

Workers' Control

Ken Coates

Ken Coates with others established the Institute for Workers' Control in 1968. This article appeared in the first issue of The Spokesman published in March 1970.

During 1969 the movement for workers' control began a very serious growth, as if, suddenly, all the agitational seeds of previous years had begun to sprout. Late in March, the recently-formed Institute for Workers' Control convened its annual seminar, at Sheffield University, and was somewhat embarrassed to find that 1,032 delegates turned up. Since the Institute has no full-time staff, and only the most rudimentary organisation for publishing, it was surprising that this extraordinary gathering was not chaotic in the extreme. But more than a score of industrial study groups, ranging from several dozens of dockworkers, miners and motor-workers, to small handfuls of workers in the communications and public service industries, immediately got down to work, and produced an impressive volume of practical discussion, rootedly established in the real experience of their participants. On the basis of this experience, the doctrinal arguments which would have wrecked any other similarly heterogenous gathering were remarkably controlled and polite. Anarchists and liberals, communists and trotskyists, co-operators, fabians and lifelong trade union militants, all found whatever their preconceptions, genuine advantages in a free exchange of opinion which related to the felt problems and needs of the struggle for industrial democracy.

No doubt this contributed to the subsequent upsurge. Within the next few months, a "Free Communications" group was established among television personnel and journalists; the motor industry convened its own special conference on workers' control, addressed by Ernie Roberts and Moss Evans, spokesmen

respectively of the AEF and T&GWU, which attracted delegates from the shop stewards' organisations of every major car-factory except one; serious work was done by dockworkers, responding to proposals for the nationalisation of the ports; by public employees; and by a plethora of other industrially based study-groups.

Regional groups began to organise themselves and a conference was convened in London for the beginning of the New Year. In September, to the surprise, not least, of the members of the Institute, shop stewards at the giant G.E.C. complex in Liverpool announced that they were going to oppose redundancies in their factories by occupying and working them. Although this remarkable initiative failed, largely because it was too ambitious and not adequately understood by the workpeople (it seems certain that a sit-in would have succeeded, had it been canvassed generally around the plants) nonetheless, it gave rise to a storm of concern in the popular press, and a great deal of reflection by the powers-that-be. *The Times* published two long leader-page articles on workers' control during the following weeks. Mrs. Barbara Castle made a powerful, if not undemagogic, appeal to the Institute of Directors to recognise that "power now rests on the shop-floor" (a situation, it must in fairness be admitted, which she is doing her best to overturn). The *Daily Sketch* discovered Soviets in the Merseyside woodpile. Sir Reay Geddes, the chairman of Dunlop, made a strong attack on the notion that "greater worker participation" might be in order in British Industry. And as 1970 came nearer, it was absolutely clear that the discussion which had boiled up through the trade unions during the last year of the 'sixties would not quickly, and of its own accord, die down.

Of course, this argument has not been fostered by the IWC alone. Main credit for the upsurge should certainly be given to the Wilson administration, which has laboured night and day for the past few years to find ways to discipline the trade unions and roll back their effective powers at the level of the shop-floor.

Mrs. Castle's celebrated white paper "In Place of Strife" not only provoked two widespread political strikes, the first in Britain since 1926, and split the whole Labour Movement right down the middle: it also caused trade unionists to stand back and think about the sources of what power they held, and the appropriate means to defend and extend it. And behind the manoeuvres of the Government, the inexorable processes of rationalisation of a ramshackle industrial structure continuously confronted workpeople with the need to find a serious alternative strategy in which to fight back.

No doubt the industry seminars, the debates within the unions, and the

growing flow of tracts and booklets will continue into the 'seventies. But the IWC will have to do more than continue its established course if it is to be able to continue to serve the movement it has helped to arouse.

Two particular areas will need special attention. Spectacular though the spontaneous upsurge has been, it will not sustain itself without a degree of organisation. All the evidence suggests that a great deal can be done to disseminate workers' control ideas with a minimum of organisation: because workers' control is an idea which exactly responds to the increasingly marked alienation felt by workers in modern factories and at the same time draws increasing strength from the fact that those factories are passing through a phase of drastic re-organisation, with numerous convulsions shaking their traditional habits of work. But it is not enough to say that an idea can be easily propagated: at some point it must be implemented, and the process of implementing this particular idea involves a protracted battle in which organisation can be the vital determining element. In any case, the mere dissemination of ideas is done better if it is done systematically, and the Institute for Workers' Control is by no means sufficiently well endowed either with members or resources to be able to carry its message to more than a fraction of the people who are waiting to hear it. Of course, the work of organising the practical struggle for workers' control will be done by the parties and trade unions which the working people have developed for that purpose: but it will only begin to be done efficiently when a general consciousness of the relevance of the idea has suffused itself throughout the Movement of Labour. So the first crucial problem for the Institute to solve is now apparent: hundreds of additional members, dozens of local groups, hundreds of affiliates, and dozens of additional industry-based seminars are needed if the groundwork is to be properly prepared for the next phase of the argument in Britain.

But it is not enough to stop there. A movement grounded in this country is an important beginning, but it is only a beginning. Today's industry could almost laugh at such a movement, however powerful it became, if it did not develop another side to its activities, reaching out to international action in its own cause. This fact has already come home very sharply to many workers. Ford's shop stewards, after their crucial strike of early 1969, were deeply impressed by the threats of their management to transfer production overseas. As a result, they eagerly proposed to the motor industry workers' control seminars that links be developed throughout Europe, with car workers all across the continent.

This point has also been clearly understood by Hugh Scanlon, who told the Sheffield Workers' Control Conference that the development of

international conglomerate companies had made an answering trade union strategy of international action quite imperative. Since then, Ford workers have already blazed the trail by visiting their opposite numbers in Gent in Belgium, and in Cologne. At the same time, powerful delegations of trade unionists from Italy, France, Yugoslavia and Germany have been visiting workers' control conferences in this country. And, further afield, important seminars have been held on the same theme in Australia and Canada, and are likely to emerge before long in the United States. In France, M. Rocard, the candidate of the P.S.U., recently won a crucial parliamentary election on the issue of workers' control. Widespread debate has broken out in Scandinavia, in Finland and in Italy, all of which has drawn heavily on British material.

It therefore appears that the time is ripe, as well as the need is urgent, for the preliminary work of assembling an international conference on workers' control.

If during the next months these twin problems can be attacked, and if they can be overcome, then the future of the workers' control movement will be of interest to even more people by the end of 1970, than it has been at the beginning.

