

# Workers' Control

Another World is Possible

Author: Ken Coates

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Reviewed by **Jim Mortimer**

The Institute for Workers' Control, formed in 1968, played an important part for many years in the discussion surrounding the efforts made by trade unionists for more influence on decisions affecting their employment. In the course of this discussion many articles were written about trade union struggles against factory closures, about the role of workplace representatives and about the unilateral prerogatives claimed by management.

The movement to extend workers' influence was associated with a number of prominent trade unionists, including, notably, Jack Jones of the TGWU and Hugh Scanlon of the AEU. But none did more to stimulate and aid the discussion than Ken Coates, one-time miner, Labour Party activist, Member of the European Parliament, an outstanding trade union historian and now a professor and distinguished scholar. He has always been a participant in the labour movement. This book contains a reprint of many of his articles and is a tribute to his contribution over many years.

The articles are preceded by separate forewords by Derek Simpson, the new General Secretary of AMICUS (the merged union formed by the AEEU and MSF), and Tony Woodley, the new General Secretary of the TGWU. Derek Simpson's foreword states that Ken Coates' articles "provide an intellectual

framework for the restoration of effective industrial democracy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century". He condemns the so-called sweetheart deals between employers and some unions entered into in the 80s and 90s. They abandoned fundamental elements of trade union agreements, including recognition of the role of shop stewards.

Tony Woodley's foreword is an excerpt from his inaugural speech at the biennial delegate conference of the TGWU. It is a wide-ranging and hard-hitting assertion of the need for strong trade unionism. His message also has political implications.

He points out that he has no selective amnesia about how bad it was under a Tory administration, but he asks why, under the present Government, the gap between the rich and poor has widened, why anti-union laws, in violation of international standards, have been left on the statute book, why workers, unfairly sacked after 8 weeks, are not legally entitled to go back to their jobs, why Labour has extended privatisation, and why Labour has lined up with the 'reckless, aggressive reactionary US administration'.

In an article published in 1965 Ken Coates pointed out that the words "workers' control" are commonly used to cover two quite distinct concepts. The first concerns the role of workers in the administration of nationalised industries and services. The second concerns the role of unions in challenging and curtailing the unilateral prerogatives of management on issues affecting the employment relationship.

This applies both in public and private employment. The most basic form of this challenge is a collective agreement to establish trade union recognition, minimum standards of pay and conditions and a procedure for dealing with grievances. Every step along this road constitutes an exercise towards industrial democracy.

The essays in this book remind the reader of the historic struggles of the British trade union movement to extend the frontiers of workers' influence in the 1970s and early 1980s. They include the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders 'work-in', the efforts to save jobs at GEC Merseyside, the initiative of shop stewards at Lucas Aerospace in formulating proposals for continued employment on socially needed projects, the helpful role of Tony Benn when he was in the Cabinet, the pressures that led to an official Committee of Enquiry with terms of reference that included the phrase, 'Accepting the need for a radical extension of industrial democracy in the control of companies... and accepting the essential role of trade union organisations in this process...', the sit-ins in a number of factories threatened with closure and the moves to establish producer co-operatives.

By the middle of the 1980s, with the continued presence of a Tory government, the defeat of the miners and rapidly rising unemployment, the movement to extend workers' influence declined. The offensive passed to the employers and their political representatives.

Further chapters in this struggle remain yet to be written. This book offers guidance and inspiration for the struggle.