

Firing the bosses

Can worker self-management succeed?

The global economic crisis has thrown up some bold experiments. **Shawn Hattingh** looks at the creation of some worker self-managed workplaces which in the way they are run give an exciting glimpse of what a world without capitalism could look like.

Capitalism is an extremely brutal and vicious system. The elite who control most of the wealth wage a daily psychological, economic and physical war on the majority of people. One of the main battlefields of this war is the workplace.

Capitalist workplaces are undemocratic hierarchical institutions that are tightly controlled by a minority who demand obedience. Under this tyranny, bosses and managers order workers around, they control their movements, and they control their actions. Indeed, bosses may treat workers with disdain or, at best, with condescending paternalism. The consequences are that capitalist workplaces, and the education system that feeds into them, try to crush peoples' confidence, smash their spirit, stifle their initiative and often smother their creativity.

Bosses want people who simply comply with their orders and respect authority. When workers question aspects of this, or refuse to obey orders, they are punished and humiliated. In the most extreme cases, workers are fired and if

unemployment is high they are tossed into an uncertain world where it has become enormously difficult to secure even the basics of life, such as food and shelter.

In capitalist workplaces, bosses and managers also take most of the profits and rewards for themselves. They also try and externalise any costs or losses onto workers, communities, and the environment.

One of the main aims of bosses is to keep workers' wages as low as possible. Nothing highlights this better than the events that have taken place in millions of workplaces during the current global economic crisis. While bosses and managers have been receiving trillions in bailouts from the political elite, they have tried to force workers to bear the brunt of the crisis. They have done this by retrenching workers, putting them on short-time, cutting their wages, and even taking away their retirement benefits.

STRIKING BACK

During the recent economic crisis, however, something has happened that the bosses and the elite have

not expected. Workers in many places around the world have begun to fight back by directly attacking the authority of bosses and the political elite through occupying their factories.

In fact, workers have embarked on factory occupations in over 40 countries in the past two years. For example, hundreds of workers occupied the Ssangyong factory in South Korea in May 2009. The rationale behind this was to try and stop the company retrenching over 2 500 workers. The occupiers fought a heroic battle and held onto the factory for 77 days, despite being continuously bombed with liquid tear gas by military helicopters. In the end, almost 3 000 riot police stormed the building and evicted the workers.

The reason why the state unleashed this force was because they were terrified that factory occupations would spread in South Korea. For this reason, they made an example of the Ssangyong workers. Nonetheless, even in defeat the workers reclaimed their dignity.

A similar inspiring story has unfolded in Haiti. In early August, over 10 000 workers occupied the factories in the country's free trade zone. They have said they will not give up these factories until their demands for decent wages are met.

South Africa too has had its occupations. In June, outsourced workers at the Crocodile River Mine occupied their workplace and demanded that they be employed on a permanent basis. Like in South Korea, the employers unleashed the police on them and many of the occupiers were arrested. Again the



Worker delegates vote for the takeover of the Argentinian ceramics factory, FaSinPat.

bosses and the state were making examples of the Crocodile River Mine workers in a bid to deter other people from occupying their workplaces.

SACKING THE BOSS

In some cases, workers have had an even more radical agenda. Faced with the prospect of being retrenched, some workers have seized their workplaces with the idea of implementing worker self-management. In other words, they have decided that they will keep their jobs and fire the bosses instead.

In Argentina, for example, since the beginning of the global economic crisis about 20 factories have been seized by workers who have implemented self-management.

Workers have also completely taken over some factories in places such as Egypt, Uruguay, Serbia and Scotland over the past two years.

In the process, many Argentinian workers have adopted and adapted the lessons, strategies and ideas from the previous wave of factory seizures and worker self-

management that took place after an economic collapse in Argentina in 2001. Today, in Argentina there are 250 worker self-managed factories in which 15 000 people work.

What is distinctive about almost all of these factories, whether in Argentina or Egypt, is that they have aimed to breakdown capitalist relations within the workplace. They have questioned the legitimacy of private property, and they have undermined the authority of the state. They have created new social relations in the workplace, promoting the idea of social property, and promoting a different type of economy based on equality and solidarity.

NEW WAYS OF MANAGING

Upon seizing their factories, most of the workers involved broke with the traditional hierarchical relations that define workplaces. This has involved eradicating managerial positions and completely democratising the workplace.

For instance, at the Bauen Hotel in Argentina which has been under worker self-management since

2003, workers decide in a democratic assembly on the policies and direction of the hotel. Indeed, almost all of the factories that have been taken over by workers use assemblies to run operations democratically.

In some of the larger worker self-managed factories, such as the FaSinPat ceramics factory in Argentina, the assembly system has been augmented with a system of coordinators. The coordinators are elected and rotated on a regular basis to facilitate the basic functioning of the different production lines. However, the coordinators are answerable and accountable to the general workers' assembly.

The aim of rotating coordinators is also to ensure that everyone has a chance to be a coordinator, to ensure that no hierarchy emerges, and that power remains with all workers in the assembly.

Along with this almost all of the worker self-managed factories have taken a decision to pay everyone equal salaries. Through this, workers are creating new workspaces that are based on principles such as equality, mutual cooperation, participation and direct democracy.

BEGINNINGS OF SOCIAL ECONOMY

Some self-managed factory workers have adopted collective ownership, while others have taken an even more progressive position.

At FaSinPat the workers have adopted the slogan 'FaSinPat belongs to the people' and they have put this into practice. FaSinPat does not just provide jobs and salaries to more than 470 people, but the workers involved also make donations to schools, support social movements, and build community kitchens and houses. This has led to the community seeing FaSinPat as *their* factory.

In fact, the community around FaSinPat have defended the factory against the old employer and the state, who have been trying to reclaim the factory. It has been through this that both the workers and the community have come to see FaSinPat as being socially owned by all.

A number of the older worker self-managed enterprises have also played a key role in assisting newer worker run factories. This has extended to sharing knowledge and providing material support.

Similarly, worker self-managed enterprises have also assisted each other during the economic crisis to ensure that people are not retrenched. A worker from the Chilavert which is a self-managed printing works in Argentina, explained why self-managed factories were doing this, "We are not capitalists, you can't throw workers out like they are lice".

Some of the worker self-managed factories have created economic relations that by-pass the market. For example, Bauen Hotel established a relationship with a federation of co-operatives whereby they provide accommodation and conference facilities in exchange for goods from the co-operatives. This exchange relationship has been based on the idea of solidarity.

CHALLENGES

Worker self-managed factories, however, have faced some major challenges. All of the factories that are self-managed are forced to operate under the market system and are, therefore, exposed to some of the negative consequences of this system. They have also come under attack from previous owners and from the state.

For example, on five occasions, the Argentine state has sent in riot police to try and evict workers from FaSinPat. Of course, the reason why the state and bosses have tried to smash worker self-management is because they show that workers and the poor are not zombies that need to be ordered around, but are people who are capable of running workplaces and society by themselves. As such, worker self-management is an extreme threat to the hierarchical nature of the state and capitalist workplaces.

CONCLUSION

The worker self-managed factories that are spreading around the world are a massive threat to bosses. The reason for this is that they prove that workers don't need bosses. The self-managed factories are also creating new

social relations in the workplace that are based on equality and solidarity. These workplaces are the antithesis of capitalist workplaces, where oppression and authority reigns.

It is also through these new relations that these workers are beginning to see a glimpse of what a post-capitalist world would look like. Such a world would hopefully be a world where there are no bosses; where hierarchies don't exist; where workers and communities manage themselves; and where the economy is collectively planned through assemblies on the basis of solidarity and for the benefit of everyone.

However, to create such a free society it must by definition be created by the poor and workers themselves. Indeed, a truly free society cannot be imposed by a self-appointed elitist 'vanguard' seizing state power. This is why states of any kind, whether capitalist or 'socialist', being hierarchical in nature, have had no interest in establishing true self-management.

Indeed, there are numerous historical examples, including in the Soviet Union in 1917/18 of 'vanguard' parties capturing state power and then using this state power to entrench the privileged position of a party elite by smothering worker self-management. Fortunately, this 'vanguard' model of left politics seems to be exhausted today. Indeed, the self-management that we have seen emerging recently has been about getting rid of all bosses, even those that claim to be leftist. LB

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Workers expropriate the Bauer Hotel.