

Ukraine and the question of self-management

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In its 2022 activity report, the Sotsialnyi Rukh (Social Movement) stressed that “Civil society has been forced to fulfil the role of the state and, instead of expecting more specific assistance, to assume almost all its social functions”.

A few months earlier, in September 2022, at its conference in Kyiv, the organisation explained that “the war has led to new forms of self-organisation and popular politics. The mobilisation of the people on the basis of the war of national liberation has strengthened the sense of popular involvement in a common cause and the awareness that it is thanks to ordinary people, not to oligarchs or corporations, that this country exists. The war has radically changed social and political life in Ukraine, and we must not allow these new forms of social organisation to be destroyed, but to develop them”. Among the demands put forward by the conference, Sotsialnyi Rukh highlighted “In particular, the nationalisation of key enterprises under workers’ and public control is necessary. Introduction of open accounting in all enterprises, regardless of the form of ownership and involvement of employees in their management, creation of separate elected bodies and committees for the realisation of this right.” For her part, Katya Gritseva, a member of this organisation, in an interview given to the French magazine Contretemps during her visit to Paris, observed that “Many people are voluntary, they engage in mutual aid, create extra-state organisations to make up for the shortcomings of a state that is unprepared for such a situation. This dynamic of self-organisation is contradictory to the return of the conservatives and even the extreme right. For the left it is a question of acting in favour of this dynamic, of helping the workers, the people, without pretending to give them lessons in the manner of the Stalinists”. When asked about self-management in Ukraine, Ksénia from QueerLab replied “Yes, the practice of self-management is widespread. In Ukraine this topic is discussed and is relevant, because everyone is impressed by the phenomenon of self-organisation of various teams, volunteers, activists, the rise of which became noticeable with the beginning of a large-scale war! Our team is also self-managed, with everyone involved and coordinating the leadership. Also, adhering to the horizontal structure, we have no leaders or bosses”. [1] It should be added that many Western observers were surprised by the rapid restoration of the Ukrainian railways after the Russian bombardment and concluded that private companies could never have achieved such feats or organised the evacuation of refugees so efficiently. The Autogestion association noted (11 March 2022) that “The war confirmed for some, revealed to others, and reinforced in any case, the existence of a national solidarity and above all provoked a popular self- organisation. On the initiative of the workers, the reconversion of the production of numerous enterprises to support the war effort was organised... Municipalities, local administrations, groups of inhabitants organised together daily life, supplies, care, evacuations.”

This capacity for self-organisation of Ukrainian civil society has been and remains one of the keys to its resistance to Russian imperialist aggression. In a situation of war, it may seem surprising that the exploited and dominated decided to take their lives into their own hands, when their situation could appear desperate and resignation or distress could paralyse them. But it is often in situations of acute crisis that workers decide to take care of the “administration of things” (F. Engels) when the

state is unable to respond to their needs.

Proportionately, and without falling into anachronism, we can think of the Argentinian workers who, faced with massive lay-offs, decided to take over their company, to manage it themselves, to organise new labour relations and new forms of ecological production. It is estimated that there are nearly 20,000 workers who manage more than 435 self-managed enterprises throughout Argentina (February 2022). In the heart of the Babylon of capitalism, one also thinks of those self-managed workers' cooperatives in the United States. One example is Spectrum in New York, where workers, after a four-year strike, developed their People's Choice Internet cooperative [2] and offered cheaper Internet access to the people of the Bronx. Finally, Dicle Amed, a member of the Rojava Women's Economy Committee, is quoted on the subject of women's cooperatives: "We are trying to develop a format of production that is not directly money-oriented and not based on the development of large production monopolies, but which responds to the needs of society and ensures self-sufficiency. This is what we do. We don't make profits with these cooperatives and we are not shareholders." We could multiply the examples, but all these experiences, from the North to the South, have in common the construction of a workers' political economy as an alternative to capitalism.

For several years now, the Autogestion association has been publishing an International Encyclopaedia of Self-Management, which presents experiences of self-management or workers' control from the 19th century to the present day, as well as theoretical texts on this issue by authors from a wide spectrum of the workers' movement, from social democrats to libertarians. To date, 11 volumes have been published (free to download at [3]) in French.

Three volumes have been published in Spanish.

Self-management as a political perspective in Ukraine

A question arises: after the victory, will the Ukrainian state take over its full role, dispossessing the workers and the population of the capacities for managing society that they acquired during the war? Will they be deprived of «almost all their social functions», to use a formulation of the Sotsialnyi Rukh, which they assumed during this difficult period?

According to the old dialectic of "war-revolution", one can hope that the Ukrainian people will not want to see the pre-war social and political order return. Based on their experience, and their ability to manage «social functions» themselves, the question of democratic self-management at all levels will have to be asked. Recently, the issue of corruption at the highest levels of the state has come back into the public debate. It is clear that the best medicine for this scourge is workers control over the management of administrations. No control body, no commission of enquiry will be as effective as the workers' collectives that democratically control the use of public funds. Self-management can become a common horizon and a project for society. A concrete utopia which, based on the new social practices born of the war and radical democracy, will give itself the means here and now to avoid all bureaucratic drifts in the construction of the alternative.

Self-management expresses the aspiration to take one's affairs into one's own hands, to organise oneself without hierarchy and without bosses, to establish other social relationships, but in the case of Ukraine it also becomes a tool of resistance and survival in an unprecedented situation. Self-management is at once a project, a programme and a social practice, and is making its way through the history of emancipation. This is the path that Solidarnosc wanted to open up in 1980 with its project of a self-managed republic, before being crushed by the Polish and Russian bureaucracy. In Ukraine it is obvious that a new page is being written, rich in lessons from the long history of the self-organisation of the exploited. In this situation, it appears that the Sotsialnyi Rukh is certainly one [4] of the organisations most aware of these potentialities. Its political tasks are immense. The

internationalist and anti-capitalist currents of the Western left must support it.

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Footnotes

[1] <https://rev.org.ua/samoorhanizatsiya-ta-solidarnist%ca%b9-lhbt-k-pid-chas-viyny>

[2] <https://peopleschoice.coop>

[3] https://www.syllepse.net/autogestion-l-encyclopedie-internationale-_r_76_i_648.html

[4] But not the only one, let's mention some sectors of the Ukrainian trade union movement or the feminist and LGBT movement for example.