



Prayer for Joy

I have no name
I am but two days old —
What shall I call thee?
I happy am
Joy in my name,
Sweet joy befall thee!
Pretty joy:
Sweet joy but two days old,
Sweet joy I call thee:
Thou dost smile,
Gilding the while,
Sweet joy befall thee.

The Institute for Workers' Control

Michael Barratt Brown

In the year 2003, Ken Coates collected together and had published a number of articles which he had written in the 1960s and 70s on industrial democracy and entitled the book, *Workers' Control – Another World is Possible*. He obtained contributions from the newly elected leaders of two of the largest unions, Derek Simpson of the Engineers' Union and Tony Woodley of the Transport & General Workers, together with supporting introductory messages from five other unions, the journalists, the firemen, the communications workers, the bakers, and public and commercial services unions. This initiative from Ken was most particularly encouraged by the inaugural speech of Tony Woodley on his election as leader of the T&G, which he spoke of as giving 'A Mandate for Change'. This was in the sixth year of the so-called 'New Labour' Government of Tony Blair, which was committed to the abandonment of many of the principles of the Labour Party; social ownership, industrial democracy, public welfare services, and regulation by the United Nations of international disputes. In welcoming the 'rebirth of the trade union spirit', Tony Woodley had singled out victory in the struggle for industrial democracy, which was yet to come.

The founding of the Institute for Workers' Control (IWC) at the sixth annual conference on Workers' Control, held at Nottingham University in 1968, followed a series of earlier conferences among trade unionists, left-wing Labour Party members, and university lecturers in Industrial Studies, which were initiated by Ken Coates, himself an ex-coal miner and then an extra-mural tutor in adult education at

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Nottingham University. The background to this initiative was the return of a Labour Government, in 1964, under Harold Wilson as Premier after thirteen years of Conservative rule, but with a very small majority, somewhat increased at a further election in 1966, but still without the commitment to socialist advance and trade union involvement that many in the Labour Party were looking for. Ken Coates' initiative in founding the Institute really built on a campaign promoted over a number of years by *Voice of the Unions*, a monthly journal sponsored by left-wing MPs and trade unionists. On the initiative of Ernie Roberts, Assistant General Secretary of the Engineers' Union, *Voice of the Unions* had organised two conferences, one in 1964 in Nottingham, which attracted 80 participants, one in London in 1965, with the support of the London Co-operative Society, which had many more participants. A further conference, on 'Opening the Books' of companies to trade union review, was jointly organised, later in 1965, with the Manchester-based paper *Labour's Voice*. A conference in early 1966 in Nottingham, convened by the Centre for Socialist Education, attracted more participants. This took place at the same time as major trade union struggles were being waged – in the demand of steel workers for renationalisation of the steel industry, in the demand of the seamen for opening the books, epitomised in a strike pamphlet, *Not Wanted on Voyage*, written by John Prescott and Tony Topham, and in the demand of the dockers for workers' control in *The Dockers' Next Step – an Anti-Devlin Report*, challenging the Government's proposals for rationalisation.

In this situation it was not surprising, perhaps, that the next Workers' Control conference, in 1967 in Coventry, had 500 delegates and included seminars on the Health Service, the steel industry, the Coal Board, the motor industry, the docks, the aircraft industry, municipal buses, the big corporations, and education. John Hughes of Ruskin College introduced a session at the conference on the results of the Labour Party's study group on industrial democracy. He spoke on behalf of Jack Jones, who had chaired the study group and was to become General Secretary of the Transport and General Workers' Union and a strong supporter of the Institute for Workers' Control. Big questions were raised about the possible loss of independence by unions participating in management, and particularly in their having to take responsibility for decisions on redundancies. There was much discussion, therefore, at the conference about the presentations to be made by supporters of worker's control at the forthcoming Labour Party Conference in Scarborough. Ken Coates made a most moving reply to the debate, insisting on the importance of the demand for worker's control, that 'it is the practical foundation of the new

life we are going to build together'. The conference ended with agreement to establish regional activities and conferences in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Cardiff, London, Nottingham, Manchester and Sheffield, and conferences and seminars on the following industries; aircraft, docks, steel, mines, buses, motors, and the student movement, with convenors assigned for each. First drafts of proposals for each of these industries were collected together with chapters on the controllers of the economy in private business and in government, and published as a paperback by Sphere Books in 1968 under the title of *Can the Workers Run Industry?* (available from www.spokesmanbooks.com).

A series of annual IWC conferences followed the founding of the Institute at the Nottingham Conference of 1968. The number of delegates exceeded one thousand, stimulated by a great number of pamphlets, particularly by Ken Coates, Tony Topham, John Hughes and myself. Not only the TUC, but also the Labour Party itself had entered the discussion of workers' control and its relation to the German system of *mitbestimmung* and British war-time Works' Councils. The IWC argument was concerned with preserving the independence of trade unions, and therefore critical of any scheme for workers' participation without built-in safeguards for the unions. This applied equally in the private sector and in the nationalised industries, where proposals were being advanced for trade union officials being considered for membership of boards of management at different levels. The IWC view was that workers' control should be seen as an extension of collective bargaining, not as an alternative to it. Critics of the IWC, in the Communist Party, for example, saw the whole IWC movement as a diversion from traditional trade union-organised resistance to arbitrary management.

What had begun to activate trade unionists in the late 1960s was the impact of capitalist reorganisation involving mergers and take-overs and accompanying closures. A paper which I had prepared on 'The Controllers of British Industry' was considered at the 1967 Workers' Control conference in relation to a paper by Tony Topham on the current role of the increasing numbers and importance of union shop stewards. Tony showed that trade union shop stewards' main activities were concerned not with questions of wages – less than a third of their time – but of job security, safety, and working conditions. At the same time, in 1967, Ken Coates was reminding us of Marx's warning to workers that fighting with the effects of their employment conditions was not the same as fighting the causes of those effects. 'A fair day's wage for a fair day's work' was a laudable aim, but it fell far below the revolutionary watchword, 'the abolition of the wages' system'. In responding to the 2011 riots in English cities it is worth

remembering how it is that, even among those who are employed, most men and women at work are not in control of their activities, but involuntarily and arbitrarily subordinated to the will of an employer. Workers' control remains a claim to human freedom, and that was what Ken Coates was reasserting in 2003 in recalling the struggles of the 1960s and 1970s

In 2003, in *Workers' Control: Another World Is Possible*, one important contribution to the case for workers' control was added by Ken Coates in an essay on 'Education as a lifelong experience'. This essay not only expounded the case for life-long learning, through adult and continuing education, which had been the occupation of Ken himself and of many of those involved in the founding and development of the IWC; it also put forward a case for a different connection between work and education. In this vision the aim of education should not be a preparation for employment in a division of labour organised by owners and controllers of capital, but rather a development of the capacity of all men and women to build a co-operative commonwealth, in which human labour is not divided but united. The training of shop stewards in the development of workers' control could be seen in this light as something very different from the perfection of work study and scientific management espoused by F.W.Taylor in the Ford factories in the United States. Ken had found much evidence of the dehumanising of work processes in a book by my father, written in the 1930s, *The Machine and the Worker*, based on what my father had learnt from his students who had come on from working lives to Ruskin College, where he was the Principal. I found that things had not changed much when, in the 1970s, I became the founding Principal of the Northern College, the 'Ruskin of the North'.

After 1968, the responses of workers' trade unions through work-ins and sit-ins as the alternative to plant closure were proposed and tried. The most famous took place in 1971 at Upper Clyde Shipbuilders (UCS), in the shipyards on the Upper Clyde River in Scotland, but it had been preceded, in 1969, by a proposed sit-in at the General Electric Company (GEC) Merseyside plants, which Tony Benn visited when he was Minister of Technology. From that time on, Tony became fully involved in the work of the IWC and a close association developed between him and Ken Coates. Tony Benn had met the GEC shop stewards and been most impressed by their arguments, although the takeover was ultimately annulled. Two years later, as Shadow Industry Minister following the 1970 General Election, when the UCS workers, facing a shut down, voted unanimously for a similar takeover to that proposed at GEC, Tony Benn visited Clydeside and gave every encouragement to the shipyard workers. The IWC prepared pamphlets in support of a work-in and defended the workers' case in various forums,

including the Heath Government Inquiry, which was established. An important volume was contributed by Robin Murray, who included a comparison with workers' control in the Split shipyards of Yugoslavia. A major victory was achieved when, in the end, public funding was obtained for a surviving nationalised shipyard complex. At the Labour Party Conference in 1971, the visiting UCS delegation received an ecstatic welcome.

Workers' control is not something which is exercised in the abstract. It has to be related to fulfilling actual needs. These needs had been distinguished by researchers quoted by Ken as comprising all elemental needs of food, clothing and toiletries, environmental needs, such as housing, leisure, transport, and needs related to the person, such as education, sports, health, and cultural provision. Determining the priority of such different needs encouraged the concept of a social audit, which I examined in an IWC pamphlet in 1971 (*UCS – The Social Audit*). This considered all the effects on employment opportunities, benefit costs, lost taxation and so on of plant closures. This principle was then applied to other plant closures – coal mines in Yorkshire, steel works in Sheffield, Imperial Typewriter factories in Leicester and Hull, and Chrysler motors in Coventry. But the most imaginative application of this concept came from the Lucas Aerospace workers, who, beginning in 1974, drew up a detailed blueprint of the alternative uses in socially useful provision to which their skills could be applied. The whole range of products, from a hob cart for paralysed patients with spina bifida to coaches which could travel on road or rail, gave rise to many technological advances.

By 1974, enthusiastic support for workers' control came from the accession to leading positions in their unions of the two trade unionists, Jack Jones of the Transport and General Workers and Hugh Scanlon of the Engineers, who were strong supporters of workers' control. This led Harold Wilson to promise, in the General Election of 1974, to socialise the nationalised industries and set up a Committee of Inquiry on Industrial Democracy. This was duly set up under the chairmanship of Lord Bullock, who had been the head of an Oxford College. The IWC submitted its own recommendations concerned with preserving the essential independence of the unions. Stuart Holland and I had already presented to the IWC conference in 1973 a 'Model for Developing Workers' Control', where management would consist of equal numbers of representatives of employers, or of government in the case of nationalised industries, and of trade unions, with a chairman acceptable to both sides, subject to veto. Bullock's solution was to propose boards for companies consisting of equal numbers of representatives of shareholders and of trade unions, plus a third group of mutually agreed

technical representatives. This proposal was countered by a highly divisive proposal that consumers should also be represented – but how could they be selected? Ken responded that the problem could be met by the establishment of planning agreements democratically reached by government consultation on specific issues. Little came of this on a national scale, but many local authorities, especially in the north of England, developed this kind of planning agreement. By 1977, some Yorkshire County Councillors associated with the Northern College were walking about with badges proclaiming ‘The Socialist Republic of South Yorkshire’.

Efforts to proceed along these lines at a national level petered out under Callaghan’s premiership in 1977-9, however, and the Bullock commission came to nothing. But a whole number of Workers’ Producer Co-operatives were established, often with the direct ministerial support of Tony Benn, before he was removed from his post as Secretary for Industry. His successor, Eric Varley, had once written a pamphlet for the IWC on self-management in the coal industry, but did not follow that up with support for worker co-operatives. None the less, a good number survived for a period, such as the Triumph Meriden motor cycle company, joining other longer-standing co-operatives and worker-owned enterprises such as the Scott Bader Commonwealth, which operated a chemical factory in Wellingborough. Opposition to such developments came, perhaps surprisingly, from the Communist Party, which argued, going back to Marx, that such co-operatives formed a diversion from revolutionary aims. Other Marxists, such as the Belgian Ernest Mandel, a good friend of Ken’s and mine, argued in favour of all attempts at social revolution, even modest ones, and this view was strongly supported by Ken himself.

When Ken comes to sum up the experience of those who struggled to realise the aims of the IWC, this is what he wrote:

‘If they had any criticisms of democratic institutions, those criticisms would emphasise the need for fuller, not less stringent, accountability and openness. But they did show, both in their many brilliant individual initiatives and in their courageous joint activities, a burning need for quite new institutions, from which none could be excluded from the means to the fullest moral life available to any. The rebirth of socialism, which is what we are talking about, will be a true renaissance of individual human freedom, if it takes its growth points from such people as these. Precisely in so much as shipbuilders, coalminers, clerks and engineers are determined to widen the areas of choice and the material scope for self-fulfilment which are available in their own personal lives, and in so much as their combined actions serve these individual goals, the new commonwealth itself begins to come to life.’

This was written in 1981, in *Work-ins, Sit-ins and Industrial Democracy* (Spokesman Books), when there were three million unemployed under the new Thatcher regime, which had followed the disastrous 'Winter of Discontent' in the last year of the Callaghan Government of Labour, that followed Harold Wilson's retirement. What Mrs Thatcher set out to do was not only to destroy the power of the unions and the central role of mining and manufacturing in the economy, substituting services and, most particularly, financial services, but, above all, to replace the search by workers for individual freedom through a form of commonwealth with a purely individualistic freedom of private property starting with house ownership. 'There is no such thing as society, only individuals and families' she declared. And this became the accepted goal throughout the long Thatcher years, followed by Major's premiership, and no less enthusiastically embraced by Blair's New Labour. Recovering the goal of a commonwealth would not be easy, but Ken never lost hope.

The massive number of IWC publications during more than 20 years – the regular *Workers' Control Bulletins*, more than 90 pamphlets, dozens of books, the three annual issues of the 300 page *Trade Union Register*, with reports from several industries of strikes, sit-ins and other demonstrations of workers' solidarity, plus a diary of events and current employment and unemployment statistics – the annual conferences and innumerable seminars in different industries, all attest a vibrant organisation reflecting a deeply felt need that will not disappear.

Many popular organisations, concerned about climate change and community involvement, some under the leadership of 'Transition Towns', have recently been advancing a major challenge to the power of finance capital and, recently, Glasgow University students sitting in to protest arbitrary cuts made by management in their syllabuses, recalled the inspiration of the workers at Upper Clyde Shipbuilders, quoting from the University rectorial address, in 1971, of Jimmy Reid, one of the UCS leaders:

'Alienation,' he said, 'is the precise and correctly applied word for describing the major social problem in Britain today ... it is the cry of men who feel themselves the victims of blind economic forces beyond their control. It is the frustration of ordinary people excluded from the processes of decision making.'

Such memories do not die but are deeply treasured. The alternative to choice left to a market dominated by giant capital and its hangers-on is conscious choice by men and women in the situations that they know and come to understand case by case.