

Bertrand Russell and Industrial Democracy

Ken Coates

Ken Coates worked with Russell in the 1960s, edited The Spokesman for 40 years, and was instrumental in establishing the Institute for Workers' Control in 1968. He was Chairman of the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation for many years, until his death in 2010.

Workers' control lit a flame that burnt throughout the 1960s and beyond, and influenced a number of the publications of the earlier years of the Russell Foundation. Ken Coates worked non-stop to advance democracy at work, as he was later to reflect in Workers Control: Another World is Possible, a retrospective volume published in 2003. Russell himself was a passionate advocate of democracy in the workplace, as this essay makes plain. It was originally published in May 1970, in a special issue of The Spokesman 'in memory of Bertrand Russell', who had died earlier in the year.

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It was in 1914 that Bertrand Russell joined the Labour Party. Before that date he had been involved in a large number of radical causes, including a whole series of crusades against different aspects of imperialism, and, of course, the movement for women's suffrage. His first published book had been a study of German Social Democracy, originally prepared for a series of lectures, in 1896, at the recently established London School of Economics. His exposure to socialist ideas and socialist acquaintances began very early, and was not always painless. His friendship with Bernard Shaw involved him, in 1895, in being run over by the sage's bicycle, during a trip to Tintern Abbey. 'If you hear rumours of my death' wrote Shaw to Pakenham Beatty, 'contradict them. I have had a most awful bicycle smash – the quintessence of ten railway collisions – brother of Earl Russell of conjugal fame dashed into at full speed flying downhill – £3 10s. damage to

machine – Russell bereft of knickerbockers but otherwise unhurt’. In spite of, or perhaps because of, such influences as this, Russell continued to regard himself as in many respects an orthodox liberal during all his early years, and, indeed, well into the twentieth century.

The First World War produced, among many other crises, a crisis in liberalism. Russell’s decision to join the Labour Movement was not, however, simply a transfer of allegiance based upon a rational evaluation of his experience: although it certainly included that. It also included the man’s extraordinary capacity for tenacity in support of his ideas, and his completely dedicated readiness to sacrifice his own comfort and security without a moment’s hesitation, where his principles were at stake.

Russell became a contributor to the *Labour Leader*, the journal of the Independent Labour Party, and a stalwart partisan of the No Conscription Fellowship, on whose behalf he ultimately went to prison. But he was drawn towards the Guild Socialist Movement, and became increasingly convinced that socialism must rest upon the multiplication of democratic initiatives from the roots of society upwards, rather than simply upon the wisdom of the planners who perched on the uppermost branches of the social tree. Maurice Reckitt, an old Guildsman, records a meeting of the Guilds League in the Fabian Hall, during a German air raid.

‘We were being addressed by that expert in mordant detachment, Bertrand Russell ... He did not bat an eyelid or condescend to take the slightest notice, but continued the development of his argument. The noise rapidly became, louder and even intimidatingly so, the chairman went very green, and seemed to be debating whether it were more alarming to interrupt the Olympian philosopher or to remain under that skylight any longer. At length a particularly sinister crash drove him to call the speaker’s attention to the situation. Bertrand Russell looked round disapprovingly, sighed a little, and relinquished the argument, which few of us by that time had been attempting to follow ...’

If the German government’s aerial threats did not intimidate Russell, neither did the earthbound ones of the British government. In 1917, he was invited to give a lecture in Glasgow, at a meeting under the chairmanship of Bob Smillie, the miners’ leader. ‘Just before it was to have been delivered, the Government forbade me to enter what were called “prohibited areas”, among which Glasgow was included,’ he wrote later. ‘These areas included everything near the sea-coast, and the order was intended against spies to prevent them from signalling to German submarines. The War Office, however, was kind enough to say that it did not suspect me of being a spy for the Germans. It only charged me with

inciting industrial disaffection to stop the war.’ The meeting went ahead, and Smillie spoke. In fact, he read out Russell’s forbidden lecture, and later he wrote in his memoirs that he found its words to be among the most beautiful he had ever spoken.

The lecture began with a defiant argument about the development of individual personality as the criterion of a good society, and went on:

‘... in our own day the tyranny of vast machine-like organisations, governed from above by men who know and care little for the lives of those whom they control, is killing individuality and freedom of mind, and forcing men more and more to conform to a uniform pattern.

Vast organisations are an inevitable element in modern society, and it is useless to aim at their abolition, as has been done by some reformers, for instance, William Morris. It is true that they make the preservation of individuality more difficult, but what is needed is a way of combining them with the greatest possible scope for individual initiative.

One very important step toward this end would be to render democratic the government of every organisation. At present, our legislative institutions are more or less democratic ... but our administration is still bureaucratic, and our economic organisations are monarchical or oligarchic. Every limited liability company is run by a small number of self-appointed or co-opted directors. There can be no real freedom or democracy until the men who do the work in a business also control its management.’

These subversive words were well-received in Glasgow, and the Government did not proceed against Smillie, as he had half-expected, for uttering them. As Russell laconically observed later, ‘They were too dependent upon coal ...’

The following year, Russell published his *Roads to Freedom – Socialism, Anarchism and Syndicalism*. In this work he greatly modified some of his earlier, liberal opinions about socialism: but a full discussion of his ideas about socialism, and about Marx in particular, would need, were it to be undertaken properly, a book. What is important to our theme in this essay is his treatment of the great syndicalist revolt which had broken out among British Trade Unionists in the pre-war years. Pioneers like Tom Mann had not only held Government itself at bay in a series of convulsive strikes, but developed a powerful doctrine of workers’ control, which had increasingly taken hold of the imaginations of working men during the struggles which continued throughout the wartime period. Their ideas, wrote Russell,

‘have done a great deal to revive the Labour Movement and to recall it to certain things of fundamental importance which it had been in danger of

forgetting. Syndicalists consider man as a producer rather than a consumer. They are more concerned to procure freedom in work than to increase material well-being. They have revived the quest for liberty, which was growing somewhat dimmed under the regime of parliamentary socialism, and they have reminded men that what our society needs is not a little tinkering here, there, nor the kind of minor readjustments to which the existing holders of power may readily consent, but a fundamental reconstruction, a sweeping away of all the sources of oppression, a liberation of men's constructive energies, and a wholly new way of conceiving and regulating production and economic relations.'

It is in the light of this credo that Russell's struggle against the war should be interpreted. His morality did not permit him the luxuries of a 'home' policy and a 'foreign' policy: what he offered was always an integrated criticism of the power-structure of the world he confronted, so that his opposition to militarism was part and parcel of his commitment to a different form of society. The fact that he later became a foremost spokesman of the worldwide movement for peace has tended to obscure the values on which he based his support for that movement. But their reality can be clearly perceived in his struggles between 1914 and 1918. Early in 1917, following the Russian February Revolution, there was organised, in Leeds, a National Convention of Labour. Everyone from MacDonald and Bevin to Mann and Gallacher was there. It was resolved to establish workers' councils throughout Britain. Retrospectively, it was a gathering with more colour than serious intent, although at the time it greatly alarmed King George V. However, Russell, in his speech to the Convention, punctuated the speeches about workers' control and the need to form soviets with an impassioned plea for support for the imprisoned conscientious objectors, who, he said, had shown the possibility of resistance to the intentions of statesmen. In this he was true to form: he spoke to gatherings of socialists about the need to impose peace, and to gatherings of pacifists about the necessity of social revolution. In so doing he established a pattern of connections upon which he was to continually insist in the later, at times lonelier, struggles of his last decade.

After the war, he became a member of the Labour delegation to the new Soviet Union. His reservations about Russian Communism were published in his famous work, more quoted than read, *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism*. This book, marked as it is by its time, none the less contains some perceptive insights.

'It may be assumed that when Socialism is first introduced, the higher technical and business staff will side with the capitalists and attempt sabotage unless they have no hopes of a counterrevolution. For this reason it is very necessary that among wage-earners there should be as wide a diffusion as possible of

technical and business education, so that they may be able immediately to take control of big complex industries. In this respect Russia was very badly off, whereas England and America would be much more fortunate.

Self-government in industry is, I believe, the road by which England can best approach socialism ...'

The movement for workers' control in Britain proved unable to establish 'self-government' in the post-war years. After bitter strikes, lockouts, and mass unemployment, the workers' rank-and-file leadership was decimated. The mining industry became the focus of a national battle, culminating in the General Strike of 1926. When this was defeated, Beatrice Webb wrote in her diary that the rout would prove 'the death-gasp of the pernicious doctrine of workers' control, preached by Tom Mann'. And indeed it was true that simple trade unionism, never mind workers' control, had a hard time surviving in the next decade and a half. Russell began his educational experiments during this time, and wrote a series of works which were subsequently widely quoted in the 'student power' upsurge which broke loose in the very last years of his life.

It is hardly a coincidence that the international renovation of socialist ideals which began to set in during the 1960s with the developing struggle against imperialism, powerfully reinforced first by the successful Cuban revolution, and later by the world-wide movement of support for the Vietnamese resistance to American invasion, has also brought in its train a growing interest in ideas of industrial democracy, and a vigorous trade union renewal of the demand for workers' control. The same power structure has provoked similar responses in the diverse territories over which it has held sway. And in his ninety-fifth year, Russell was quick to understand and act against the authorities who were intensifying, by different but appropriate means, their repression of subject populations at home and abroad. On the very day in 1966 that he spoke to the founding conference of the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign, he also attended his last demonstration in Trafalgar Square. It was convened by the National Union of Seamen in support of their long strike against Labour Government's interdiction of their wage claim.

Having seen the International Tribunal, which he established in order to investigate war crimes in Vietnam, banned from meeting in London, by ministers of a Labour Government, he also recognised the beginnings of a renewal of socialist agitation at the roots of society. The growth of the movement for workers' control interested him keenly. In 1968 he addressed a message to the sixth national conference on workers' control, held at Nottingham University:

'I welcome the growing importance of the workers' control movement because its demands go to the heart of what I have always understood socialism to

mean. The Prime Minister and his friends have developed a quite new definition of socialism, which includes the penalising of the poorest, capitulating to bankers, attacking the social services, banning the coloured and applauding naked imperialism. When a government makes opportunism the hallmark of its every action, it is the duty of all socialists to cry "halt" and to help create an alternative based on socialist principles. In this urgent task I wish you every success.'

Bertrand Russell will rightly be remembered for many different contributions to human knowledge, to civilised thought. But it may well be that his help for this cause will be thought, by succeeding generations, to be among the most crucial engagements of the vast number he took up.

