

**Michael Barratt Brown
and Ken Coates**

The 'Big Flame'

and

What is the IWC?

Institute for Workers' Control

Pamphlet Series No. 14

SPOKESMAN
40p

Michael Barratt Brown

The 'Big Flame'

There is a new flame burning in the British Labour Movement. Those who speak of apathy and despair are out of touch and out of date. The pressure of changing technological and politico-economic forces seem suddenly to have combined with growing socialist consciousness among workers to produce a new mood and a new kind of response. Of course there have been other moments in British Labour history when the Movement changed into a new gear - the drawing up of the 6 Points of the Charter, the building of the Craft and then of the General Unions, the founding of the Labour Party, the calling of the General Strike, the post-war enthusiasms which put the 1945 Labour Government in power. Last year and this year it is suddenly the demand for workers' control that is seizing the Movement. It is closely paralleled by the students' demands - both arise from a higher level of education and cultural sophistication; both imply the desire and the capacity of large numbers of people for democratic participation in their own affairs; both involve, therefore, a challenge to autocratic and bureaucratic decision making.

The demand of both students and workers for control over their own lives is evidently an international phenomenon. 1968 was the year of the great occupation of the factories in France in a massive general strike lasting for several weeks. It was sparked off by the students occupation of the Sorbonne and police brutality in ejecting them. 1968 saw the magnificent resistance of students and workers in Czechoslovakia in defence of their Government's new and essentially democratic policies and against the subsequent Russian invasion. 1968 saw the magnificent growth in human consciousness of the black fifth of the population of the United States. 1968 saw the emergence of a Civil Rights Movement in Northern Ireland that challenged a 50 year old monopoly of political power by the Ulster Unionists. 1968 saw students in Mexico and Japan mutually challenge the whole military might of their Governments. 1968 saw Africans from Guinea to Mozambique holding the Portugese colonial rulers at bay. 1968 above all saw the success of the heroic people of little Vietnam in bringing the giant United States to the Conference Table.

What is admired in other countries is not always admired at home. The demands of the dockers and the busmen, of the motor workers and the seamen. of the students of Guildford

Hornsea, Hull, Birmingham and L. S. E. are said to be nothing but the irresponsible mouthings of a few "politically motivated" militants and "thugs". The same words are used by the authoritarians who are being challenged in each of the lands overseas which we have instanced. Anyone who supposes that the challenge to arbitrary authority nearer home can be exorcised in this way must surely be learning the lesson.

There are lessons too to be learnt by the workers and students whose challenge to authority has so suddenly changed the whole political scene at home - lessons concerned with the need for unity, for agreed programmes of action, and for precise plans for the new democratic controls which they seek. The victories of the Czech workers and students and of the Africans and the Vietnamese are not due only to their heroism but to their careful study of the needs of their peoples and their detailed attention to these needs. The heroic courage of Che Guevara and Jan Palach has caught the imagination of youth everywhere; the detailed attention to their peoples' economic and social advancement of Eduardo Mondlane and the Czech trade unionists should not be overlooked.

Workers' control and Student Democracy are not slogans only for banners and marches, but programmes to be worked out. The flame is alight but "the big flame" does not catch on as easily as may be made to appear in the imaginative sequences of a film. I am of course, referring to Jim Allen's superb evocation of the struggle of the Liverpool dockers in "The Big Flame", the B. B. C's Wednesday Play, and my only criticism, though it is an important one, is that it takes more than the bright suggestion of one man from outside to set a port alight. This criticism is moreover, not just that the ideas of workers' control will have to be sold to the workers themselves with something more than one or two splendid speeches. It is that workers' control will be literally meaningless unless it is thought about, argued about and developed by the workers themselves precisely out of their daily experience of work. And let it be clearly understood that this includes all workers professional, technical, clerical and manual. The demand for workers' control is the demand for democracy at the place of work instead of hierarchical authority, whether this derives from private or state capital.

This is the importance of the annual Conferences on Workers' Control which led last year at the Nottingham Conference of 500 delegates to the setting up of an Institute for Workers' Control. A beginning, but only a beginning, has been made, in the discussion of plans for individual industries. In the docks where the role of the employers of dock labour is least significant involving the least expertise, the Labour Party (but not the Labour Government) have accepted the principle of workers' control and discussion of this among dockers is most advanced.

The chairman of the Institute for Workers' Control is a London docker and it was not for nothing that the first programme on the B.B.C. about Workers' Control should have been a story of a Dock Strike that led to the dockers running the docks themselves, until the army and the police went in to stop them.

The challenge to Trade Union bureaucracy as well as to employers' authority - so clearly drawn in "The Big Flame" - is not going to make the movement for Workers' Control a popular one in those quarters whose authority and bureaucratic ways are challenged. There will not be many big names in a challenge of this kind, but the future of the Labour Movement depends on its development. The work will have to be done at the grass roots by those with daily experience in the pits and workshops. Over 1000 such people were present at the Workers' Control Conference in Sheffield on March 29th - 30th. There were seminars of workers from almost every industry and profession. All who are beginning to think about establishing democracy in their place of work, who were inspired by the Czechs and the French workers and students and by the idea of the "Big Flame" have now to get down to the hard detailed tasks of figuring out what an extension of democratic control would actually mean in their work in technical, costing and legal terms.

Of course it is unlikely that in the near future workers' control can mean "taking over" docks or pits or factories. The French workers were very unclear what to do with the factories when they had them and only a few continued in production. In the first instance workers' control must mean safeguarding against encroachment and then strengthening the existing controls of workers over the condition of their work. Out of this what has to be developed is an even wider extension of these controls in a continuous challenge to authoritarian and bureaucratic decision making until the question of power is raised in the whole structure of the economy.

What is the IWC ?

All over the world, unrest is mounting. More and more people are finding the political and social arrangements which they have inherited to be totally inadequate. As men have gained greater knowledge and increased their technical skills, the world-wide division between rich and poor has become wider and more stark. In the colonial and former colonial countries, forced economic underdevelopment, which means poverty for whole populations, gives rise to rebellion after rebellion. The revolutions in China and Cuba, and the twenty-five year-old war in Vietnam, are simply the most extraordinary instances of what is becoming a world-wide struggle against hunger and colonial exploitation. But in the rich countries, the former centres of world-wide empires, other forms of acute discontent are expressing themselves. Foremost among these is the sharp dissatisfaction with the dominance of a totally undemocratic power-structure, ultimately based solely on the ownership of wealth, over an economy which is becoming more and more complex and socially interlocked. Factory workers and industrial technicians alike find that, as their work requires them to act in increasingly co-operative ways in their particular tasks, at the same time the government of their collective becomes increasingly dictatorial and arbitrary. The more skilled a man becomes, the more he is likely to resent the rule of a moneyed industrial autocracy which knows little and cares less about the tasks in hand, but concerns itself only with the concentration of wealth and power. And that is not all. War to the knife, which is the law of the competition that impels this system to produce, results in the accumulation of victims. Mergers and takeovers have not only concentrated industrial power on a scale which defies any form of socially accountable control, but they have produced wave upon wave of "re-organisations", dismissals, redundancies: they have dislocated whole communities. Men find themselves facing premature early retirement, or they find themselves abruptly without employment. Even when such shocks are cushioned by welfare payments or pensions, the loss of human dignity and self-respect involved in them is beyond calculation. And frequently the victims of these convulsions find not only that they have neither civil nor even beggars' rights in relation to the enterprises in which they have invested their working lives: but also that they face deprivation, and sometimes, poverty, into the bargain.

It is in this context that the words Workers' Control have come to take on a new and vivid meaning. Industrial democracy

has become a watchword which has a profound relevance to the world of economic autocracy in which we are now living. Indeed, in every major capitalist country, the concentration of financial power has become so great, and the difficulties of administering so irrational a system have become so marked, that the State has increasingly been called upon to intervene directly, as the open political arm of business interests, to curb the independent functions of trade unions, to hold down wages by public fiat, and to implement whole successions of 'plans' to assist in the conglomeration of major enterprises and the augmentation of business power.

The trade union answer to these pressures has been, in every major capitalist country, divided. Old-fashioned unions, often topheavy with officialdom and sluggishly, if at all, responsive to the needs of members, have tended to react defensively to the combined pressures of businessmen and governments, and to succumb after what have in fact amounted to ritualistic complaints. But the more dynamic organisations have been searching for ways of replying in an aggressive way, of evolving a counter-strategy to extend trade union powers where authority seeks to whittle them down, and to assert workers' rights where management seeks to establish its own "prerogatives".

Wherever one looks there are signs of this kind of response. In West Germany, trade unions like those of the metal or chemical workers demand a significant expansion of the workers' rights in the system of 'co-determination'. In Italy, more and more struggles break out in the factories about the workpeoples' rights to control speeds of work, allocation of tasks, and similar questions. In every country, redundancy raises the question of the trade unions' right to control hiring and firing. In practically every country, as was graphically borne out in the British Seamens' strike, the imposition of incomes policies and "productivity bargains" provokes the counter-demand "open the books", so that the workers can, for the first time, judge the effect of such arrangements on their employers' ability to meet demands. And in France, as all the world knows, the culmination of these processes brought a spontaneous general strike, in which factory after factory was occupied by its workers, and, while managers were locked in their offices, workpeople began an extensive and pressing nationwide discussion on workers' control.

At the same time as the rich capitalist countries reverberate with this argument, so also the richer socialist countries begin to echo it. The concentration of power into the hands of unrepresentative elites in those countries has been, quite obviously, economically counter-productive, to say nothing of its catastrophic political consequences. And so, in Czechoslovakia openly, and covertly all over Eastern Europe, there arises the demand for Workers' Councils with effective control of the enterprises, and the equally pressing insistence on the

need for democracy in planning. In Yugoslavia, where this debate began, the argument continues fiercely and publicly: while in the Soviet Union itself there are all the signs that the stiffening of Governmental control and doctrinal rigidity reflect a serious growth of democratic pressures in the factories. Every move which is made in Eastern Europe to develop this argument has its immediate repercussions in the West, and vice-versa. And since the economic and political difficulties of bureaucratic planning seem to be acute, there can be little doubt that this process will escalate.

In Britain, the workers' control movement has emerged from these conditioning factors. Starting in 1964, with a conference of some 80 socialists in Nottingham, a public debate has grown to embrace most major trade unions, the Labour and Liberal Parties, and even a corner of the mass-media of communications, which are, of course, a crucial preserve of autocratic control. Beginning in response to stimuli from Yugoslavia and Algeria, where self-management experiments excited British socialist thinkers, the movement has been confronted by a whole series of developments which have reproduced the traditional arguments for industrial democracy on a quite new plane, and given them a force which is becoming increasingly obvious and relevant. The post-war industrial revolution has produced a new technologically educated labour force, to which "managerial prerogatives" are an affront without mitigation. But the uneven development of this revolution has made the process of "modernisation" all the more convulsive in the backward sectors of industry, thus forcing workers to look towards control demands if they are to succeed even in the most elementary measures of self-defence. The fact that the neo-capitalist strategies of incomes policy and corporate "planning" have begun to show savage teeth, has forced workers to begin to revalue their assessments of the political utility of the organisations they have built, and to look for complimentary forms of industrial and political action with which to meet the new offensives which have been unleashed upon them. During this time, the discussion on workers' control has grown from conferences of eighty socialist journalists and academics, leavened by occasional trade union leaders, to cover gatherings of over one thousand trade union delegates. The seven conferences which have so far been held have brought together workers in more than twenty different industries, and produced a whole mass of documentation on conditions in those industries, and a stream of pamphlets and articles by workers engaged within them.

Arising out of this ferment, and as a result of a decision of the Sixth Conference for Workers' Control, the Institute for Workers' Control was formed in 1968. Its function is to act as a research and educational body, to co-ordinate discussion and communication between workers' control groups and trade unions,

to provide lists of speakers and to publish important materials on the subject of industrial democracy and workers' control. Membership of the Institute is open to all individuals who are interested in workers' control and who pay an annual subscription of three pounds, for which they receive all the publications of the Institute. It is also open to trade union and other working-class organisations who wish to affiliate, upon payment of a fee based on a sliding scale for local, district and national organisations. The Institute is governed by a Council which is elected at its general business meeting, open to all individual and affiliated members. Of course, the Institute does not commit itself to the majority or minority views of the groups or unions which support it, and where there is a plurality of views upon a question it will, subject to the state of its resources, publish them all. Voting, therefore, either at Council or General meetings, will normally concern administrative questions, unless there is a very general consensus upon the issue under discussion. The Institute does not seek to replace or usurp the policy-making functions of trade unions or the political organisations of the Labour Movement, but rather to provide them with a convenient and open forum upon a crucial issue. For organisations or individuals who wish to support the Institute, but who do not wish to concern themselves with its administration, associate membership is open at thirty shillings a year, which carries with it a subscription to the Bulletin of the Institute. In industries or localities where there is a developed interest in workers' control and industrial democracy, workers' control groups have been formed. These will normally affiliate to the Institute on the same basis as other local or district committees of trade unions or political bodies, and will therefore carry the same rights as those bodies in relation to the administration of the Institute.

Besides publishing a whole series of pamphlets and books, and issuing a monthly digest and a quarterly Bulletin of articles and information, the Institute convenes seminars for specific industries wherever it is requested to do so. Important seminars of dockworkers, busmen, farm workers and steelworkers have been held, and many other seminars are projected. At the same time, the Institute has taken the responsibility for convoking, jointly with the journal *Voice of the Unions*, the annual Conferences on Workers' Control in which the different industry seminars meet and exchange views. The seventh such Conference, held at Sheffield, had one thousand and thirty-two trade union delegates, and marked a serious step forward in the study of the relevance of ideas of industrial democracy to the problems of many groups of workers. The workers' control conferences are open to all who wish to participate in the movement for workers' control, and their seminars produce reports which are, wherever possible, published by the Institute, if necessary with both majority and

minority views. Naturally, the nature of such a Conference precludes it from arriving at decisions which bind the participants : but nonetheless, the value of so wide a forum is becoming increasingly apparent.

Of course, the crisis in which the British Labour Movement is caught requires the development of serious analyses, programmes and forms of organisation over a range which cannot possibly be covered by the Institute. But it seems clear that in the process leading up to this development, the ferment of ideas will be greatly assisted by the kind of work which it is undertaking.

PUBLICATIONS OF THE INSTITUTE FOR WORKERS' CONTROL

BOOKS

Workers' Control — Report of the 1967 Workers' Control Conference

Edited by Tony Topham 10/-

How and Why Industry must be Democratised —

Papers and proceedings of the 1968 Workers' Control Conference

Edited by Ken Coates and Wyn Williams

Hardback 32/6 Paperback 15/-

Can the Workers Run Industry? (Sphere) Edited by Ken Coates 8/6

Workers' Control Readings and Witnesses for Worker's Control

(Panther) Edited by Ken Coates and Tony Topham 10/-

The Debate on Workers' Control

Bert Ramelson, Ken Coates, Tony Topham, Charlie Swain & Bill Jones 6/-

PAMPHLET SERIES

1. **The Way Forward for Workers' Control** Hugh Scanlon 1/6
2. **Productivity Bargaining** Tony Topham 1/6
4. **Opening the Books** M. Barratt Brown 1 6
7. **Steel Workers' Next Step** A group of Sheffield Steel Workers 1/6
11. **Soviets in Italy** Antonio Gramsci 2/6
12. **The Dockers' Next Step**
Hull & London Dock Workers' Control Group 2/6
13. **Four Steps to Progress (Workers' Control and the Buses)**
Jack Ashwell 2/6
14. **The 'Big Flame' and What is the IWC?**
M. Barratt Brown and Ken Coates 9d
15. **The Law versus the Unions** Ken Coates and Tony Topham 1/6
16. **Job Evaluation and Workers' Control** Ray Collins 1/6
17. **GEC - EE Workers' Takeover** 2/-
18. **A Hope for the Miners?** John Hughes 6d

THE INSTITUTE PUBLISHES A QUARTERLY BULLETIN

Single Issues 5/- Subscription for six issues 30/-

from IWC, 45 GAMBLE STREET, FOREST ROAD WEST, NOTTINGHAM