

Workers Creating Hope: Factory Occupations and Self-Management

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Introduction

In most countries, political leaders and bosses are using the global economic crisis to once again unleash an attack on workers and the poor. As part of this, we have seen corporations around the world trying to make workers pay for the crisis by retrenching tens of millions of people. In the most extreme cases, workers arrive at their companies in the morning and are told they no longer have a job. With all these retrenchments, corporations are not just taking away jobs but they are also attacking people's dignity. They are literally throwing people into a very uncertain world where it is getting harder and harder to even get the basics of life such as food and shelter. Of course, the corporate elite are not worried if people starve or live in misery, what they care about is their profit margins and bottom lines. Through retrenchments, therefore, the elite are waging a war on workers and the poor in the name of corporate survival and profit prospects. Fortunately, workers around the world have started resisting. Strikes against retrenchments have occurred from France to China and from Greece to South Korea. In some cases, workers have even kidnapped their bosses and occupied factories and offices to stop being made 'redundant.' [1] It is through this type of direct action that the workers involved are winning concessions from the elite. Indeed, workplace occupations seem to be one of the most effective ways for people to win their demands and reclaim their dignity back from the elite.

Worker Occupations Are Spreading

A few years ago, it would have seemed crazy to even suggest that workers across the world would be starting to once again occupy their factories to stop closures and retrenchments. The only place this seemed to happen up until recently was in Argentina. With the crisis in Argentina in 2001 hundreds of workplace occupations occurred. In the end, over 200 factories were recovered by workers and in many cases they became democratically run by the workers themselves. [2] Nonetheless, few even imagined that factory occupations and self-management would become a possibility in many other countries. Certainly, in every country around the world retrenchments have been rife over the last 20 years, but staging direct action to stop this through occupations did not look like a realistic option. For example, in South Africa hundreds of factories have closed since the 1990s, but trade union leaders did not even consider occupations as a viable strategy to combat this. Within the last several months, however, factory occupations have occurred in at least a dozen other countries besides Argentina. Once again direct action and even talk of worker self-management are back on the agenda of many workers.

Even in Britain and Northern Ireland, where Thatcher's brutal attack on the coal miners in 1984 left lasting scares amongst workers and the poor, workplace occupations have occurred. When the car parts manufacturer Visteon informed workers that the company would be shutting its doors, the workers decided to occupy the company's plants. They were furious as they had only been given 6 minutes notice and a severance package that was paltry. For over a month, the workers occupied Visteon's buildings despite the threat of arrest. [3] In the end, even though they could not save their jobs, they won a severance package that was worth ten times the original offer. In the process, the Visteon workers regained the dignity that the management tried to strip them of. Similarly, when workers at Prisme Packaging in Dundee were told that the company was shutting its doors, they staged a 51-day sit-in. They had decided that they were not willing to lose their jobs and said that they wanted to re-open Prisme as a co-operative under self-management. For them, victory came when they managed to secure funding for their co-operative venture. [4]

Similar stories of workplace occupations have also occurred in the Republic of Ireland. Earlier this year, workers at the Waterford Crystal factory were informed by the companies liquidators — Deloitte and Touch — that they no longer had jobs and that they would not even receive severance pay. The workers decided to defend their livelihoods by staging an occupation. In response Deloitte and Touch sent in a private security force to threaten and intimidate the workers. Eventually, however, 10 million Euros was made available for a severance fund and negotiations are now underway for some of the workers to keep their jobs. [5]

Factory and workplace occupations have also been taking place in several countries on continental Europe. When the current crisis first struck, in late 2007, 300 workers at Frape Behr in Spain occupied their workplace to stop retrenchments. As part of this, community activists and supporters surrounded the building and protested in solidarity with the workers inside. [6] At the same time as this was occurring, workers in Serbia were occupying their factory, Shinvoz, to prevent it being privatized. [7] In France, workers under the threat of retrenchments have also charged into the offices of their bosses and held them until their demands have been met. For example, at FM Logistics 125 workers invaded a managers meeting and held the bosses hostage. The reason the workers did this was because the company had formulated a plan to retrench over 470 workers due to the current economic crisis. After only one day of 'captivity,' the managers of FM Logistics agreed to re-examine their retrenchment plans. Similar 'bossnappings' have also occurred at the French holdings of Sony, 3M, and Catepillar. The majority of the French public have supported these 'bossnappings.' This support has meant that the French state has not been able to move against the workers involved. [8]

Over the last few months, factory occupations have also been taking place in Turkey. Workers in Turkey have been hit extremely hard by the crisis with over 500,000 people losing their jobs since September 2008. In order to stem this, workers in a number of factories — such as MEHA textiles and Sinter Metal — embarked on workplace occupations. The Turkish state, however, has reacted harshly and used security forces to drive the workers out. Nonetheless, the workers then camped outside of the factories and their resistance has continued. Recently, the workers at Sinter held a celebration to mark their 100th day of resistance. [9]

North America has also seen a string of workplace occupations. Due to the collapse of the auto industry in Canada, workers have occupied 4 different plants because they had been refused any compensation. Reportedly, the workers were occupying the plants in order to prevent machinery being removed by the liquidators. In fact, they were using this tactic in order to force the bosses and the liquidators to the negotiating table. Likewise, in the United States, there have also been a number of occupations. The most well know was the Republic Windows and Doors occupation. The occupation occurred because the workers at the plant were given just 3 days notice that it was to be shut. To add insult to injury, it turned out that Republic was closing because the Bank of America —

which had received billions of dollars of public money in bailouts — refused to extend the company's credit. Again the occupiers received massive public support. Subsequently, the workers won severance pay and the company has opened under new ownership — meaning some jobs, but certainly not all — have been saved. [10]

With the current global economic crisis, Argentina has once again been taking the lead in occupations and turning occupied factors into worker self-managed institutions. Under the threat of downsizing and pay cuts, 10 factories have been occupied in Argentina since 2008. The workers have taken this action to stop the owners from declaring bankruptcy. Indeed, it has been a strategy of the Argentine business elite to use crises to declare insolvency, then fraudulently liquidate assets and suddenly open the business under a new name a few months later. A number of the newly occupied factories have also received major support from the older self-managed factories. [11] Already, workers at least one of the 10 occupied factories — Arrufat Chocolate — have elected to take over the factory permanently and operate it on a democratic basis. They have already gone into production using generators and are turning Arrufat into a viable worker self-managed operation. [12]

Conclusion

The current economic crisis has seen corporations unleash a series of attacks on workers. This has included retrenchments, wage freezes, and in some cases closers. In many parts of the world, workers have responded with their own actions. These have included workplace occupations and even in some instances complete factory takeovers with the aim of embarking on self-management. As such, these workers are finding their own solutions to the crisis. The actions of these workers are inspirational. It seems likely that more and more workers will begin adopting and adapting the idea of factory occupations as a viable way to save jobs and reclaim the dignity that bosses have tried to take away from them. Perhaps what we are also seeing through the occupations, takeovers, and self-management is a glimpse of what a post-capitalist world, created by the workers and the poor themselves, would look like. Indeed, hopefully the factory occupations that we are beginning to see are an embryo of a different world — a world where there are no bosses, where workers manage themselves, where the economy is democratically planned through worker and community assemblies, where there are no hierarchies, where the environment is not raped, and where the goal is to meet peoples' needs and not make profits.

P.S.

* From MRZine:

<http://www.monthlyreview.org/mrzine...>

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Footnotes

[1] Naomi Klein and Avi Lewis, "Fire the Boss: The Worker Control Solution from Buenos Aires to Chicago," 15 May 2009.

[2] Marie Trigona, "FASINPAT (Factory without a boss): An Argentine Experiment in Self-management." In Spannos, C (ed.) *Real Utopia: Participatory Society for the 21st Century*, AK

Press, 2008.

[3] www.libcom.org/tags/visteon-occupation

[4] Left Luggage, "Dundee: Prisme Occupation Workers Save Their Jobs," IndyMedia, 24April 2009.

[5] Naomi Klein and Avi Lewis, "The Cure for Layoffs: Fire the Boss!" 20 May 2009.

[6] Freedom Fight, "Catalan, Serbian Workers 'Squat' in Factories," ZNet, 21 January 2008.

[7] Freedom Fight, "Letter of Support to Factory Occupations in Serbia," ZNet, 9 January 2008.

[8] Christopher Ketcham, "Enraged about Corporate Greed? Kidnap Your Boss," 1 May 2009.

[9] "Chicago Window Factory Reopens with Occupying Workers Back on the Job," DemocracyNow! 15 May 2009.

[10] Eren Buglalilar, "Deepening Crisis, Growing Resistance: Workers in Turkey," *MRZine*, 27 April 2009.

[11] Trigona, "Argentine Factory in the Hands of the Workers: FASINPAT a Step Closer to Permanent Worker Control," 27 May 2009.

[12] Klein and Lewis, "The Cure for Layoffs: Fire the Boss!" op. cit.