly degrade their environment, and the search is on for new energy sources beyond their unsustainable form of nuclear power: 'the tighter our humanity closes ranks to conquer nature, the tighter the elements close theirs to avenge the victory' (Ibid, 79). Bogdanov's prescience only extended so far. It would fall to later generations of exponents of workers' control to set about developing integral solutions to such problems, incorporating an understanding of the inescapable ecological limits to growth.

## A road not taken

The comings and goings of the old mole of revolution can be mysterious indeed. At just the moment when Lenin was moving artfully to break up the movement for workers' control on the Russian railways (Carr, 1952, 394-7), an upsurge of indus-

trial militancy in Britain, driven in part by the tremendous impact of the Bolshevik revolution on the rank and file, led to the explosive growth of the Shop Stewards' and Workers' Control Movement (Pribičević, 1959; Goodman and Whittingham, 1969). For a time this movement, a meld of industrial unionism, syndicalism, and guild socialism, came close to supplanting the leadership of the official trade unions over workers in engineering, then Britain's largest industry. 'It was', according to its principal chronicler, 'perhaps the first major workers' movement to put workers' control in the form of an immediate demand instead of an ultimate objective' (Pribičević, 1959, 125). The movement fell apart with the onset of the economic recession that culminated in the 1926 General Strike and subsequent lockout, and this collapse, in G. D. H. Cole's estimation, was at least in part a result of the failure to carry through its demands from shop floor struggles to 'the higher ranges of control, and especially to the control over investment' (Ibid, vii). As a form of industrial organisation, however, the shop stewards' movement would survive to play an important role in the resurgence of demands for workers' control in the 1970s, especially in shipbuilding, engineering, and the motor industry.

If the British left needs new ancestors, the little remembered but once influential Institute for Workers' Control (IWC) makes a compelling candidate. Drawing upon the work of a handful of talented thinkers and activists on the fringes of the Labour Party, including Ken Coates, Tony Topham, and Michael Barratt Brown, and able to rely upon a sympathetic hearing from prominent left-wing trade union leaders such as Hugh Scanlon, Jack Jones, and Ernie Roberts, the IWC was one of the most vibrant and extraordinary British political research organisations (or think tanks, as we now call them) of the post-war period. Largely forgotten today, the IWC in its heyday served as a vital resource for workers engaged in the major industrial struggles of the period, as well as an invaluable source of creative ideas and strategy for the left inside and outside the Labour Party through the crisis years of the 1970s and 1980s (2).

The IWC was formed at a conference in Nottingham in 1968, the sixth in a series of annual gatherings that brought together thousands of trade unionists and political activists from across Britain to debate themes of industrial democracy and public ownership. Attendance lists and conference reports document the impressive reach and intellectual content of these meetings, one of which occasioned the first face-to-face meeting between C. L. R. James and E. P. Thompson, leading to an exchange of views on the representation of the creative possibilities of the working class in the *May Day Manifesto* (Topham, 1967, 54-7). The stated aims of the IWC, according to its constitution, were to 'assist in the formation of workers' control groups dedicated to

the development of democratic consciousness, to the winning of support for workers' control in all the existing organisations of labour, to the challenging of undemocratic actions wherever they may occur, and to the extension of democratic control over industry and the economy itself, by assisting the unification of workers' control groups into a national force in the socialist movement' (IWC, n.d., 4). In pursuit of these aims, the IWC produced a steady stream of research and publications, disseminating ideas about workplace democracy while providing direct technical support to workers engaged in industrial struggles, at one point proposing the creation of a Workers' Consultancy Service dedicated to the task (Coates, 1969, 58).

The IWC was also 'an important forum' politically, according to Hilary Wainwright, providing 'an unusual meeting-place for left politicians, industrial militants, socialist feminists and committed intellectuals' (Wainwright, 1987, 6). Having arisen in reaction to the disappointments of the 1964-70 Labour governments, it became a focal point for opposition to efforts to constrain the trade unions, such as Barbara Castle's *In Place of Strife* proposals or the Tories' 1972 Industrial Relations Act. The IWC went on to make significant political and intellectual contributions to the development of the 'Bennite' New Left in the Labour Party.

Its founding in the pivotal year of 1968, a time of 'imagination in power', with factory and student occupations across France and ten million out on strike (Hoyles, 1973), was prescient. Within a few short years, rising industrial militancy in Britain – 23,909,000 days were lost to strikes in 1972 (Hyman, 1979, 27) – was to break the bounds of narrow economism and extend shop floor struggles over jobs, wages, and working conditions into an embrace of radical new approaches to worker self-management, economic democracy, and socially useful production. Between 1972 and 1974 Britain experienced the greatest wave of sit-ins, work-ins, and occupations in any advanced capitalist country since the epic factory occupations that swept the US auto industry in 1934-38 and gave rise to the Congress of Industrial Organisations (Fine, 1969; Sherry, 2010). The legendary 1971-72 work-in at Upper Clyde Shipbuilders – 'a formative political as well as industrial event of this period' (Panitch and Leys, 2001, 58) – quickly spread beyond the Glasgow shipyards to set the pattern for over two hundred sit-ins and factory occupations at plants including Plesseys, Fisher-Bendix, River Don, Norton Villiers Triumph in Meriden, Westland Helicopters in Yeovil and Hayes, Allis Chalmers in North Wales, the Glasgow *Scottish Daily Express*, Thornycroft, Harris Engineering, and many more. By 1972, thirty factories were under occupation in Greater Manchester alone (Sherry, 2010, 122).

For the IWC, these occupations, sit-ins, and new co-operative experiments represented 'encroachments' on the decision-making prerogatives of capitalist management along what Carter Goodrich, in his classic 1920 study, saw as an ever-shifting 'frontier of control' (Goodrich, 1975). Through their day-to-day struggles on the shop floor, workers were engaged in constant challenges to managerial power and privilege aimed at bringing about real advances while also pointing to the eventual need for the socialisation of industry under worker self-management. The IWC helped give impetus to a powerful new recombination of theory and practice by British workers that was redolent of the factory council movement in 1920s Turin (Spriano, 1975). The climax was reached in 1975, when workers at Lucas Aerospace undertook the development of the storied 'Lucas Plan', produced by a cross-plant multi-union Combine of shop stewards representing 13,000 workers in thirteen unions across seventeen sites, and aimed at heading off redundancies and transforming the company's productive capacity from fighter jets and other military equipment to 'socially useful production' under the management of the workforce in consultation with the wider community (Wainwright and Elliott, 1982).

The fate of the IWC was to see its ideas resisted and, ultimately, comprehensively defeated with the rise of a New Right dedicated to overthrowing the post-war consensus, unpicking the economic gains of labour, and restoring the divine right of capital. With the Thatcherite settlement in place and Labour set on a course of accommodation to the new dispensation, the IWC began a slow fade into insignificance. But there was nothing inevitable about this outcome, despite the insistence to the contrary of house-trained establishment historians. The IWC was an important protagonist in the historic contest between New Left and New Right over the terms of the breakdown of the post-war consensus, articulating a serious vision of an alternative path forward to a radically different society: 'Which current would prove dominant in the resolution of the crisis was not a foregone conclusion, as the massive ideological effort on the part of the new right clearly showed' (Panitch and Leys, 2001, 7). In this sense the IWC, together with the broader New Left of which it formed a part, represented an important road not taken, a potential exit to the left from the crisis of Keynesianism, and one that prefigures many of today's concerns over co-operation, ecology, resilience, democratic ownership and participation, socially useful production, and the need to rethink work and employment in the face of the radical labour-displacing dimensions of new technologies. It is a vital and empowering inheritance, one we might usefully recover if we are to craft radical but practical alternatives to a moribund social democratic centralism and a terminally crisis-ridden but still aggressively destructive neo-liberalism.

## The frontier of control

The idea of workers' control is as old as the idea of socialism itself, representing one of two potentially contradictory strands of thought that would place decision-making control over productive enterprises in a socialist economy either directly with the workers or with representatives of the community as a whole (usually, though not necessarily, in the form of *central control*) (Dahl, 1947). These traditions have been continually in tension, with periods in which one or the other has had the upper hand. In Britain at least, the workers' control tradition has a long and impressive lineage, with similar initiatives going back to the dawn of the industrial revolution, from Luddite insurrections to the Owenite movement, the Grand National Consolidated Trades Union, the co-operativism of the Rochdale Pioneers, and the syndicalism of Tom Mann. There have also been many parallel experiments overseas, ranging from Algerian autogestion to Yugoslav self-management (Rychetnik, 1969) and workers' participation in Israel's Histadrut economy (Chizik, 1970). The device of factory occupation in particular has been exported and re-imported on many occasions, 'remembered in the popular histories only at times of great social upheaval and collapse, such as the near-revolutionary stresses of Gramsci's Turin, or of France during the upsurge of the Popular Front (or again in 1968)' (Coates, 1981, 13).

Developments in Britain in the 1970s conspired to breathe renewed life into old syndicalist and guild socialist strategies (Thompson, 2006, 198). While many of those involved looked forward to different arrangements under socialism, in the meantime *workers' control* was the terminology used to describe efforts by the workforce to encroach upon the prerogatives of management within a capitalist framework. Such encroachment, according to Michael Barratt Brown, begins with 'checks and vetoes over the arbitrary and centralised decisions of the managers of capital. From control over pay for the job and hours of work, it moves forward to control over manning the job, over hiring and firing, over redundancies and work sharing, to raise questions about what is produced and where and when investment should take place' (Barratt Brown, 1972, 230). Workers' control therefore inevitably involved 'a balance of hostile forces, a division of authority between rival contenders' (Coates, 1981, 35). It should thus be distinguished from *co-determination* and related corporatist arrangements whereby workers' representatives are co-opted into responsibility for the continuing operation of capitalist enterprises (Coates and Topham, 1973, 5-8), as well as from *workers' self-management*, a term more often used to describe the future goal of democratic administration of enterprises under socialism.



The post-war rise of monopoly capitalism, driven in part by mergers and acquisitions in the face of deepening international competition, witnessed the emergence of a succession of corporate forms, all of which had in common the preservation of authoritarian managerial governance. Increasing awareness among workers of this basic relation resulted in a growing number of proposals for industrial democracy (Ibid, 17). Moreover, the 1970s movement for workers' control was born of the exceptional economic conditions stemming from a quarter-century of near-full employment, rising union density, rapid technological change, a morbid but relatively stable Cold War security framework, and an increasingly educated workforce. Add to this an expanded public sector and the growing self-confidence of trade unionists prepared to think in other than defensive terms, and it is clear that the possibilities for a socialist strategy based on 'encroaching control' seemed far more promising than they had been in earlier decades of the twentieth century (Thompson, 2006, 198).

The IWC was motivated in part by the demand for democratisation of the nationalised industries, given disillusionment at the top-down Morrisonian model of public corporations at arm's length from democratic control (Barratt Brown and Holland, 1973). Emphasis was placed on the latter part of the old Clause IV of the Labour Party constitution, which envisaged common ownership on the basis of 'the best obtainable system of popular administration and control of each industry or service' (Bristol Aircraft Workers, 1974). A socialist strategy of encroachment, of course, could only be carried so far before running up against the obstacles of continued widespread private ownership of the economy. But this was precisely the point; for the IWC, the end goal was common ownership of industry on the basis of democratic economic planning, thereby transitioning from workers' control under capitalism to the possibility of full worker self-management under socialism.

The end of the long boom amplified rather than detracted from these currents, as the prospect emerged of substantial reversals to the material gains won by ordinary working people in the post-war period. The flowering of struggles for workers' control in the late 1960s and early 1970s took place against the backdrop of a weak and faltering British capitalism confronted by a strong and growing trade union movement. In the period 1969-79, union density rose from 46 per cent to 55 per cent of the workforce (Thompson, 2006, 227). In such circumstances, unions and public spending were quickly made into scapegoats for the economic crisis, the origin of lazy clichés about the 1970s industrial landscape that persist to this day. The period has gone down in collective memory as one of national decline, rampant

inflation, industrial strife, economic underperformance, and ungovernability amid a generalised sense of crisis that was only brought to an end by the advent of Thatcherism. This is a serious misreading of the problems of the era, in which low productivity was born of low investment and low wages. The true ‘British disease’ was not strikes but chronic underinvestment, which had left British industry increasingly uncompetitive in the face of intensifying international competition, rising commodity prices, oil shocks, and halting growth. The failure to support long-term investment in British firms can be traced back to the dominance of the City and its rentier values, still a key structural fault line of the British economy. This explains much about the industrial dynamics of the time: ‘Instead of research, reinvestment and restructuring, most British companies would rather simply lay off workers, prompting industrial militancy in response’ (Medhurst, 2014, 58).

The anger of workers at such dislocations was compounded by deep disenchantment with the economic performance of the 1964-66 and 1966-70 Labour governments, leading to determined reappraisals. For many, the record of Wilson’s Labour in office spoke for itself, a catalogue of ineffectiveness, retreat, and betrayal:

failure to arrest Britain’s relative decline, a deflationary response to sterling crises that destroyed any possibility of meeting the ambitious growth targets set by the National Plan, periodic public expenditure cuts, the failure of the Industrial Reorganisation Corporation to effect a restructuring of British industry that would enhance its economic competitiveness, a 60 per cent rise in unemployment, an increase in Britain’s international indebtedness and a rate of price inflation that rose from 3.3 per cent in 1964 to 6.4 per cent in 1970. (Thompson, 2006, 189)

As Francis Cripps and Frances Morrell later pointed out, rising unemployment was a straightforward – ‘foreseeable and foreseen’ – outcome of the policies Labour consciously chose to pursue throughout the period (Coates, 1979, 95). Once these realities became clear, increasing numbers of working people began to look elsewhere for answers, and workers’ control was one direction in which they turned. At the same time, massive corporate rationalisation and increasingly acute balance of payments problems were beginning to force the trade unions to widen their scope beyond pay and working conditions to substantive engagement with issues related to corporate strategy, investment, and production itself. This raised questions about the wider social costs of plant closures and the need to broaden the basis of economic decision-making beyond a narrow commercial focus on balance sheets of

profit and loss within a given company to 'the democratic expression of social needs' (Thompson, 2006, 199).

The possibilities inherent in an increasingly skilled and educated workforce were beginning to come to the fore. Earlier debates over workers' control within the Labour Party in the 1930s and 1940s had been closed down by arguments about the impracticability of workers assuming management responsibilities, epitomised by Stafford Cripps' claim, during the 1946 debates over nationalisation, that it would be 'extremely difficult to get enough people who are qualified to do that sort of job, and, until there has been more experience by workers of the managerial side of industry, I think it would be almost impossible to have worker-controlled industry in Britain' (Coates, 1975, 50). By the onset of the 1970s it was no longer possible to make such excuses, as Britain had 'probably the most industrially experienced work-force in the world' (Scanlon, 1968). As membership crossed the 50 per cent mark, the changing sociology of Britain's trade unions saw the unionisation and radicalisation of increasing numbers of white collar workers, who brought over to the side of labour their understanding of technology and capacity for innovation:

The pressures of mass production in an increasingly competitive market had steadily eroded the privileged status of the design engineer; computer-controlled technology was both the final leveller and a new source of collective bargaining power. These newcomers did not just provide higher dues to head office: many of them also acted as a yeast in the trade union dough just at a time when it was needed ... designers and shop-floor workers in the heat of the technological revolution began to uncover the choices and values involved in the design and innovation process itself. (Wainwright, 1994, 162)

In such a context, transparency and openness at the firm level took on a growing importance. Information on productivity, profitability, and investment would be critical to any extension of workers' control that sought to wrest away greater power over decision-making. 'Opening the books' was thus one of the central demands of IWC campaigns, amounting to more than just an insistence on access to hitherto concealed company data on plans and performance. It was, as Michael Barratt Brown argued, a starting point for '*evaluating* and *interpreting* a complex situation in order to work out and fight for a policy of advance towards democratic control of industry'. Once facts and figures were made available to the workforce, the next step would be the establishment of social audit groups in each factory and enterprise, and so on; each step representing a further encroachment upon management

prerogatives and ‘criticism in practice’ of the resource allocation function of capitalist managers – and, ultimately, of capitalism itself (Barratt Brown, 1968, 2-5).

## When lame ducks took wing

‘The words “sit-in” and “work-in” have not entered the language as idle coinages’, wrote Ken Coates, ‘they have fought their way into people’s imaginations’, with the result that, for a time in the 1970s, workers were able to see ‘all sorts of possibilities of action and redress in a variety of predicaments which [had] hitherto, in the recent past, for them spelt only submission’ (Coates, 1981, 12-13). The first major attempt at a factory occupation in post-war Britain was an abortive bid, modelled after the 1930s US auto industry occupations (Roberts, 1973, 145), to launch a work-in at the General Electric Company-English Electric (GEC-EE) plants on Merseyside in the summer of 1969. In the face of threatened closures following a merger, local shop stewards began an urgent consultation on alternative economic possibilities for the plants. The IWC was invited in ‘to provide services to the workpeople of GEC-EE in Liverpool in furtherance of their decision to combat a massive programme of redundancies by occupying and working their factories’ (Barratt Brown et al., 1969, 6). In the event, the factory occupations did not take place, due in part to the realisation by shop stewards that they lacked satisfactory solutions to key logistical problems, such as how to ensure continuing supplies of materials and power, as well as unresolved questions over entitlement to redundancy pay and workplace injury compensation. However, the very fact that a work-in was actively under consideration resulted in a storm of media coverage, sowing ideas and stimulating the imaginations of workers across the country.

The lessons of GEC-EE did not go unheeded. In June 1971, the government of Edward Heath announced its decision to withhold financial assistance from Upper Clyde Shipbuilders (UCS), causing the company to go into liquidation (Coates, 1981, 21). Amid a worsening economic climate – there had been 80,000 redundancies in 200 companies as a result of mergers and closures in the first half of 1971 alone (Roberts, 1971, 5) – the general crisis of British shipbuilding was coming to a head, exposing the problems of outdated, under-capitalised plant and equipment evident throughout British manufacturing industry. A declining sector marked by technical backwardness and outmoded structures, shipbuilding was increasingly dependent on government contracts and state aid. That said, when the axe fell at UCS it came as a bitter shock to the workers. A new managing director had, with the co-operation and strong backing

of the unions, begun making improvements that looked to be turning UCS around. Losses had been falling, productivity had increased by 87 per cent in a single year, the books contained £90 million worth of orders, and projections were that the shipyards would return to profitability the following year (Eaton, Hughes, and Coates, 1972).

The closure, it turned out, was a premeditated act by the new Conservative government, as was evidenced by a December 1969 note circulated to the Shadow Cabinet by Nicholas Ridley, then Opposition spokesperson on shipbuilding. In a classic piece of Thatcherism *avant la lettre* Ridley had urged, should the Tories return to office, that no further government money be provided and that Heath 'put in a Government "Butcher" to cut up UCS' and sell off the company, which was viewed as pushing up wage rates in the industry, on the cheap (McGill, 1973, 71). Secretary of State John Davies later denied all knowledge of the document, but Ridley was appointed junior minister in the Department of Trade and Industry and events began playing out much as the Ridley Report had envisaged (Coates, 1981, 25-7). The strategy was even telegraphed ahead of time in Davies' infamous 'lame duck' speech to the 1970 Conservative Party conference.

The threatened closures could hardly be fought with a traditional strike, so discussions turned to alternative forms of industrial action, centred on the idea of a 'work-in'. The UCS workers' leaders were aware of the problems that had worried the GEC-EE shop stewards before them – two thousand copies of the IWC's pamphlet recounting the Liverpool struggles had been distributed in Glasgow that month (Ibid, 30) – and set about crafting their own solutions. The government initially delayed publication of its findings regarding UCS, reportedly because 'all available Army units were in Northern Ireland' (McGill, 1973, 101). When it was announced, at the end of the month, that two of the four yards were to be shuttered and sold off, with a loss of 6,000 out of 8,500 jobs, the workers immediately seized control of the gates and the shop stewards called a press conference to publicise their intentions. The chairman of the joint coordinating committee covering workers at all four UCS shipyards, a young Communist shop steward named Jimmy Reid (quickly propelled to national fame by events), announced 'the first campaign of its kind in trade unionism':

We are not going on strike. We are not even having a sit-in. We do not recognise that there should be any redundancies and we are going to 'work-in'. We are taking over the yards because we refuse to accept that faceless men can make these decisions. We are not strikers ... We are not wildcats, we want to work ... the biggest mistake we could make is to lie down, capitulate, and grovel. (Coates, 1981, 22-3)

Capitulation was unlikely, given the long-standing tradition of industrial militancy on 'Red Clydeside', going all the way back to the Socialist Labour Party of James Connolly and revolutionary agitation of John Maclean. The day after the announcement Tony Benn travelled up to speak to the UCS workers, expressing his support for their action. Sympathy began to snowball, with an electrifying effect on industrial relations. The UCS work-in unleashed a wave of similar actions as far away as Australia, where a spate of factory and mine occupations took place following the example on the Clyde. In Britain, there was a dramatic mobilisation of the wider labour movement, and the Scottish TUC moved to set up a public enquiry. Even the Parliamentary Labour Party, in a rare fit of incautiousness, took up the cause without any foot-dragging. Donations flooded in to the workers' fund, including a sizable contribution from John Lennon accompanied by a bunch of red roses. The UCS delegation to that year's Labour Party conference was received with rapturous applause.

Public relations was hugely important in the UCS struggle. In spite of their treatment at the hands of a hostile media, the workers were able to break through to the wider public and maintain strong political support, not least because of the degree of discipline – 'there will be no hooliganism, there will be no vandalism, and there will be no bevvying', Reid had insisted – that accompanied the work-in. Productivity soared, and a major problem became restraining production to pre-occupation levels, lest existing contracts be completed too speedily ahead of a resolution of the crisis, thereby accelerating the threat of lay-offs and risking defeat. A social audit – 'an attempt to assess, and place before public opinion, some picture of the true socio-economic costs of decisions which are taken within the narrow rationality of enterprise budgets' (Ibid, 83) – was conducted, finding the costs of closure and restructuring to be 'very much higher than keeping the yards in full operation' (Fleet, 1972, 13). One critical difference with the earlier attempted work-in at GEC-EE was the heavy commitment of financial capital sunk in the half-completed shipping still under construction in the yards. This effectively fell hostage to the work-in, a key point of leverage with a liquidator obliged to salvage whatever possible on behalf of the company's creditors. The work-in continued for over a year until, in October 1972, the government announced a £47 million rescue of the firm, reversing redundancies and allowing all four yards to be saved.

While UCS was clearly a resounding victory for the workers in immediate industrial terms, in a strategic sense the success was much more limited. The objectives of the work-in had remained resolutely within the existing structure of ownership, and the workers stopped short of developing their own plan for management of a demo-

cratic shipyard under a future nationalisation. The Dockers had in fact made a direct appeal to them to do just this, having already developed a blueprint of their own for democratic management of the docks. 'We are all engaged', urged Brian Nicholson, a Docker and member of the TGWU National Executive, 'in a common fight to replace arbitrary, socially-blind authority, by a responsible, democratically-accountable system of social management' (Coates, 1981, 42-3). While the UCS workers were quite correct to 'insist that they could not by an act of collective will levitate the Glasgow-based ship-building industry clear over the manifold problems imposed by a hostile political economy' (Ibid, 41), this underscored a wider dilemma. Defensive struggles, no matter how hard fought and successful, still placed workers at an automatic disadvantage in a period of major structural change. The IWC had been issuing such warnings for years:

It is not enough to demand structural reforms in the declining, loss-bearing sectors of the economy alone; socialist advance will only occur when the workers' control movement extends itself to embrace both the industries whose structural weaknesses compel the present fierce rationalisation drive, and those industries which are the growth sector of international neo-capitalism. (Coates, 1967, 88)

In the meantime, the effect of the UCS victory was to normalise work-ins, sit-ins, and occupations as a feature of UK industrial relations. An IWC conference on work-ins and sit-ins was held in Newcastle in January 1972 to help spread the word. Hundreds of sit-ins followed over the next decade, involving tens of thousands of workers directly (with some plants being visited and revisited by factory occupations), and touching the experience of millions of others throughout the labour movement.

Recognition was growing of the need for different models. After the miners brought down Heath's government, Tony Benn's brief period as minister at the Department of Industry saw state support for worker co-operatives at Fisher-Bendix in Kirkby, Norton Villiers Triumph in Meriden, and the Glasgow *Scottish Daily Express* (Coates, 1976). Such aid, however, remained 'minimal compared to the overall assistance given by government to private industry', while 'most of it went to compensate previous owners for what was already an obsolete plant' (Ness and Azzellini, 2011, 296). The 'Benn co-operatives', a bold and courageous effort by their workforces, were thus inevitably short-lived. The true breakthrough in the search for new models came with an entirely different approach to production, aimed at avoiding the problems faced by worker co-operatives adrift in the capitalist marketplace. This

took shape in the creation of a series of workers' alternative plans for production aimed at meeting social needs, most famously at Lucas Aerospace.

The decision by Lucas management to cut 5,000 jobs (out of a total of 18,000) caused union representatives at the company to go on the offensive in a bid to access decision-making about future investment (Coates, 2007). Their initial demand for a traditional nationalisation became, after a meeting of thirty-four Lucas shop stewards with Tony Benn at the Department of Industry, a push for workers' self-management on the basis of a highly sophisticated Alternative Corporate Plan. 'There is talk of a crisis wherever you turn', observed Mike Cooley, a North London design engineer and leading member of the Lucas Aerospace Combine Shop Stewards' Committee:

I think we have to stand back from that crisis for a few moments and see where we are in relation to it. For it is the present economy that has a crisis. We don't. We're just as skilled as we were; miners can still dig coal, bricklayers build houses, and we can still design and produce things. (Wainwright and Elliott, 1982, 7)

Casting a wide net on the shop floor to tap the deep expertise and tacit knowledge of the workforce, and acting in consultation with the community to identify social needs unmet through the market, the Combine Committee discovered the capability to produce over 150 socially useful products, eventually settling on five categories of alternative production: medical equipment; alternative energy (wind, solar, storage technology); oceanic exploration devices; new transport solutions (including the remarkable 'road-rail vehicle'); and electro-magnetic braking systems. It was described in the *Financial Times* as 'one of the most radical alternative plans ever drawn up by workers for their company' (Lucas Combine, 1979, 4). As well as being a version of William Morris' ideal 'factory as it might be', the Lucas Plan was also, as John Medhurst observed, 'a progressive green agenda ... decades ahead of its time' (Medhurst, 2014, 98). In 1979 the Lucas Plan was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Additional alternative corporate plans were soon forthcoming from Vickers and other companies, indicating a growing 'capacity to conceive of ways in which productive activity could be reoriented to serve more obviously social and socialist ends' (Thompson, 2002, 60). Of critical importance was the emphasis placed on production for use instead of profit, and on transition out of anti-social and otherwise harmful products, such as armaments (Beynon and Wainwright, 1979).



A particularly galling instance of a missed opportunity, given the intervening decades of inaction on greenhouse gas emissions, can be found in the *Workers' Enquiry into the Motor Industry*, as TUC General Secretary Frances O'Grady recently pointed out (3). Convened by the IWC and consisting of motor industry workers from Chrysler, Vauxhall, Ford, British Leyland, and Willmott Breedon, the workers' report drew upon the ingenuity and farsightedness of the shop floor to offer the prospect, as far back as 1978, of an advanced green transition away from the internal combustion engine and in the direction of hybrids, electric cars, and mass transit vehicles (IWC Motors Group, 1978, 85-8). Even back then, it would seem, the viewpoint of social labour was superior to that of the capital owners of big car companies in grasping the dimensions of the metabolic rift and turning its implications into practical plans of action.

## Alternatives to Keynesianism

The work of the IWC unfolded against this dynamic background, both feeding into and drawing upon the greatest upsurge in working class industrial mobilisation and militancy in Britain in half a century. Eventually, the IWC's efforts helped prompt Harold Wilson to appoint the Bullock Committee in 1975 to conduct an enquiry into issues related to industrial democracy, including mandatory worker representation on boards and other changes in company law (Coates and Topham, 1977). But as the crisis of long-term underinvestment in British industry grew increasingly apparent, the IWC understood something that continued to elude Labour's traditional social democrats: that the social and economic arrangements of the post-war settlement were simply unsustainable. Like the Thatcherites critiquing the status quo from the opposite direction, the Labour New Left viewed Keynesianism as having lost much of its explanatory power. Observing important structural changes in the economy, they were driven to the supply side to look for root causes of crisis and decline. In this vein, the IWC played an important role in the development of wider left economic alternatives to both moribund social democracy and emerging neo-liberalism. Their response to the collapse of the post-war settlement was to call for the socialisation of capital and the democratisation of both the economy and the state – and, for that matter, of the Labour Party.

Ken Coates in particular, considered by Eric Hobsbawm in 1973 to be 'the most underrated political analyst among British Marxists today' (Coates, 1977) and later to earn the distinction of having been expelled from the Labour Party under both

Harold Wilson and Tony Blair, contributed ideas to the development of the Labour left's alternative economic proposals. Coates himself was a fascinating figure: ex-Communist Party, ex-International Marxist Group, and a campaigner for the rights of dissidents in the Eastern bloc, he was prominent in international efforts to persuade the Soviet authorities to rehabilitate Nikolai Bukharin (Coates, 1978), and was once sent by Bertrand Russell and Jean-Paul Sartre as an emissary to Fidel Castro with the incredible proposal of creating an international brigade to fight in Vietnam (Lambie, 2012, 19-45). A former coal miner, he won a scholarship to Nottingham University where he studied sociology, and his book with Richard Silburn, *Poverty: The Forgotten Englishmen*, a survey of St. Ann's in Nottingham, was greeted with shock upon publication when it revealed the large proportion of working people who remained mired in poverty (Coates and Silburn, 1973). His experiences in industry formed the basis of his life-long opposition to 'wage slavery' and accompanying hard-headed devotion to the romanticism of William Blake and William Morris; the latter's insistence that 'no man is good enough to be another man's master' was emblazoned on the IWC's banner. He was also among the first to recognise the need for British socialists to come to terms with the ecological implications of the pursuit of rapid output growth, editing a collection of essays on *Socialism and the Environment* as early as 1972.

A member of Tony Benn's informal kitchen cabinet, Coates had some influence on what was to become the Alternative Economic Strategy (AES), promoted for the next ten years as the Labour left's alternative to both Keynesianism and monetarism. The AES, had it been implemented, would have preserved the Keynesian commitment to full employment but sought to underpin it with a regime of expanded public ownership, price and rent controls, economic planning, the expansion of social housing, a wealth tax, and an extensive programme of economic democracy, including democratisation of the nationalised industries – all in all, what Benn memorably termed 'a fundamental and irreversible shift in the balance of wealth and power in favour of working people and their families' (Medhurst, 2014, 11).

Also in the orbit of the IWC were two economists who developed important interpretations of the causes of the breakdown of the Keynesian settlement: Michael Barratt Brown and Stuart Holland. Amid general confusion about the failure of traditional Labour policies to secure even the expected trade-off between price inflation and unemployment as both rose at the same time (Thompson, 2006, 189), Barratt Brown and Holland each laid out analyses that underscored the role of giant global corporations – variously 'trans-national companies' (Barratt Brown, 1972) or

'multi-national companies' (Holland, 1975) – in outflanking exchange rate, fiscal, monetary, and other policies pursued by national governments. Corporations' self-financing of investments through retained profits gave them access to finance independent of government-determined interest rates; 'transfer pricing' allowed for manipulation of declarable taxable profits; and cartel behaviour over price-setting undermined exchange rate policies aimed at improving trade performance and the balance of payments while limiting the efficacy of counter-inflationary measures aimed at protecting real wages (Thompson, 2006, 192). Leaving aside their increased capacity to influence policymakers, this meant that 'a divorce [had] arisen between the demand management orthodoxies of governments and the supply management cycle of big business' (Holland, 1978, 141). For Holland, this rise of what he termed *mesoeconomic power* between macroeconomics and microeconomics meant that solutions would increasingly be sought in vain in the traditional Keynesian toolbox of demand management. Clearly, any future left-wing government would require new, more potent means by which to challenge head on the increasing power of international monopoly capital.

The IWC played a critical role in the early formulation of these alternatives. In 1974 Ken Coates published, under the auspices of Spokesman Books, a pamphlet by Michael Ellman, Bob Rowthorn, Ron Smith, and Frank Wilkinson, a group of left-wing economists at Cambridge, entitled *Britain's Economic Crisis*, which was 'offered as a discussion document in the hope that it will stimulate debate within the labour movement on alternative socialist strategies for the British economy' (Cambridge Political Economy Group, 1974, 2). In this it succeeded, becoming one of the precursors of the AES advanced by the left inside and outside the Labour Party in the seventies and eighties. Another source was the 1973 *Programme for Britain*, described by Tony Benn as 'the most radical and comprehensive programme ever produced by the Labour Party' (Thompson, 2006, 216). The basic elements of the AES were an expansionary policy of full employment to be achieved via a planned reflation of the economy through increases in public spending; capital controls and managed trade; an industrial strategy and firm-level planning, expanding public ownership and industrial democracy; a national economic plan; and price controls to combat inflation (Conference of Socialist Economists, 1980, 6). Workers' control, as propagated by the IWC, was a central component of the strategy, but would be flanked by major new public institutions such as the proposed National Enterprise Board, a state holding company modelled after the Italian Istituto per la Ricostruzione Industriale (IRI), which would establish a significant public stake in manufacturing industry and exercise control over both public and private sectors

through a system of planning agreements with the hundred largest companies (Thompson, 2006, 217).

It was never to be implemented. Benn was to complain of a ‘systematic social democratic betrayal of socialist policy’ (Medhurst, 2014, 96). Monetarism was first installed in Britain by Callaghan and Healey through the IMF-compliant budget of 1976. Once Thatcher was in Downing Street, the terms for dismantling the post-war settlement could be set by the IWC’s class enemies. In Thatcher’s first term alone industrial production fell by nearly 20 per cent, manufacturing capacity declined by a third, unemployment rose above 3 million, and inflation again reached double digits (Thompson, 2006, 226). With the progression of Thatcherism through the institutions of politics and the British state, the IWC was thrown on the defensive and, despite some bitter struggles over the nature of Labour’s response, particularly around mandatory re-selection of MPs (Mullin, 1980), and rearguard actions against privatisation, it eventually faded into insignificance. Many of the IWC’s ideas, however, still stand as the core of an alternative political economy, from the micro-economics of production at the firm level to a broader politics and democratic theory. It represents a radically different conception of politics and economics that is sorely needed today. If we are ever to find workable alternatives to neo-liberal capitalism, as Leo Panitch and Colin Leys have argued, ‘we need at least to examine objectively the most recent democratic socialist project to have emerged in practice, and to learn what we can from it’ (Panitch and Leys, 2001, 2).

## Hard road for the hard left

A few signs point to the renewed importance of recovering the history and legacy of the movement for workers’ control in the 1970s. To begin with, there has been a sharp return of factory occupations and initiatives for workers’ control in recent years with the onset of neo-liberal crisis. Most of the activity at the turn of the century was to be found in Latin America, especially following the collapse of the Argentine economy in 2001, which saw unemployment soar to 25 per cent and the emergence of the *sin patrón* (‘without bosses’) movement numbering over 10,000 workers in two hundred recovered workplaces – ‘an old idea reclaimed and retrofitted for a brutal new time’ (Lavaca Collective, 2007, 8). But since the financial crisis of 2008, factory occupations have sprung up across Europe, especially in Spain, Italy, France, and Greece, but also in Egypt and the United States. The shuttering of Republic Windows and Doors in Chicago and its reopening under co-operative worker ownership as New Era Windows

has garnered international attention (Lydersen, 2009), as has the experiment in economic and ecological self-management at the Vio.Me factory in Thessaloniki, Greece (Azzellini, 2015, 67-8). To Alexandros Kioupkiolis and Theodoros Karyotis, these developments represent 'the crystallisation of structures that go beyond simple workers' control over production and aspire to a wider social control, which encompasses the production of new ideas and values (including common ownership, solidarity, cooperation and the protection of the environment)' (Ibid, 318).

In Britain, many of the challenges of post-industrial decline remain starkly present. The grotesque power that private corporations continue to wield over workers and communities through locational decisions was on display again in recent debacles at Redcar Steel on Teesside and Ineos at Grangemouth in Scotland. Entire communities are still thrown on the scrap heap, with all that implies in terms of associated capital and carbon costs and wasted lives. New public strategies in this area will need to encompass both democratic public ownership and new planning capacities and functions. It also seems clear that, given the pressing demands of climate change, the next few decades will require a considerably bigger role for economic planning than has been the case in the last few decades. The question then becomes how to make such planning democratic and participatory as well as effective (Topham, 1983). As the search commences for ways to re-embed the economy and provide an expanding zone of decommodification to buffer against the market, the somewhat forgotten but substantial history of thinking at the IWC along these lines offers a creative body of work upon which to draw for inspiration. And at a time when the leader of a major trade union can call openly and without embarrassment for the renewal of the Trident nuclear weapons system as a means of protecting jobs, past thinking around defence conversion and socially useful production is in urgent need of reclamation (Collective Design/Projects, 1985; Dumas and Thee, 1989).

Finally, the recent extraordinary developments in the Labour Party make the recovery of historical memory concerning the 1970s of immediate political relevance. Up until a few months ago, the history of the IWC's failure, together with that of the broader New Left, to gain lasting traction within the Labour Party under far more favourable conditions than those obtaining today, raised searching and somewhat prohibitive questions about the future reformability of Labour and whether the energy needed to create a genuine alternative to the current economic order should once again be absorbed in an attempt to remake British social democracy (Panitch and Leys, 2001, 15). With the surprise election of Jeremy Corbyn as leader of the Labour Party, these propositions will now be tested whether we like it or not.

An ideological ice age may be coming to an end, but as the neo-liberal permafrost breaks up we should expect great efforts to preserve the power of the political narratives that have served our economic masters so well for the best part of four decades. Every myth and threadbare cliché about the ‘hard left’ – of which the IWC was certainly a part – is being dusted off and put to service by a shrieking opposition, inside and outside the Labour Party, unnerved by the prospect of a major breach in the ruling consensus. In fact, the protagonists on left and right at the time took up very different positions vis-à-vis the crisis of the 1970s than they have been afforded in conventional accounts. Clarity on just what was at stake and who had the better answers is once again a matter of current politics.

Corbyn’s leadership could open up space for a much broader political conversation, especially on economics, than has been possible in the UK for many decades. In his first conference speech as Shadow Chancellor, John McDonnell pledged that Labour would ‘promote modern alternative public, co-operative, worker controlled and genuinely mutual forms of ownership’ (McDonnell, 2015). At precisely the point when it appeared at its weakest historically, the Labour New Left has been granted an unexpected afterlife. It is greatly to be hoped that this does not devolve into a simple reprise of conventional Keynesianism, already tested to its limits in far friendlier conditions and found wanting.

Just as dangerous is the bandwagon, already rolling, that seeks to rehabilitate the so-called ‘soft left’ as a means of managing Corbynism and returning Labour to ‘electability’. This manoeuvre depends upon a bait-and-switch by which the historical ‘hard left’ is first marginalised by reducing a variegated and broad-based political movement to a cartoon of the Militant Tendency while a refurbished pluralist ‘soft left’, built around *Marxism Today* and trendy cultural theory, is proffered in its stead. Although it made a few interesting conceptual advances, the ‘soft left’ outside the Labour Party was a mash-up of post-Fordism and postmodernism amounting to, in one succinct verdict, ‘either futurology or bad history ... Analytically erroneous, it was strategically divisive’ (Elliott, 1993, 150-1). Somehow retrospectively granted exclusive rights to Gramsci and to social movements, in practice it took quiescence as its watchword, seeing hegemony as something to be ‘endured, not forged’ (Ibid, 151). Inside the Labour Party, the soft left’s record was still worse. As two close observers of the mafia politics of the Kinnock era noted, Labour’s own ‘Great Moving Right Show’ would hardly have been possible without:

the acquiescence of a sizable chunk of the rank and file, whose demoralisation and disorientation in the wake of successive defeats was skilfully exploited by

the Party leadership. A key layer of activists, those former supporters of the “Bennite” insurgency, who came to be known as the “soft left”, proved themselves ready, willing, and able to make any compromise and abandon any principle as and when it suited the interdependent requirements of the leadership and their own personal interests. (Heffernan and Marqusee, 1992, 2)

It would be a final grim irony if, granted an unexpected afterlife, the political heirs of the Labour New Left were themselves to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory by either falling back into the arms of the Keynesianism against which they originally defined themselves or succumbing to the same ‘soft left’ blandishments that previously delivered over the party, bound hand and foot, to its real enemies within.

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## Notes

1. Alexander Bogdanov appears to be enjoying a mini-revival: he also has a walk-on part in Paul Mason's latest book. See pp. 218-21 in Mason, P. (2015) *Postcapitalism: A Guide to Our Future*, St. Ives, Allen Lane.
2. Although the Institute for Workers' Control is sadly defunct, IWC publications are still available from Spokesman Books at: [https://www.spokesmanbooks.com/acatalog/Institute\\_for\\_Workers\\_Control.html](https://www.spokesmanbooks.com/acatalog/Institute_for_Workers_Control.html). Many IWC pamphlets are freely available on the website of Socialist Renewal at: <http://www.socialistrenewal.net/node/121>.
3. Frances O'Grady, General Secretary of the Trades Union Congress, gave the inaugural Ken Coates Memorial Lecture at the University of Nottingham on 3 June 2015. Audio of the lecture is available at: <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/cssgj/centre-activities/conferences-workshops/ken-coates-memorial-lecture.aspx>.