

# WORKER'S EMANCIPATION AND WORKER'S SELF-MANAGEMENT IN FACTORIES.<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

As from the nineties, in Brazil, several experiences of self-management of workers began to influence the course of the labor struggle against structural unemployment. Such experiences appear to be a solution to the survival problem and an alternative for the workers' autonomy before the domination of capital, in the domain of production. In this article, we analyze the foundations that guide the experiences of self-management, in the sense of examining if, in fact, they can be constituted in an autonomous power and sovereign before the capital. Or if, self-managed companies reproduce, essentially, relationships of competition and exploitation of labor, now effected by workers themselves without having employer.

Key words: self-management, struggle of classes, human emancipation.

## I. Introduction

The theme of the current article is the analysis of the possibility of reaching the workers' emancipation through the creation of democratic participation mechanisms within the landmarks of the capitalism. We have opted for using as reference the proposals, in Brazil, for direct control on the capital, searched in the cooperative experiences and manufacturing self-management by the workers.

The emergence of the democratic organization movement of the popular forces retrace the immediate following years after the end of the military dictatorship in the late eighties. The experiences of workers' self-management in factories, in our estimation, a particular variation of

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such movement, and coincide with the evolutions of the structural crisis of the capital and the neoliberal reaction to the explicit crisis in Brazil, mainly, from the nineties on. Such experiences have shown up as a possible reaction to the harmful effects of the structural crisis of the capital over the capitalist accumulation and the individual capitalists' profitability taxes. They contribute to the attenuation of the resultant problems of the capital structural crisis, saving businesses and jobs.

The proposal of new experiences of participative democracy, and the analysis of the possibilities of putting the capital under the control of the workmen's interests has acquired significant historical importance, mainly if we consider the defeats the struggle for human emancipation has faced, under the terms stated by Marx in *On The Jewish Question*, in the last centuries in attempts of similar nature. In fact, would we be innovating, or retaking old class struggle paradigms formulated by the 19th-century reformism, already renewed by the European social-democracy during the *Welfare State*, and, who knows, currently, renewed again so as to meet the demands of the structural crisis of the capital and its neoliberal facet? To what extent do the manufacturing self-management experiences allow the working class to accumulate forces and build the way towards human emancipation? That's what we will discuss next.

## II. The self-managerial control of labor over the capital

### 1. Conceptual approach

We have found some reports in the 1st National University-Business Symposium about Self-Management, from the very workmen, about various concrete experiences<sup>2</sup> which have allowed us to observe a very real and representative picture of the means used so as to set up a "Business without a Head"<sup>3</sup>.

The self-management businesses may be characterized, according to Vieitez (1997, p. 9,11), by a set of goals which they try to accomplish, such as:

.workers become owners and managers of the new shops

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<sup>2</sup> It consists of statements given by nine workers who represent six cooperatives (Skillcoplast, Hydrophoenix, Conforja, Coopervest, Contramonte and Cobertores Parahyba). It was also analyzed the information from the ANTEAG (Workers in Self-Management and Share Participation Organizations National Association) representative, among other texts.

<sup>3</sup> Title of the book published in 1997, after the 1<sup>st</sup> University-Business National Symposium about Self-management was held.

- . capital resources are obtained from the selling of goods and services
- . “maximizing profit is not the motive force of the enterprise”
- . autonomy in management and democratization of the decision making process
- . primacy of people and labor over the capital in the distribution of the profits.

## 2. Unemployment and self-management

Exclusively aiming at “defending the job”, it is inherited the organization in the conditions and structures which it had been performing within the market.

No other option was left to the workers, because companies were going through financial crisis, and they felt no longer able to perform the labor rights. So as not to lose their rights acquired in years of work, the workers accepted as an alternative taking over either part of the company, separating and specializing themselves in a sector of the production line, or at a first moment becoming the old bosses’ partners in a co-management relation, in order to, then, when getting the public financing needed, set up the self-management regime and create a new company.

It has been observed that the growing occurrence of self-management experiences in the 90s coincide with the deepening of the economic crisis and its most perverse development, from the social perspective, which is the structural unemployment. Aiming at such losses to the labor, as well as providing a more profitable way out to the crisis of the companies through an “inner” factory solution, when reaching the repayment of the labor liabilities with sums of capital already immovable, self-management has shown itself as a remedial action facing the effects of the capital crisis. It works as a means of socializing the onus of the crisis diminishing next to the workers, and not as an act of conquering the labor autonomy from the hierarchical subordination of the capital. Therefore, it is an alternative imposed by the circumstances and not an emancipating strategical option which intends to promote substantive alterations in the subordinating relation to the capital and in the dominant relations in the capitalist market.

## 3. New collective personifications of the capital– the judicial-legal illusion

The capital system, as a continuous self-valorization process of the accumulated work, needs the capitalist action in order to play the controlling role over the living work. The capitalist

is supposed to do the “mediation” (and impose) its imperative objectives [of the capital] as consciously feasible commands to the most potentially recalcitrant real subject of the production” – the work. (Mészáros, 2002) The owner of the capital, “aware of such move”, so as to remain as capitalist, must have the value valorization as “subjective aim” – search for the “incessant multiplication of the value”.(Marx, 1983) If he doesn’t manage to play this role effectively he is no longer a capitalist, or, in our case, he gets rid of those enterprises in which he can’t obtain the needed profitability anymore. Still, according to Marx, “As a Capitalist he is just personalized capital. His soul is the soul of the capital. The capital has one only vital impulse, the impulse for valorization, to create surplus value, to absorb the means of production with his constant part, the largest mass as possible of surplus labor.” (Marx, 1983, p. 188)

At assuming the role of impersonating the capital, despite being from the working class, these new capital owners, currently in associative or cooperative regimes, will be further too committed to the objectives of the amplified reproduction of the capital than their former individual owners. According to Mészáros (2002) after Marx, the causative relation goes from the capital to its specific type of personification, and not the contrary. Therefore, the capital and its expanding requirements, which imply the hierarchical subordination of the capital and the increasing appropriation of the product of other’s work, have got no reason to disappear just because the personification of the individual capitalist also vanishes. He keeps on acting, adopting other forms of personification.

Based on the mentioned statements, we can observe that the changing of the former bosses’ property titles to the new associated workers is everything but free or self-determined. It is an innovation in the forms of subordination to the capital in times of crisis. The capital is a social relation of production and not a “material entity” or a “neutral mechanism” which can be holding possession of another individual randomly, whatever his legal title is, an individual private owner or a collective owner, or a state one. For implying a living work subjection process, for needing to guarantee its self-valorization through the as effective extraction of surplus value as possible, it is accumulated, object labor, and it hasn’t got any form of existence which can do without the worker, whatever its judicial-legal appearance is. (Mészáros, 2002)

The mere substitution of the subjects to occupy the personification role of the capital, keeping the objective conditions of the reproduction and expansion of the capital while a dominant system, does not alter in any way the antagonically structured relation in which the exploitation of the capital over the labor is based. As with the cooperatives, the mystic collective

appropriation of the capital by the workers only alters the means of such exploitation and accumulation.

The cooperatives remain subordinated to the capitalist, it doesn't matter which collective property relation is established. Therein, according to Luxemburg (1975, p. 52), the competitiveness is imposed through the "need of intensifying the work the most", "reducing or lengthening the working hours according to the market status", to sum it up, "all the ways to confront within the competitiveness" are put into practice, without getting not even a millimetre closer to the transformation of the capitalist way of production in competitiveness behalf of the workers' autonomy.

The relationship with the other fellows changes due to new duties while personifications of the capital, and, now, they're responsible for the success the business. Some of them give up; others have to impose the new criteria of individual productive participation on their fellows, as they are the producers of the surplus value after all. At the "Assembly, the worker identified who wasn't working properly and asked to take them out and we had to agree with that." "Chances were given" to these workers "but this is not a playing game." Therefore, "we cannot have paternalism within a productive process, nor in a self-management process, otherwise it will inevitably be a failure." (Manuel Alves da Paz -Skillcoplast *in* Vieitez, 1997, p. 61-62)

#### 4. Worker against worker – self-exploitation of the work

When the cooperatives are a success, according to Luxemburg (1975, p. 55), they become a means of reducing the capitalist profit, "thus enriching the workers", while they show a "hybrid character", as the associated workers under these conditions are nothing but personifications of the capital in the list of capital owners, and workmen in the production sphere (of the floor of the factory). Such hybridism has a very serious political consequence, as it leads the involved individuals to resign from the "struggle against the capitalist production model", restricting it to "struggle against the capitalist distribution model".

When accomplishing the imperatives of capital profitability, all the strictness and effort are expended, nevertheless, in the relation with the work, all the resistance or the misunderstanding to the new way of exploiting work is seen as a hurdle and must be overcome through persuasion and qualification, through re-education ("deculturalization") or by imposing the most committed with the idea. It is observed that even the pedagogical benefit, according to

Singer (2000), a “vital concernment” objective<sup>4</sup> for such democratic innovations in the capital-labor relation, it is seen subordinated to the imperatives of the capital, which doesn’t spare the worker’s subjectivity, forcing it to adequate itself (and justify) to the tyranny of profit as a condition to the survival of the business.

Besides the various difficulties in keeping the workmen’s productivity because of the varied degrees of subjective involvement and the certainty about the validity of the experience, there is no way of not recognizing immediately the imperious power of the market. In one of the statements, the market is seen as “extremely aggressive and difficult”, as factors such as “competition, price and time” act on it simultaneously, being the case that the “client has become our boss”. The despotism of the market, in contrast to the “democratic” relations among the workers, appears through a new subject – the client. According to a statement, the “client is the boss a we accept it because it’s him the one who pays and keeps the business going round.” (Manuel Alves da Paz *in* Vieitez, 1997, p. 62)

The submission to the exchange relation within the capital system is as important as the property relation. Mészáros (2002, p. 629) warns that the

exchange relation to which the labor is submitted to is not less slaving than the separation and alienation of the workers’ material production conditions. At reproducing the exchange relations in an enlarged scale, labor can only multiply the power of the wealth over itself. The sad history of the cooperatives in capitalist countries, despite its genuine socialist aspirations in the past, is eloquent at this concern.

The onus of facing the competitors under disadvantageous conditions due to the shortage of capital, to the low technological level<sup>5</sup>, to the administrative-financial inexperience, to some workmen’s resistance to increasing the work intensity without the correspondent improvement in the income, to the production scale, to the arrival of imported products at lower prices, weighs even more in a globalized market.

### III. Final Considerations

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<sup>4</sup> “The importance of these experiences is the learning which they promote to segments of the working class of how to take over the collective management of productive enterprises and to operate them under democratic and equality principles.” (Singer, 2002, p. 44)

<sup>5</sup> “We cannot have an obsolete technology”. It is recognized that “so as to be in the market, (...), in order to introduce our product, we need to prepare our staff to cope with.” And the factory ground staff shows a “certain rejection (...) in acquiring some technological knowledge”. (José de Oliveira Martiniano *in* Vieitez, 1997, p. 65)

The yearned democratization of the power<sup>6</sup>, therefore, finds itself compromised by the illusory autonomy of the labor facing the capital. An agenda that isn't autonomous in any way is imposed to the deciding "autonomy" of the workers-bosses over the course of the company, once it is conditioned by the structural crisis and the neoliberal deregulation of the markets and the labor relations.

It is observed a bigger deepening of the submission to the capital and a more perverse exploitation over labor. Instead of autonomy, equality, freedom and democratization of the power, it is only found more subordination, and what is worse, it is ideologically disguised by the possibility of, holding a factory property title, put some control over the capital in favour of the workers' historical needs. The new controllers of the capital become to be controlled by him, without becoming aware of such turning, and having the additional advantage of deviating the energy needed to the class struggle of labor against the capital for the space of the cooperative labor (the worker split between boss and employee) inside the factory.<sup>7</sup>

It's inevitable that the "perverse circularity of the capital"<sup>8</sup> remains acting, in which the objectivated work, alienated, turns itself into capital and while personified capital it dominates the worker – he takes its historical force from the living work and uses it to dominate. Much more than getting closer to a democratization of work, it provides new forms of domination, now with the adherence of the workers. It is ignored that in order to obtain any substantive change that transfers the power over the production and the distribution of the social wealth for the work, it requires, according to Mészáros (2002, p. 711), that "the capital [should] be overcome in its totality from its relations, or else its way of social metabolic reproduction, which dominates everything, won't be able to be moved even in relation to relatively less important matters."<sup>9</sup>

There is no possibility of a pacific coexistence among interests of antagonistic classes inside the same company in which the worker starts to perform alternately, now the personification of the capital, now the personification of the salaried work, as they can't get away from the pressures of the expanding accumulation of the capital and the market laws. Therein the

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<sup>6</sup> Dois importantes requisitos da autogestão são a democratização do poder e a autonomia sobre a propriedade. (Vieitez, 1997, p. 15)

<sup>7</sup> A synthesis of the ontological basis of the uncontrolability of the capital, exhaustively dealt by Mészáros in his work *For Beyond the Capital*, can be found in a book which has been recently published by Edufal – Federal University of Alagoas Press. (Paniago, 2007)

<sup>8</sup> See Mészáros (2002, p.707-708)

<sup>9</sup> As for Marx, the capital is not only a simple social relation, but a "process, in whose various moments it is always capital". (*Grundrisse apud* Mészáros, 2002, p.711)

experiences related in the Symposium and the experiences of Argentinian cooperatives coincide, as, still according to Lucita (2004), “Sooner than later such pressures are made to be felt inside the managed companies by their workmen and workwomen. The salary differences, the inner hierarchy, productivities and rhythms of self-exploitation, appropriation of the exceedings, autonomization of the Administration councils, etc., are the most common manifestations.”

What is observed in all the reported experiences is that the capital is kept and reproduced within the self-managed companies, and, according to its nature, from the exceeding labor appropriated from the worker, in other words, from the living labor subjection, and not from an equalitary and democratic balance between capital and labor. This is the capitalist objectivity; it works like this in the material basis of the system, and, thus it has affirmed its hegemony through the centuries.

The transformations occurred in the capitalism since the second half of the twentieth century, specially the worsening of the social inequalities and the chronic unemployment which were resulting from the neoliberal intervention, highlight the relevance of searching for all sorts of alternatives for the quotidian survival of thousands of workers subjected to unemployment. Within this context, the self-management experiences acquire a huge importance as the fight to defend employment, although finding in itgerming cells of a new democratic and equalitary working relation in the production of the material richness is disconsidering the empyrical evidences and the theoretical contributions of the past.

Therefore, it is up to us to recuperate the emancipating purpose of the socialist project, which implies the overcoming of the capital and all sorts of inequalities among men and creating the adequate means for its accomplishment.

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