

We Should Demand Democratic Workplaces, But What Does That Mean?

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Organizing our workplaces isn't just about wages, hours, working conditions, and obtaining rights non-unionized workers lack—such as the right to have a steward present during disciplinary proceedings. It's also about having a say during our workdays and in our working lives. As we build collective power with coworkers, negotiate with management, and make demands of employers, workplace democracy is a way of talking about having a say. But what does that mean?

For most of us working in the public or private sector, for nonprofit or for-profit companies, with our hands or heads, a few dollars or cents won't make a huge difference. But having decision-making power over hours and shifts worked, staffing levels, work assignments and duties, health and safety, hiring practices, production methods, and opportunities for education and advancement will improve conditions for *all* workers on the job. (Lest-we-forget, to make our workplaces more democratic we must confront white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, settler colonialism, and other forms of oppression that divide the working-class. Democracy requires all of us.)

When corporate employers spend more on anti-union campaigns than the cost of raises—it's about control. When small business owners hover over their workers, micromanaging even simple tasks—it's about control. When nonprofit executives hide behind a progressive veneer, refusing to allow their workers a say in the organization's operations—it's about control. And when workers organize and demand a say in their workplaces it's about workers' control and workplace democracy.

What Is Workplace Democracy?

Simply put, workplace democracy is the application of democratic principles to the "hidden abode of production," to the imposition of work; that is, the often unseen and private machinations that

bosses and managers utilize to extract the workers' abilities, capacities, and energies during the working day. Workplaces are dictatorships, where democratic principles and ideals that should pertain to civil society and the political sphere don't apply. (Consequently, the only rights one has at work are those gained through struggle with employers by unions and working-class movements; and these are concretized in labor law and collective bargaining agreements.)

Moreover, there isn't a clear consensus on what the *democracy* part means. Bernie Sanders has "The Workplace Democracy Plan," but beyond expanding trade union density it is unclear how the plan proposes to make workplaces more democratic. The AFL-CIO argues that unions lead to "workplace improvements" and SEIU claims that unions provide a "voice at work," and rightly so. Again, these statements are made without clarification or substantive detail about what made the non-unionized workplace undemocratic and how unionization changes these dynamics.

The problem here is with work itself and "work is still the central issue" in "societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails." The unions and progressive Left in the United States refuse to acknowledge that the imposition of work is inherently authoritarian, unevenly distributed, and violent. As Studs Terkel reflected, in the opening line to his monumental collection *Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day And How They Feel About What They Do*, "work, is, by its very nature, about violence—to the spirit as well as the body."

The only way to obtain the means of survival under capitalism, besides the paltry aid of the welfare state, is through working for wages: you don't work or work enough—you starve. You receive wages under the cost of your reproduction—you starve. There isn't work available and unemployed insurance isn't sufficient for your reproduction—you starve (and, often, then face the disciplinary apparatus of the state). Then, once you enter this hidden abode of production, bosses and managers attempt to extract and exploit workers' abilities and capacities: "moments are the elements of profit," "if you have time to lean, you have time to clean," "nobody ever changed the world on 40 hours a week," "Arbeit macht frei" or "work sets you free." Once a crisis (or pandemic) exposes the realities of work and the workplace under capitalism, antiwork sentiment explodes; with the tagline on the popular Reddit site proclaiming "Unemployment for all, not just the rich!"

As labor journalist Sarah Jaffe reminds us in her recent best seller *Work Won't Love You Back: How Devotion to Our Jobs Keeps Us Exploited, Exhausted, and Alone*,

"The labor movement's earliest demands were usually for *less* work—shorter working hours, down to twelve, then eleven, then ten, then eight, plus days off. The strike, the workers' best weapon, is, after all, a refusal of work, and for a while they wielded it effectively, winning some concessions on the length of the working day and week as well as on wages. Capitalists would give up a little here and there to keep the profits following, but they also sought new strategies to keep workers on track beyond simple brute force."

Working shorter hours, demanding days off, and having control over the workplace is antithetical to the form and function of work under capitalism.

Most of you will spend more time between reading this and the day you die working than any other activity, besides sleeping. Not to mention the overwhelming majority of the labor force actively

despise what they do all day. If the labor movement does not center the demand for less work, for refusing work as it is currently constructed under capitalism, workplace improvements and having a voice at work are insufficient to address this central issue. Now, there are histories of and ideas about workers' participation and cooperation in the workplace. There are ways to incrementally improve workplace democracy toward workers' control. But there is still an outstanding question: what is workplace democracy?

Notions of workplace democracy are saddled by the muddled and near meaningless definition of the word *democracy*. The term cleaves into two very different traditions: representative democracy and direct democracy. Representative democracy, applied to the workplace, begins with voting to join a union; consists of electing stewards, bargaining team members, board members, and union officers; sending delegates to labor-management meetings; signing petitions and strike pledges; involvement of members in grievances and issues that directly affect them; and developing a strong union culture with rank-and-file involvement.

Correspondingly, direct democracy on the job means cooperatively making decisions over hours and shifts worked, staffing levels, work assignments and duties, health and safety, and hiring practices; deciding what-when-where-why-and-how to produce; opportunities for continuing education and advancement, job rotation and "balance"; narrowing the gap between manual and mental work; and flattened hierarchies regarding specialization, administration, supervision, compensation, and related matters.

The former represents the best of democratic unionism. The latter, the horizon of workplace democracy, and therefore a more equitable and directly democratic society governed by working-class peoples.

Talking About Workplace Democracy

"We don't have a consistent language to talk about workplace democracy," concluded Robert "Bob" Bussel, recently retired faculty at the Labor Education and Resource Center at the University of Oregon, when we spoke at the beginning of September 2022.¹ Meaning, the contemporary labor movement in particular and the labor force in general doesn't have the necessary vocabulary to explain how organizing fundamentally changes the power relationships in our workplaces.

Often workplace democracy is incremental or develops informally through the self-activity of the workers themselves. Erik Forman of The Drivers Cooperative in New York City, a 7,000 strong alternative to Uber and Lyft, has the distinction of being one of the first union organizers to take on Starbucks back in the early 2000s with the Industrial Workers of the World. As a result, they have "been thinking about workplace democracy for fifteen years." Erik reminisced, "Orders might come from Starbucks corporate office in Seattle. But supervisors could run their stores a little different, some workers had choices about breaks and tasks. It might only be a limited scope of control; they couldn't change wages or who was hired and fired. But it was something."

"For me, workplace democracy has to do with workers having control over how we spend our time at work and what we do while we are there," offered Alexandra Bradbury, editor at Labor Notes. She continued, "What is our experience of the work like? How are we spending our actual minutes working? How fast do we have to move? What tasks are we doing? What order do we do them in? When, where, and how do we take breaks from work?" Often, these are things many of us think about during and after our working hours.

Using Alexandra's prompt and expanding upon it: What physical and mental capacities do you expend during your shift? What repetitive motions do you perform that can injure your body? How

could tasks flow better and what tasks are necessary to complete a project? Do you count the seconds before the next break or end of your shift? “What are the general physical, intellectual and moral conditions of life of the working [people] employed in your trade?” (This last one is the hundredth such question in Karl Marx’s *Enquête Ouvrière* or *Workers’ Inquiry*, originally published in 1880, which has influenced workers’ movements since.)

While many of us discuss the minutiae of our workplaces, as any union organizer will tell you, there is a difference between a conversation about work and an organizing conversation about work. The best organizers begin with questions about how things are and move workers toward actions that reflect how things could be. Alexandra reminds us, “there needs to be a political vision about what work we are doing. What is it for? Who is it for? Are factory workers making an electric car or a gas-guzzling car or something other than a car? Are bus drivers charging fare, or do bus drivers have a say in where the route goes or how often it goes?” It is this political vocabulary and vision that the contemporary labor movement is sorely lacking. And, as we will see, the labor movement is often barred by law or employer / management rights clauses in collective bargaining agreements from “interfering” in this sphere.

Economist and author of the recently published AK Press title *A Participatory Economy*, Robin Hahnel shared a boarder vision of direct democracy and used “powerful” language to describe it. During a Zoom call with *New Politics* in late-September Robin proposed, “the simple answer is that it’s the workers who work there, and only the workers who work there, who get to decide what they produce and how they produce it. If there’s any differences in how much they’re being paid, what those differences would be and why there should be any differences at all is decided by the workers.” He concluded, and I concur, “I think that’s actually a very powerful answer.”

“For us,” Kate Khatib of Red Emma’s Cooperative shared, “what defines a workplace as democratic is that those who are most impacted by decisions get to make those decisions.” Kate is a worker-owner at Red Emma’s—a worker-owned, horizontal bookstore, café, and event space founded in 2003, opened in 2004. At its height, prior to the pandemic, it had thirty workers and now has twenty workers, sixteen owners and four are on the pathway to becoming owners. “We make decisions, we do the work.”

“There are coops, cultures of solidarity that develop in the workplace, and principles about participation,” Bob continued, and we can look to those as models to better understand and improve our own workplaces.

Talking About Worker Cooperatives And A Participatory Economy

In the historical record and across the planet there are countless examples of directly democratic workplaces. These can provide the necessary language for workers in the workplaces of today as well as the “fields, factories, and workshops of tomorrow,” as are initiatives such as Democracy at Work , Democracy at Work Institute, Participatory Economy Project, and others.

Esteban Kelly, the Executive Director for the US Federation of Worker Cooperatives, is part of an effort that is actively creating a framework for democratic workplaces. In conversation with *New Politics*, we first asked “what is a democratic workplace?” “It comes down to two pieces: ownership and control,” he answered.

“At the Federation we hold an extremely high standard, insisting that worker ownership and worker control should both be in place at a democratic workplace if possible.

Beyond our admittedly high bar, my understanding is that most people use worker-ownership and worker-control as independent variables, where ownership means at least 51% worker-owned. Some groups have a very low bar, where “worker ownership” can be as low as 10% of the shares of the company being in the hands of workers or depending on the workplace even as low as 3%. I think it’s interesting to consider the case of worker self-directed nonprofits, which are public-serving organizations that cannot be ‘owned’ by the workers at all. We welcome many of them to our community despite not having any technical ‘worker ownership,’ because some of those groups take worker-control very seriously, codifying it in their policies, hence becoming “democratic workplaces” in their own right. That shows how important control can be in this ecosystem. Again, the USFWC considers both ownership and control together. Control, however, can look like a lot of different things. Worker cooperatives can be entirely controlled by a board made up of worker owners or they can elect a board of individuals who are otherwise accountable to the worker owners. Worker owners can even designate external board seats for people who have specific expertise that the business needs, but that is only to extend the capacities of the worker owners themselves.”

While ownership and control elude workers in the overwhelming majority of workplaces in the United States currently, worker cooperatives are addressing the real complexities of being a workplace—a business, service, or non-profit organization—within the confines of capitalism.

“At Drivers,” Erik reflected,

“one of the challenges is how to be accountable to stakeholders, how to include all the voices of these stakeholders. We believe in principles of workplace democracy, and we are figuring out how to operationalize it. Our office is staffed by drivers, all our management are drivers (and we require management to drive), we have drivers in staff positions and a time off-the-road pipeline. And there is a board-staff feedback loop. We have a multi-stakeholder board, with the largest section being drivers, and there is a management hierarchy that can discipline and fire. Our policies and strategy are decided on a quarterly basis, and everyone has full access to all the business information.”

Through these pipelines Drivers is actively engaged in job rotation and equitable distribution of tasks. But there are real challenges, such as what do to when a skill set is needed but not readily available in the cooperative. For example, programming a computer application for a “ride-share” service requires considerable training and experience. Worker cooperatives can train from within, which is time- and resource-intensive, add expert members to the board, or hire an external individual. Drivers, for instance, has contracted with an additional worker cooperative to run part of their financial operations. Not all job duties can be rotated to all workers, but they can be what Robin calls “balanced.” Providing “balance” rather than simple rotating job duties allow these enterprises to address critical needs while seeking to flatten hierarchies, address class divisions as well as the division between manual and mental work.

In their interviews with *New Politics*, Erik, Esteban, and Kate emphasized another important factor

that is an extension of workers' "ownership and control." That is, all workers should have unfettered information about how the business is governed, managed, operates, its financial health, and, if possible, its place in a particular industry and the overall economy.

Adding complexity to Esteban and the Federation's emphasis on "ownership and control," Kate reminds us that "there is a real tendency to conflate governance with management and operations. All three require knowledge and training, but workers can only fully participate in governance as responsible owners if they have access to the information they need to make smart decisions, and training in how to make those decisions together. We also want to bring that information into management and operations, empowering workers to take real ownership over their workplace and training ourselves to identify critical information, make informed decisions, and improve operations and efficiency."

Power educates, both when it is confronted and when its wielded. What American workers are profoundly lacking and what worker cooperatives, worker self-directed nonprofits, and Employee Stock Ownership Plans (ESOPs) do provide—and the labor movement should provide as well—is this experience and education. Similarly, all those interviewed underscored the importance of specialized training and education for ownership and control, governance and operations of democratic workplaces, as this is not regularly provided for most working-class people.

Part of training and education is political education and a grander vision for the working-class. But what is this vision? As Robin reflects on the possibilities for workplace democracy in *A Participatory Economy*, "The key institutions in a participatory economy are self-governing worker councils and neighborhood consumer councils, as well as federations of consumer and worker councils." That is, democratic, self-governing workplace's coordinate with the needs of their immediate neighborhood, and then are linked regionally and beyond through these councils. And these self-governing worker councils are held accountable to the larger communities in which they are part, to using resources and producing in a socially responsible way, by providing transparent proposals that can be reviewed by anyone. Moreover, he continues, "People's income is based on the efforts and sacrifices they make at work as judged by their fellow workers, while there are allowances for those too young or too old to work and for those who are disabled, along with provisions for those with special needs."

Worker cooperatives and visions of a participatory economy are "weapon[s] to reclaim surplus value," which is how Erik describes Drivers. Namely, ways of reclaiming the value produced at work over the cost of wages paid to workers. And there are every day, incremental, and organized ways to reclaim this value while petitioning for ownership and control along with seizing control of governance and operations. It begins with a demand.

Demanding And Organizing Democratic Workplaces

Now that we have set a horizon of workers' control, cooperation, and participation to strive for, we need a horizon in which to act: making our own workplaces more democratic.

"Without a union," Alexandra declares,

"the workplace is fundamentally undemocratic. Typically, the boss has all the decision-making power, and the workers have none. But in some workplaces, maybe even without a union, you have a culture of workers' control just from the social relationships among workers, the norms that have been established over time, the actions that have shifted

the relationship between the workers and a particular supervisor.”

These every day, informal practices of self-activity are part of workers exerting power on the job. However, what is everyday can become overt, what is informal can become organized. Participating in collective action educates workers as they confront their boss’s power and wield their own. Then, as part of their union or workers’ organization, workers’ can be elected stewards, collect signatures for petitions, speak to their coworkers about wages and working conditions, participate in labor-management meetings, question candidates and elected officials as part of the endorsement process, and “engage in other concerted activities for the purpose of collective bargaining or other mutual aid or protection.”

At best, union and worker organizations extend these encounters through political education, amplifying them through training and skills development, and provide experiences in direct democracy. At worst unions, especially trade unions that lack a class analysis, rely on staff and bureaucrats while they disempower members by not providing them every opportunity to participate in full life of the organization and workplace. Besides, the labor movement needs to recognize that fourteen million union members would be a formidable force if they were given the opportunity to govern. Consequently, as Alexandra concluded our conversation, “if the power of workers is their power to take united action together, then a democratic worker organization is central to that power.”

Often, the results of united actions by workers and union members is collective bargaining with management. Labor Notes educator Barbara Madeloni argues in an article titled “We Need Democracy on the Job and in the Union, Too,” that “Collective bargaining agreements give workers some control over their work lives. Still, it is kind of astonishing how little control most workers have over the place they spend so much time—and how little we demand actual democracy at work.”

If workers bargain over wages, hours, and working conditions why do they have so little power on the job? The answer is threefold. First, collective bargaining agreements are saddled by employer / management rights clauses which prohibit interference with the processes of production and the management of the business. Second, workers are often legally barred from having a say on staffing levels (nurses get a say while cooks, janitors, and nursing assistants do not) or if labor law applies to their workplaces at all (in the case of farm and domestic workers). And third, and arguably most important, because the labor movement hasn’t demanded ownership and control; but it could.

In conversation with *New Politics*, Kate argued, “there are other places workplace organizers can push for gains beyond wages and working conditions” and they continued, “we should be pushing for employee stock ownership, profit sharing, democratic control of management.” Whereas Esteban argued for demanding a seat at the table, on a corporate or nonprofit boards, Robin surmised, “worker participation is a really sensible demand. [...] And the truth of the matter is they have no good reason to say no.” One of the reasons unions don’t demand something that is clearly “sensible,” is that these are not mandatory subjects of bargaining. That is, areas that management is required to bargain over.

However, as Alexandra prompts us, “Just because something is not a mandatory subject of bargaining doesn’t mean you can’t make management bargain over it” and that comes with building collective power. “Workers’ greatest exercise of power is the strike,” she reminded us, “And the only illegal strike is an unsuccessful strike,” that the legality of a strike won’t matter if the workers win. To which we can add the only impossible demand is the one not made. But a demand made of whom?

While it might initially seem contradictory, unions and worker organizations must demand democracy at work and for the common good, must view workers as whole, total people. In recent years, bargaining for the common good has become an adage of teachers' unions, who declare that their working-conditions are students' learning-conditions. Likewise, this is true of healthcare workers, service and social workers, essential workers, and most of all domestic workers whose working conditions *are* the common good.

Since workers lives extend beyond the workplace, so should their power. What is referred to as whole or total person organizing extends these democratic impulses and workplace issues into the community (and back again). Meaning, union and working-class organizers should leverage the relationships workers have with other workers—in their churches, community organizations, social and familial networks, and cultural milieus—to build support in the workplace and provide stewardship for the community. But there are real challenges, and these begin in the workplace.

Thus far we have presented workplace democracy as if it is an inevitability or logical outcome of organizing. It isn't, it's a constant struggle. "As a high school teacher in a unionized workplace," Erik somberly reflected,

"I tried to leverage opportunities to involve teachers and parents. This was formal—not real— democracy. And while we used mechanisms to give voice to staff and students, none of this is particularly radical. Most teachers wanted to talk about their quality of life or a parking pass. It was harder to convince them that we could have a vision and pedagogy for the school. So, this is a political question and something that organizing campaigns will have to address: just because workers have a voice doesn't mean they will use it progressively."

"Every Cook Can Govern"

Is this a question: every cook *can* govern? Or is this a statement: every cook *can* govern!

To answer this question, we will need to organize and educate workers, make demands for ownership and control, to practice and engage in governance and operations, and the working-class will need to refuse work as its contemporary constructed so that time and space is available *to* govern. And the answer begs another question, what prevents cooks from governing?

"Now the average [union] bureaucrat or [elected representative] would fall in a fit if it was suggested to [them] that any worker selected at random could do the work that [they are] doing, but that was precisely the guiding principle of Greek Democracy," C.L.R. James reflected in a study on the subject. While currently these principles of democracy are not wielded by all working-class peoples, forging these principles of democracy will begin in our workplaces by the workers themselves.

Every cook can govern their kitchen. By extension every cook can operate their restaurant in council with the front of house. Then, outside the front doors, every cook can govern their neighborhood in which they work as well as operate the larger communities of which they are part. What begins in the kitchen, with organizing unions and democratic workplaces, extends throughout society. It is a horizon in which to act as well as a one toward which we are striving.

i The opinions and conclusions herein are the authors' alone unless clearly stated otherwise.