

Arthur Scargill

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A Debate on Workers' Control

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If we look about us in Britain at the moment, there is undoubtedly an incredible crisis. There is a crisis of structural unemployment, our National Health Service is being disintegrated; even the air we breathe is polluted by this system. Yet in spite of this crisis the influence of the left is significantly small in Britain. When one says that to left-wing people they have a tendency, in all seriousness, to take the same view as Brecht who, on one famous occasion, said with brilliant irony "the Government has decided the people are wrong, therefore the people must be disbanded". Some people say if *only* we had a French working class, or if *only* we had the Italian working class we would surge forward. But we have the British working class with all their weaknesses and all their strength. And their strengths are many. They are an experienced and courageous working class.

Part of the trouble is that we don't listen to the working class nearly enough. When one talks to them about a socialist society, they tend to ask whether there is any country where that sort of society exists. And that's a pretty difficult question. I wouldn't like to say that the sort of society I want is the one I see in the Soviet Union for example. They ask "What kind of leaders? How would the country be run?" It's clear from the whole way in which they question these things, that they have no intention of replacing one elite with another. They don't want tsars, whether they are trade union tsars or whatever. They want a society in which they can fully participate and use their creativity to the full. Now in many ways that concept is in contradiction with the notion of leadership that exists in many parties and factions in the United Kingdom. There is the notion about that leadership is declaring yourself to be a vanguard. Having said that you then pursue a sort of jesuitical logic and say that if we are the vanguard it necessarily follows that we represent the highest level of consciousness of the working class. We also are the most dynamic in the working class and anybody who disagrees with us must be an enemy. It follows from this political dogma that political leaders perceive their role as solely to tell other people what to do, since by virtue of being part of this elite vanguard they know by definition precisely how the working class should behave in all circumstances and at all times. Now the problem about this is that even if we

could find leadership – and I certainly don't see it in Britain at the moment – such leadership would deny the working class a most precious experience. This is the self activism and development which raises the level of consciousness and competence to that high level which is a pre-requisite, a really democratic society; insofar as workers' control is one of the components which would do that, to that extent in my view is it important.

I mention that particularly, because there have been significant developments in Lucas Aerospace. As a result of trying to draw an image of what the future of that company might be like, an image of the society in which it would operate, it has been possible in practice to be engaged in a whole series of activities which have exposed to our members far more clearly than ever before, the objective role of the Government and many of the Ministers within it. We have seen both the pathetic slavish grovelling of some Government Ministers to this big multinational company in which we work and the objective role of trade union leaders who behind our backs have had secret meetings with the company to prepare the carve-up of our jobs. These are the same people who, when confronted two years ago and asked what products we could be making, and how we should make them, were absolutely silent. Yet they are the people who will tell us that they know best and will always lead us.

In the course of this development, the whole question of hierarchies and management has been to the forefront of our discussion. As one Lucas worker put it, we have discovered that management is not a skill or a craft, or profession, but a command relationship, a bad habit inherited from the army and the church. We don't like those kind of hierarchies at all, whether they be in the trade union movement or in political parties.

In the course of that struggle as well, we have been able to demonstrate in practice the non-neutrality of science and technology. We have been able to do it in objective circumstances through activity in a way we could never have done just by reading about it, or by getting lectures from very profound leaders. We were learning in the way that human beings always learn: we were learning by doing. As one of the Lucas workers said, 'I know because I do, not I do because I know'. Any organisation which provides a framework in which workers can be involved in that kind of activity, in my view, is a significant and important development towards creating the level of consciousness we need to safeguard and guarantee democracy in the future. In other countries, there has been a tendency when the superstructure of the State has been changed, to continue to run industry precisely as before. It was Lenin himself who said how important Taylorism could be to the running of the Soviet Union. Now some of you may recall that Taylor once said, "In my system the workman is told precisely what he is to do, and how he is to do it and any improvement he makes upon the instructions given to him are disastrous to success". It almost sounds like some political leaders who claim that the mass has been subverted when it does not pursue the direct Party line. What we are talking about is a level of consciousness which comes through struggle. We maintain that those who become separated from the base of that struggle and go into the superstructure very quickly begin to challenge the base. There is a contradiction between

superstructure and base. In my view, any trade union leader who becomes full-time — he can be as benevolent and dynamic and energetic and political as he wants — taken away from the point of production over five years that person will change. They can be as dynamic as they want. I have seen that change happen amongst my colleagues. If we are talking, therefore, about workers' control, we have got to ensure that we develop mechanisms where people are continuously exposed to the contradictions at the point of production itself.

When Jack Munday suggested that trade union leaders should return to the point of production after three years and work there for six years before they have the possibility of becoming a full-time official again, he was torn apart both by the right and the left in Australia. Because both of them saw real workers' control where there was rotation of function and involvement of people at the point where the decisions would be made, as a challenge to their power-structures of both the right and of the left. It is worth recalling that during the Cultural Revolution in China, (which I find it very difficult to make a final judgement about), the workers at the Shanghai machine tool factory said on one occasion that, in their opinion, the most dynamic sectors of a Party or a class should never go into the superstructure but should stay at the base fermenting and toppling the superstructure, if necessary. That to me is the dimension of real industrial democracy and workers' control.

Now it may be that industrial democracy and workers' control as it is spoken about could represent a compromise with the system which oppresses us. There seems to be in some circles the idea that if only we could get more and more people into positions of authority, one morning we might wake up and find that we have five seats on the Board against the employers' four and could then disband it. Now I don't believe for one moment that any class acquiesces in its own destruction. I take the view that there is a need ultimately for a Party and for an organisation of the working class which can face up to that power. Although that would require a level of consciousness amongst the working class which we don't have in Britain at the moment, our experience in Lucas Aerospace is that we are developing the levels of consciousness which will make that sort of thing possible. I think therefore that insofar as workers' control can begin to move towards a dual power situation in industry, the workers begin to flex their own muscles, begin to be conscious of their own great intellect. These are the people who design and build everything we see about us, when you come to think about it, because after all you can't ride around in a pound note, you can't live in it, you can't eat it. All that we see about us comes as a result of the power, the ingenuity and the creativity of all the working people. If through workers' control, they have the opportunity of sensing that power, the opportunity of using it in practice, and thereby understanding how parasitic and how irrelevant those are who control our society, to that extent do I believe that workers' control can be important. Insofar as it represents one challenge to the naked power of the multinationals in this country, to that extent do I believe it is of great significance.

Arthur Scargill

It is my firm belief that workers' control means in effect the castration of the trade union movement, means in effect a total collaboration as far as the working class is concerned, and certainly in practice, will result in compromise with society as it exists. I cannot for the life of me understand how any well-meaning socialist can possibly subscribe to the view that workers' control is something that we should adopt. I firmly believe that it is not only a diversion but, far more, is in fact an instrument that will retard progress towards the ultimate goal of a socialist Britain. There are those who suggest that workers' control is a means of moving towards a socialist system of society and that it is one of those necessary "revolutionary" steps towards that aim. I take the opposite view. It is my firm belief, based upon my experience, as well as political reflection, that workers' control and subscribing to this ideology will in fact harm our movement.

Is there anyone who believes for one moment that if we had, not a majority on the Board of Directors of Weinstock's company, but the total control of that company or the total control of any company, that we would be in any position to determine the future of that particular company. Of course we wouldn't. You can make all the plans that you want in society as far as your individual organisation is concerned, and both the multinational and national capitalist organisations will crush you (to quote London) with their iron heel. It is a nonsense, it is a fallacy, to believe for one moment that we can live in a capitalist society and attempt to work with it. What the trade union movement can do within the society is to wrench from it, while ever we have it, the best terms and conditions for those that we represent, both in the sense of wages and fringe benefits, though far more important, possibly, are organisation, investment and planning. If one suggests that workers' control should be introduced, (or worker participation, so that we can get a look at the books or better investment) the certain outcome would be the perpetuation of a society to which we are so fundamentally opposed.

We have already got a glowing example, which demonstrates categorically that we cannot have a socialist oasis sitting in the middle of a capitalist desert. I have been all my life connected with the Co-operative Movement; at the present time I am a member of the regional committee of Co-operative Retail Services. The only problem with the Marxist philosophy of the Co-op Movement today is that it is more in common with Spencer than it has with Karl. Their whole direction is geared to the competitive market of the Marks and Spencers and the Woolworths and the traditional traders in the high street, because we are living inside a society whose motivation is the acquisition of maximum profit. In my own industry we have had an example of how workers themselves can be conditioned to be actively concerned not only with our organisation, but with the perpetuation of the existing system. They begin to work with a view that is management-oriented. They begin to look at statistics rather than people. Participation in the mining industry, the consultative machinery which is supposed to give the National Union of Mineworkers a voice, has from bitter experience proved conclusively that the whole idea

of the consultative machinery was to foist on to the trade union movement and the working class measures which are certainly unpalatable to say the least.

In my view, we have to look very closely at the concept of workers' control. Like the apple in the Garden of Eden it looks good, it sounds good, for some people it even feels good by the very pamphlets that they touch, but I can assure you that if tasted it will at the best give a very severe bellyache and at the worst kill off the aspirations both of the working class and the Labour and trade union movement. We live in a society where all the political parties are at the moment discussing worker control, worker participation, or worker involvement. We should question why they are prepared to compromise themselves, or so it seems, with our working class interests if in fact we suggest that we should have worker control or worker involvement. The reason is crystal clear. The only reason that they are prepared to listen to any suggestion of worker involvement in British industry is in order to prevent a real challenge to the structure itself and to do that they are quite prepared to accept reforms within the existing system.

I consider that workers' control, as an ideology, is the apologist's alternative to socialism, the academic's dream of Utopia. In my view it certainly has no place in the struggle against capitalist society and for a socialist alternative. We live in a class society, whose motivation is very simple: to acquire the maximum profit it can. If we were to have tomorrow in my own industry every single seat on the National Coal Board and complete control of the national industry in which we work, we would be totally impotent in the absence of any economic planning in what we could do for the benefit of the people who work in the industry. Had we been in a position of control of 1972 there isn't a man or woman in our movement that could have examined the books of the National Coal Board and argued a case for a wage increase, because on the basis of what we had there was no prospect of giving the workers in the industry any increase or fringe benefits. The reason was simple: we did not need an industrial or an economic decision but a *political* decision, outside the industry itself, because in the very formative years of the National Coal Board — and it still happens in any industry today — political decisions had been taken which were proving disastrous both for our industry and the British people in the short-term and in the long-term. Even today, when we have one and a half million people unemployed in Britain, we have a Labour Government which is silent on the importation of coal from Poland, Polish coal which is being subsidised by a Communist Government. But coal is coming into Britain cheaper than the British miners can produce it and in those circumstances even if we had complete control of our industry it would need decisions far beyond our own industry to make the impact in the market so necessary for the basic advance of the British coalmining industry and indeed of associated industries as well.

Wherever worker participation or worker involvement has been tried it has been an abysmal failure. What worries me as a trade union leader is the concept that if we can get control of our industries and retain the existing system apparently then we can alter the whole course of British history. Let me tell you, that sort of argument has been advanced for very many years and it is similar both in philosophical terms and indeed in political terms to the argument inside the Labour

Party at the present time in respect of social democracy and socialism. There are those in the Party who argue that we can accommodate all manner of points of view in our Party. But I take a different point of view. I think that those in our Party with the kind of views of Reg Prentice or Dick Taverne, or those who support the European Common Market, like Roy Jenkins, have nothing in common with our Party or Clause 4. I believe that those in our Party who do not commit themselves to the common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange have more in common with the Party that's now in adulterous association with our own Party than they have with socialism or with the Labour Party itself.

The trade union movement, it is argued, if we have workers' control, can have tremendous influence, indeed power, over planning and investment: we could open the books to determine exactly what the position is. As I said earlier this implies the castration of the trade union movement because the logic of this development is that if the trade unionists sit on Boards of Management or take complete control of an industry in respect of investment and planning the very same people who are responsible for management decisions will then be those who determine wages and fringe benefits negotiations and the whole need for a trade union movement as we know it would then disappear. On the other hand, there is a strong argument firmly grounded on experience which says that if we could win, not only from our employer but from the Government of the day, both in 1972 and 1974, an increase in wages which they resisted fiercely although it was absolutely justified, then is there any logical reason why we cannot as a trade union movement also have the same power and influence as far as planning and investment decisions are concerned?

The danger with workers' control, the philosophy of those who are members of the Institute of Workers' Control, is that by its very nature it seeks to become involved in the process of capitalism itself. I do not believe that the function of our movement has anything in common with a society which we are committed to end. I therefore assert that the basic contradictions within our society can only be ended if our movement is galvanised in a united fashion against the evils of the society in which we live. The demands enunciated a hundred years ago for the common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange, are as clear and as true today as when they were first uttered all those years ago. I truly believe, that it is a dangerous diversion to support the aims of the Institute of Workers' Control because I believe in doing so we are supporting the principle of preserving a rotten, corrupt, capitalist system of society. There is only one way to advance our movement, there is only one way to advance our class: by taking on the system under which we live. By so doing we shall in the short term wrench from that society in return for what we put in, the maximum amount in terms of wages and conditions. We will at the same time have to use whatever influence we can to preserve the jobs of our members wherever they are threatened. But in the long term what we really need is a complete transformation of society. Just as we have produced a whole crop of social democrats that appear to have no relation to the Labour and trade union movement, similarly I firmly believe that the whole concept of the movement for workers' control will produce a situation which will help perpetuate the capitalist system.

I am absolutely convinced on the basis of our experience at the NCB and in the coal industry that the only view that we can properly take is that we should galvanise the movement not in pursuit of the aims of the Institute of Workers' Control, but in the pursuit of the basic principle and aim of a socialist alternative. Quite frankly Sir Derek Ezra and Arthur Scargill could plan tomorrow a coal mining industry to produce 200 million tons of coal and it would not be worth a bean if those in political power were to take those decisions that would have the effect of either producing a nuclear holocaust by nuclear power development or producing a situation whereby we burn all our North Sea oil and gas without any thought for those that we represent, as indeed happened in Holland only a few years ago.

Workers' control equals a block on the advance towards socialism. I want to see the basic aims of our movement and I want to see Clause 4 of the Constitution of the Labour Party become a reality in our time. To do that means dropping the aims of workers' control and going for common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange, transforming society and taking workers' control in the only meaningful way and that is in a real socialist Britain.

Audrey Wise

Clause 4 speaks of common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange, to give the workers by hand and by brain the full fruits of their labour. But it goes on to say, "Under the best obtainable methods of popular administration and control". Nobody in the Labour Party, I sometimes think, reads that second part, but I do, and the Institute for Workers' Control does. Now you can make a case that every instrument of the working class is a snare and a trap and a diversion. I could make a case about the danger of demonstrations. You might well argue that mobilising a hundred thousand in Grosvenor Square was all a waste of effort because you didn't win immediately. You could say that the Chartists should never have gone after the vote. After all, isn't Parliament the greatest diversion of all? You could certainly make out a very good case against the Chartist agitation, but it would be wrong wouldn't it? If you had lived then, you would have been a Chartist, Arthur Scargill would have been a Chartist, I am sure of it. I know I would have been a Chartist.

Certainly we must take on the system: the big question is how? And, most important of all: when will workers at large want to take on the system? Because up to now, they haven't in fact wanted to take on the system. They actually think the boss pays their wages. They don't realise they pay their own wages. And so what's missing in the equation is not that capitalism is not ready for replacement, not that, it's that workers haven't yet realised that there can and should be alternatives. They don't see there would be something different. Nationalisation so far has not shown them that, because they don't own the nationalised industries, they don't feel they own one scrap of the nationalised industries. And they are right. I think public ownership, as we have it now, is a snare and a delusion. What is the public if it doesn't consist of people? Who are the masses if they don't consist also of individual workers?

A crucial socialist endeavour seems to me to be to weld together individual workers, help them, take part with them, in the welding together of the individuals into collectives which don't destroy individuals but enhance them. I don't understand what socialism will be if it won't be that, and to me that is what workers' control is all about. I don't understand the notion that we have to wait until we have socialism, and after that we will get workers' control. To my mind they will be one and the same thing. Because the trade unions are badly compromised in some ways we don't all leave the trade union movement en masse. Of course we don't. Because joining and staying part of the trade union movement is first and foremost a declaration of class solidarity. And what we have to find is ways of using the trade union movement so that it acts on behalf of the working class.

Arthur said some very astonishing things. He said if the miners had had total control of the National Coal Board in 1972, then the books would have shown them that the industry couldn't afford wage increases. Well there's a certain logic in that. But it didn't stop the miners saying, we need a wage increase, therefore the money has got to be found. If they had controlled the National Coal Board would

their voice have necessarily been any weaker? Wouldn't that have meant that the National Coal Board and the NUM, and the miners at large, would all have been saying, "you have got to find the money". There is nothing that says that taking control of an industry means that that then is the end of the road. By God, if the workers' controlled GEC it would transform the situation. There would have to have been, for that to come about, a tremendous advance in workers' consciousness. Then do you think that it would remain there. If the workers' controlled GEC and had GEC's five hundred million that's at present in the bank and started to use that five hundred million, for production of useful goods, would that not have an effect on other workers? Would it not transform the situation? If the Lucas Aerospace Combine Committee were successful in forcing Lucas Aerospace Management to move over, so that they started producing the heart pumps, the kidney machines, and so forth would that not change the situation? It wouldn't solve everything. But it would have been the most enormous advance.

There is a way of showing that every breath a worker draws is a compromise with capitalism. I'll tell you the best way to take on the system. Stop providing any more workers for the system. If my grandfather had done that, we wouldn't have capitalism, would we? That's the fundamental way of taking it on. In a sense it is undeniable that every time you go to work you are collaborating with the system. Now I don't hold with the one step at a time mentality. I do believe in turning first of all in the right direction and then I believe that you go in leaps and bounds, and sometimes have to slow down to a crawl and sometimes even take a step back. I believe that movement and the development of consciousness is uneven, with different layers, but that sometimes there are enormous leaps. When you think, the birth of a baby is a tremendous revolution. One minute there is one person, the next minute there are two people. A revolution, instantaneous. But didn't it have to grow, that baby, within the existing person or system? Didn't it have to be conceived and grow until the time that it had developed sufficiently to have a life of its own? It seems to me that fundamental changes in social relationships are rather like that. There will never be a day in my opinion when you can say, yesterday we were capitalists, today we are socialists. There will come a time when people will realise that that particular baby has been born. And it won't necessarily mean that that parent has died. There will be a time possibly when we can see both of them till the parent is finally eclipsed. I think that that is not an unfair analogy.

I don't believe that you can simply take on the system in a sort of global mystical way. If you want to wrench higher wages and good conditions and even investment and planning from the system, well aren't you saying that you are trying to wrench some of the power? Isn't that part of what it is about. And you are not saying that you can wrench all the power straight away, you are saying you have to start by wrenching some of it. In the workers' control movement we recognise that you have to go beyond the idea that you are merely aiming to get a bigger share in the cake. We are beginning to see that it is even possible to go beyond the idea that you are trying to take over the bakery. You want the share of cake, you want the bakery, but you want *new recipes* as well. And you can start preparing your new recipes now. That is what Lucas Aerospace workers are doing, that is what the

miners ought to be doing. Because wouldn't it be stronger, if not only Arthur Scargill gave evidence at the Windscale Inquiry, but the National Coal Board officially: if it were the miners speaking on behalf of the working class and with the whole authority of a publicly owned industry which would be under the best possible popular means of administration and control. Wouldn't that help in the fight against nuclear magnates? I think it would. Therefore I think that far from being a diversion, the workers' control movement helps to make workers realise that they *can* take control.

All the time, of course you come up against constraints, all the time. If you have got a good Labour council, like we are told they have in Sheffield, that is a step forward. That does not mean that you are at the end of the road, because that town is working under the constraint that you have not got control of the Government. But does that mean that you should have stepped back from controlling the city of Sheffield? Of course it doesn't. And in controlling the city of Sheffield or in controlling Lucas Aerospace does that not mean then, that the workers get more and more convinced that there is an alternative way? And that they can achieve it? You can have participation schemes. Despite what Arthur Scargill has said workers' control is not to be written off as signifying merely participation schemes. I believe for instance that the participation scheme at British Leyland is a diversion and worse. But it was not brought about through the Institute for Workers' Control. It wasn't brought about by the struggles of workers. And there is all the difference in the world between something which is done by the boss to keep the workers quiet, and control which they wrest for themselves.

The reason the Tories speak up for worker involvement is the same reason why they speak up for the poor sometimes. And it is about as true. It has got as much to do with real workers' control as speaking up for the poor. Maggie Thatcher says, we are all weighed down by the heavy taxes. She says that to the poor person who was paying taxes on less than supplementary benefit is. Maggie Thatcher was seducing that person to believe that she was talking for him but she wasn't. She was talking for the wealthy. That did not mean that I could not come along and say, "relieve that person of the burden of taxation". You change the slogan so it is not 'cut taxes'. Its 'tax the rich not the poor', and you change the slogan 'worker involvement', and 'we are all on the same side, and let's get round the table together', to saying, 'look, its our work that makes these products, its our ideas that go into the design, we can do it, you move over'. There is all the difference in the world, between that idea of workers' control, and our idea.

Of course there is room for argument, about things on the way. We had arguments within the Institute about the Bullock Report. I happen to think, as a matter of fact, and I am in the minority I should think in the Institute for Workers' Control, that the Bullock Report could be useful. I have got some reasonable people on my side like Jim Murray, who also thought that, and isn't a collaborator. But there is room for respectable argument about that. I noticed, of course, that the real boss members of the Bullock Committee withdrew and made their own minority report, which encouraged me to think that perhaps I wasn't far wrong in thinking it might be useful. But Mike Cooley wouldn't agree with me about Bullock, I don't think.

And this is a respectable argument, exactly what the boundaries are, just as there is a respectable argument about tactics in Parliament. (I am one of those who thinks that we have not yet started to use Parliament and Government, never mind finished it; I am anxious to get a Labour Government which does its bit as part of the enormous fight on many fronts). We can have arguments, I think, about which schemes are legitimate and which are not.

All of us, I am sure, would agree with Arthur's judgement on the experiment in the steel industry: there was never a breath of approval for the worker directors on the steel corporation. But I am astonished to find arguments on the principle of workers actively wanting to control their own work, their own company, especially their own publicly owned company. Socialism itself, the word socialism, can be a trap. It is used about many countries in the world that I would hate to live in. And the idea that there is a way of achieving something which can be legitimately called socialism, without doing that by means of the workers taking control of production, the idea that that is possible, that you get the worker democracy bit after, I think that is one of the most dangerous ideas ever. If socialism is not achieved by extending the power and consciousness and confidence and self-respect of workers, it is not going to be socialism. I treat that idea the same as I treat the notion that we will have women's rights *after* the revolution and all the rest of it. Postponement of these goals until after we get socialism, is in point of the fact the block on getting socialism at all. The thing which will help us on the road is every instrument which we can fashion, every slogan which we can use, which encourages workers to feel that in fact they are the creators of wealth and they should be the controllers and decision-makers about what kind of wealth is produced, by whom, how it is distributed — everything. That to me is socialism. And it's workers' control, and it is only when we are successful in our striving for workers' control, that we will ever be able to say that we have reached a socialist society.

In conclusion I say, support the Institute for Workers' Control. It will help you, I am sure, ultimately to convert Arthur Scargill, who is a better socialist than are some of the ideas which he has been putting forward.

