The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Mia Wong
When Communists Crushed the International Workers' Movement
The workers' struggle at Tiananmen Square and the transition from one world into the next
June 6, 2021

Lausan.hk
The author would like to thank Cam, Sinn, and Vicky Osterweil for their help and contributions to this piece.

theanarchistlibrary.org

When Communists Crushed the International Workers' Movement

The workers' struggle at Tiananmen Square and the transition from one world into the next

Mia Wong

June 6, 2021

we face: the crisis of Papua and Palestine, of Colombia and Iran, of Myanmar and Hong Kong, of victory just beyond the horizon that nevertheless cannot yet be grasped. The workers of Tiananmen have, I suspect, no answers to give us now. But expecting answers from the departed is demanding too much of those, past and present, who died fighting for liberation. All we can do now is find our own way and with the names of the dead on our lips, build the world they fought for.

Contents

The meaning of Tiananmen 6
Democracy in the factory 8
The instinct of the workers' movement 12
The road to Tiananmen 15
The death of the workers' movement 18

as the dark agora of the factory ceased to function as a place to form identities. If a collective identity could not be forged in the factory, it would be forged in the street instead. Lacking a positive identity to cohere itself around, workers were only able to mobilize on a mass basis in direct opposition to a force that threatens it on a cross-sectoral basis. The state—with its ability to increase the price of basic commodities and slash welfare benefits—became the only available enemy and the constant fight against the police became the sole basis for forming new collective identifications. Contemporary revolts thus take the form of mass street movements and almost continuous confrontation with the state. Factory occupations were replaced with square occupations, and as the squares were revealed to be indefensible, they too were replaced by running street fights with the police. But this placed the new revolutionaries in a dangerous bind. Without the leverage against the state that the classical workers' movement's control over the workplace provided, they lacked the ability to bring down a government firmly committed to fighting it out.

Massive general strikes in Peru, India, France, Hong Kong, and Sudan in the last three years were, as Malatesta had predicted in the early 1920s, easily defeated without the accompanying factory occupations.[22] But with current labor conditions exceedingly unlikely to produce another wave of factory occupations, the way forward for any political movement that seeks to re-introduce democracy into the economic sphere is unclear. Perhaps that is the greatest legacy of Tiananmen. The workers who assembled outside Tiananmen Square had already abandoned their factories. For all that they spoke the language of the old workers' movement, they stood and fought like we do: in the streets. They were the bridge between the world of the workers' movement and the world we live in today and thus they faced the same revolutionary crisis

[22] Carloff, Andy. (1923). "The Occupation of the Factories." *Life and Ideas: The Anarchist Writings of Errico Malatesta.* PM Press.

were the high-water mark of political mobilization of the old industrial working class, who, in the streets surrounding Tiananmen, mounted the final attack of the classical workers' movement. Their defeat ended the old working class as a political force and they were annihilated altogether in the economic restructuring of the 90s. They were replaced by a new working class, drawn from the rural and semi-urban under-classes of the old socialist system, who were dragged into the cities to fill the ranks of the 277 million migrant workers that today comprise the backbone of China's working class.[20]

This new working class—with rural *hukou* and no way into the remaining state-owned factory system—would have none of the benefits of the previous one. It would instead face a full raft of capitalist ideology baked into every aspect of workplace culture and massive attempts to encourage homeownership.[21] Where the previous working class could at least posit a democratic form of the factory through which life could be improved, this new working class' greatest desire is to leave the factory entirely and become a business owner. In this sense, it considers itself to be a temporarily embarrassed petite bourgeoisie. Such ideological self-conceptions are inimical to the formations of the classical workers' movement, and indeed, the new Chinese working class has largely failed to find a collective identity in the workplace. Their situation is not unique. The death of the classical workers' movement has everywhere seen the collapse of demands for democratic self-management in the face of a working class that refuses to cohere itself in the factory. In this sense, China was just late to the game.

The fact remained, however, that the global economic system has lurched from crisis to crisis for the better part of my lifetime, setting off in its wake an increasing number of revolutions even

[20] "Red Dust: Sinosphere." *Chuang* Volume 2. 401. https://chuangcn.org/journal/two/red-dust/sinosphere/

[21] "Red Dust: Sinosphere." *Chuang* Volume 2. 413. https://chuangcn.org/journal/two/red-dust/sinosphere/

Thirty-two years later, the basic details of the events that transpired at Tiananmen Square between April 15, 1989 and June 4, 1989 are agreed upon by all but the most intractable propagandists. Angered at what they viewed as delays in the implementation of market reforms, student protesters gathered at Tiananmen Square and attempted to insert themselves into an arcane and largely imaginary factional dispute inside the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The protesters made a series of standard liberal demands about democracy and freedom of the press and prepared for a hunger strike during Mikhail Gorbachev's visit to China for the 1989 Sino-Soviet Summit—which broadly failed in terms of gaining leverage over the Party internally but rallied the rest of Beijing to their cause. As the student movement began to wane and descend into factionalism and petty bickering, the workers of Beijing took the stage of history—despite being barred from the stages and microphones of Tiananmen Square itself.

In an incredible display of nearly spontaneous self-organization, Beijing's working class began to fortify the streets around Tiananmen for the oncoming assault of the army. They successfully halted the army for several weeks and forced the CCP to draw troops from the rest of the country as military units in Beijing refused to fire on their own. However, the workers' luck ran out on June 4 and the army wiped out the workers who were defending the square and attacked the students themselves, crushing the movement entirely. This caused a wave of international outrage that accomplished nothing apart from revealing the powerlessness of the liberal intelligentsia in the face of the demands of international capital. Not long after, China would be seamlessly integrated into this international order when it was allowed to join the World Trade Organization in 2001.

The meaning of Tiananmen

But if the details of the events of 1989 are now clear, their significance is still not. Over 30 years later, accounts of Tiananmen continue to focus entirely on the students and their role in China's pro-democracy movement. Other internationalist accounts tie the Chinese pro-democracy movement to pro-democracy movements in South Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. However, they too, repeat the mistake of narrower pro-democracy accounts and focus only on the similarities between student protests. A few revisionist accounts have done better, particularly Andrew G. Walder and Gong Xiaoxia, whose work on the Beijing Workers' Autonomous Federation in the early 90s was drawn on by Yueran Zhang over two and a half decades later to finally produce a coherent account of the broader politics of the workers' movement. What they discovered was a crucial divide at the core of the movement itself. The students at Tiananmen—to the extent that their democratic principles were sincere and not simply cover for a deeply authoritarian version of liberalism that demanded rule by a new class of intellectuals to oversee market reforms—believed in a narrow conception of political democracy.[1]

This political democracy operates at the level of the state, its core tenets being: free citizens, equal status before the law, participation in elections for representatives who pass laws and generally oversee and manage the state bureaucracy. Crucially, this model of political democracy relegates the workplace to a separate, economic sphere into which democracy does not extend. The capitalist firm, or its state-owned equivalent, would remain under the absolute dictatorship of the capitalists and their managerial flunkies. Even the progressive wings of the pro-democracy movement in Taiwan and South Korea maintained this private dictatorship. Workers

[1] "Tiananmen Square and the March into the Institutions." *Chuang* Volume 2. June 3, 2019,

> their own independent organization… In work units, it's personal rule. For example, if I want to change jobs, the bus company foreman won't let me go. I ought to go home at 5:00, but he tells me to work overtime for two hours, and if I don't he'll cut my bonus. This is personal rule. A factory should have a system. If a worker wants to change jobs, they ought to have a system of rules to decide how to do it. Also, these rules should be decided upon by everybody, and then afterwards anyone who violates them will be punished according to the rules. This is rule by law. Now we don't have this kind of legal system.[19]

This is an extremely conservative framing of the classical critique of one-man rule in the factory, couched in the dominant political rhetoric of the rule of law. But any attempt to actually implement a system by which workers controlled which factories they work in, how long they worked, and what their bonus rate is democratically through an independent organization could only end in workers democratic self-management. As Walder and Zhang have pointed out, the workers of the Beijing Workers' Autonomous Federation were uniformly uneducated and had no connection to any of the various liberal intellectual circles. This was as pure a workers' movement as any in Chinese history, and for one final time the instinct of that working class was to demand democracy in the factory. This demand, above all others, was politically unacceptable. When the army marched on Beijing, it was the Chinese working class they wiped out. Even the memory of the demand for democracy in the factory would be scrubbed from the records of the CCP and the pro-democracy movement alike, thus ensuring that the meaning of the events would be lost.

What then, was Tiananmen? In some sense it was the transition point between two different Chinese working classes. The protests

[19] Gong and Walder, "Workers in the Tiananmen Protests," 1993.

lions of women of even the limited autonomy they had clawed out of the Cultural Revolution. But the beginning of marketization, the gradual dismantling of the socialist welfare state, and a wave of inflation produced a series of economic changes that turned Chinese society into a powder keg.

The death of the workers' movement

By 1989, the classical workers' movement was on its last legs. Unable to spark its own uprisings, it latched on to a series of other social and political movements, most notably the pro-democracy movement in China.[18] Yet, the development of the principles of democratic self-management and its critique of one-man rule in the factory were utterly alien to the pro-democracy movement, which meant that its development by Chinese workers was a spontaneous product of their application of the principles of democracy to their own situation. This led to formulations that would have been unfamiliar to previous incarnations of the workers' movement. One worker interviewed by Walder said this about democracy in the factory:

> Why do a lot of workers agree with democracy and freedom? … [I]n the workshop, does what the workers say count, or what the leader says? We later talked about it. In the factory the director is a dictator; what one man says goes. If you view the state through the factory, it's about the same: one-man rule… Our objective was not very high; we just wanted workers to have

[18] The world witnessed a brief resurgence of the classical workers' resistance in the broad conglomeration of movements that comprised the resistance to the IMF in Chile in 2001. There, the relative ideological continuity between the new left and the remains of the classical workers' movement meant that autonomist Marxist activists could move seamlessly between factory occupation and square occupation, though the forces of globalization had by then already gained too much ground post-Tiananmen.

would be given rights under the progressive regimes: permission to form unions, access to the welfare state, limited protection from the worst physical and psychological abuses their bosses could inflict. But no matter how progressive the pro-democracy movement, the legitimacy of the dictatorship of the bosses was not up for dispute. To them, democracy meant a democratic state, not a democratic workplace.

The workers of Tiananmen alone disagreed. They stood against not only the rest of the world's pro-democracy movements but the tide of history itself. By applying the principles of the pro-democracy movement to their own concerns—skyrocketing inflation, mounting debt, rampant corruption by government officials, spiraling inequality, and petty bureaucratic oppression—Beijing's working class reinvented an old and now largely forgotten tradition of democracy in the factory: democratic worker self-management.[2] The re-emergence of the principle of democracy in the factory for the last time in the 20th century was, in many respects, the real significance of Tiananmen.

The battle between the Chinese army and workers of Beijing was the end of a century and a half long struggle between the core of the classical workers' movement—which advocated for democracy in the factory—and its opponents (communist, fascist, and democratic capitalist alike) who insisted on one-man rule in the factory. The final victory of one-man rule in the factory and in every other workplace, forged the fundamental structure of our society—shaping it in ways we are only beginning to comprehend. It is only by placing the massacre at Tiananmen in its true context—the collapse of the classical workers' movement and the death of the democratic principle in the workplace—that we can begin to untangle the shifts in the global economy and the underlying changes

[2] Gong Xiaoxia and Andrew G. Walder. 1993. "Workers in the Tiananmen Protests: The Politics of the Beijing Workers' Autonomous Federation." The China Journal. `http://www.tsquare.tv/links/Walder.html`

in the nature of the working class itself that produced the modern world.

Democracy in the factory

In its earliest days, the classical workers' movement was resolutely democratic. In the 1840s, it struggled for parliamentary democracy against the monarchies of Europe, culminating in the wave of revolutions that swept the continent in 1848. Even as the revolutions were defeated, cracks began to emerge between the coalition of liberals and socialists that had fought together in the streets mere months before over the familiar issue of the limits of democracy. In the French Revolution of 1848, as in the Chinese Revolution in 1989, liberal pro-democracy forces wanted to narrow the scope of democracy to the political sphere while workers sought to expand it to the question of control over production itself. Further fractures emerged inside the workers' movement itself over what precisely workers' control over the means of production would mean. For the most radical factions, control over the means of production meant that workers would control the production process directly through free associations of workers, direct democratic unions (a position later known as syndicalism), or workers' councils.

But more conservative factions became enamored with the bureaucratic technologies of the state. They watched with envy as the industrializing powers of the 1860s and 1870s engaged in increasingly elaborate planning schemes: first of roads, canals, and railroads, then of entire cities, with complex grids of electrical wires, gas lines, and plumbing systems, and began to believe that centralized state planning—not democratic associations of workers—could bring about the long-sought-after cooperative commonwealth of socialism.

in urban Chinese workers experiencing alienation differently than in their French or Algerian contemporaries.

The Chinese urban working class was also, in many respects, a privileged class under the 1949-1980s class system. A worker with urban *hukou* status was given job security, insurance benefits, and access to welfare services, whereas, a worker with rural *hukou* did not share the same benefits.[15] These benefits were financed by intense grain extraction from the countryside, whose inhabitants saw little of the benefits of the fruits of their labor.[16] These factors—combined with structural ideological features of Maoism—resulted in a focus on targeting individuals rather than systems. This meant that despite bold proclamations of fighting bureaucracy, revolts during this period ended up simply replacing one manager with another. Elections on the basis of the Paris Commune were a popular demand during the Cultural Revolution—especially in the early January Storm in Shanghai and Hunan province—but almost no one writing about them seemed to know what they entailed.

The most significant impact of the Cultural Revolution on a Chinese movement for democratic self-management was the fact that the most militant factions of the Chinese working class were wiped out by the PLA-managed white terror that carried out most of the killing during the upheaval. At least two-thirds of the 1.1–1.6 million deceased were killed by various conservative authorities.[17] In their wake, politics moved toward intellectual-driven liberal democratic politics that broadly ignored the working class entirely, as Deng Xiaoping unleashed the One Child Policy in an incredibly draconian and ultimately successful attempt to re-establish the state's patriarchal control over the household and strip hundreds of mil-

[15] *Hukou* is the household registration system used in China.

[16] "Sorghum and Steel: Development" *Chuang* Issue 1. 68. https://chuangcn.org/journal/one/sorghum-and-steel/2-development/

[17] Walder, Andrew G. "Rebellion and Repression in China, 1966–1971." Social Science History Vol. 38, No. 3–4. 531–533. https://www.jstor.org/stable/90017046?seq=1

pensions into the stock market, thus tying what remained of organized labor to the stock market. Corporations began to turn the workplace into an immense propaganda apparatus, replete with mass ideological programming designed to promote identification with the corporation itself and not the working class as a whole. Worst of all, the mobility of capital and the immobility of workers combined with the new logistics networks and technological advances in containerized shipping meant that if workers ever started to get the upper hand, capitalists could simply move elsewhere. This dynamic increased, as the total size of the industrial working class contracted, spitting vast populations out of the traditional workforce entirely. These developments would eventually destroy the classical workers' movement, but in order for the anti-democratic counter revolution to succeed, it needed access to a large and exploitable labor supply. The capitalist class found that answer in China.

The system that prevailed in Chinese factories from the Communist's victory in the Chinese Civil War in 1949 until the market reforms of the 1980's was different in some respects from the American or Soviet systems. Without the ability to fire workers or a piece-rate system, it was extremely difficult to compel workers to expend labor without gaining their consent for any action taken, which was achieved by a combination of mass ideological work—a paternalistic, semi-democratic system for determining the heads of work teams that, while rigged by the Party, ensured that managers would be at least somewhat popular, and took suggestions from workers themselves on the production structure.[14] Though the process was strictly managed, workers had the ability to criticize the cadre who governed them and combined the work unit system's folding of social and home life into the factory system. This resulted

[14] Joel Andreas, *Disenfranchised: The Rise and Fall of Industrial Citizenship in China*. 64. Oxford University Press, 2019.

These factions would grow to comprise nearly the entire social democratic left: from revisionists like Eduard Bernstein, who renounced Marxism and revolution entirely in favor of reforming capitalism and the state from within, to Karl Kautsky, the hardline orthodox Marxist who would become Bernstein's great enemy in the struggle for control of the powerful German left.[3] Disastrously for the workers' movement, none would become more enamored with the state's planning capabilities than Vladimir Ilych Lenin. As David Graeber pointed out, Lenin's obsession with the German postal service was such that he included this passage about the future socialist state in his famous State and Revolution, a text written between the February and October revolutions of 1917:

> A witty German Social-Democrat of the seventies of the last century called the postal service an example of the socialist economic system. This is very true. At present the postal service is a business organized on the lines of a state-capitalist monopoly. Imperialism is gradually transforming all trusts into organizations of a similar type… To organize the whole national economy on the lines of the postal service, so that the technicians, foremen, bookkeepers, as well as all officials, shall receive salaries no higher than "a workman's wage," all under the control and leadership of the armed proletariat—this is our immediate aim.[4]

Lenin's idealized form of socialism would thus take the form of a total state bureaucracy tasked with planning the entire economy, a model that made him one of the greatest enemies of the factions of the workers' movement that sought democracy in the factory.

[3] Endnotes 4, 110.

[4] David Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy*. Melville House, 2015.

The struggle between bureaucracy and democracy in the workers' movement mirrored the struggle between the workers' movement and the capitalist state. By the 1880s, the workers' movement had created veritable "states within a state" in countries like Germany and Italy. These "states" were vast networks of workers institutions, ranging from "free schools, workers' associations, friendly societies, libraries, [and] theaters" to unions, co-ops, neighborhood associations, tenants unions, mutual aid societies, and political parties ran democratically by workers themselves, which provided vital services to workers and their families and served, so the workers hoped, as the basis for a new, socialist society.[5] Fearing the popularity of these democratic workers institutions, Otto von Bismarck created bureaucratic, state-run versions of the libraries, theaters and welfare services to replace them, telling an American observer, "My idea was to bribe the working classes, or shall I say, to win them over, to regard the state as a social institution existing for their sake and interested in their welfare."[6]

In time, various socialist movements would confuse the welfare state Bismarck had created to keep them from seizing power with socialism itself, which caused them to replicate the bureaucratic nature of Bismarck's programs. But the popularity of the older conception of socialism as democracy in the factory continued to rise even as its new bureaucratic opponents on the left and the right solidified their hold on their respective movements. More importantly, the workers who engaged in spontaneous uprisings instinctively began to form democratic institutions—particularly workers' councils. The most famous of which were the workers' councils formed during the spontaneous Russian Revolutions of 1905 and 1917. These councils, called soviets, were originally formed in 1905 out of ad hoc strike committees that became formalized, elected

[5] Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules*, 87.
[6] Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules*, 87.

economic structure had been answered for him. Production would be managed by democratic workers' councils built on the property seized by Algerian workers after the mass exodus of French settlers who fled the country en masse following independence, leaving the property uninhabited. Ben Bella's administration took a page out of Lenin's book and publicly supported the councils while privately undermining them, but the whole dispute was made irrelevant by a military coup two years later that dismantled the councils completely and reimposed one-man rule in the factory.

The road to Tiananmen

The persistence of these revolts in the face of pure military repression caused capitalist managerial elites to look for ways to dismantle the systemic structures that produced the democratic revolts without giving up their power. The instinctive embrace of democracy in the factory was only possible so long as the factory functioned as a point of encounter—a sort of dark agora that at once exploited workers and facilitated the interactions that allowed workers to find and produce collective meaning and identity with each other.[13] Thus, the fundamental thrust of the attack against democratic self-management would be an attack on the shop-floor as a site of collective identity formation and as a space that could be seen as in any way liberatory. This took a number of forms: most famously, de-industrialization itself as well as the spatial relocation of factories from urban centers into the suburbs—where workers could be turned into homeowners and bought off with a combination of cheap credit and the promise that their new homes would also function as assets.

The "democratization of finance" replaced the democratization of the factory as the capitalist class funneled the remaining union

[13] The author thanks Vicky Osterweil for this observation. (Author's personal correspondence.)

utilities to bakeries to hospitals to shoe factories, fell under the control of the direct democratic unions and once their former bosses were chased from the premises, the workers began transforming the entirety of Spanish society along democratic lines. They pooled their collective resources and allocated them democratically for the benefit of Spanish society as a whole. For a brief moment, the triumphant experiment in democratic self-management delivered on its promises: output increased dramatically, social services were expanded, and Spanish workers even self-organized a universal healthcare system that dramatically expanded service into rural areas where care was previously inaccessible.[12] But the revolution had begun amidst a brutal civil war in Spain and under the guise of an anti-fascist alliance, liberal, socialist, and Stalinist forces violently stamped out any attempts at democratic self-management and returned the factories to their managers before losing the war to the fascist armies of Francisco Franco.

Undeterred by the mounting casualty tolls of pro-managerial massacres, revolutionary workers formed democratic councils and mass assemblies in the factories once again in Hungary in 1956 and then in France, Italy, and Czechoslovakia in 1968. To the dismay of capitalist and communists alike, the development and implementation of the democratic solution to alienation these revolts provided was largely instinctual and it often emerged in places without established workers' movements and their political education efforts. Typical of such movements was the course of the revolution in Algeria. The limited political education Algerian workers had was from the nationalist, vanguardist National Liberation Front (FLN), which had carried out the war against the French colonizers. The FLN's ideology emphasized the decisive role of the state in national development. Upon taking power, however, Algeria's first president Ahmed Ben Bella discovered that the question of

[12] Sam Dolgoff, *The Anarchist Collectives: Workers' Self-Management in the Spanish Revolution, 1936–1939.* 102. Black Rose Books, 1973.

bodies of representatives from the various factories who worked to coordinate the general strike.[7]

The revolution of 1905 was crushed by the Tsar but in 1917, the Russian working class would once again form workers' councils as another revolution commenced. This time the councils would take control of production directly, coordinating between various factories and industries as well as serving as a workers counter power to the new revolutionary government. The Russian Revolution kicked off a period of open warfare that stretched from Italy to Argentina between the forces of democracy in the factory and the newly-formed, anti-democratic alliance of social democrats and capitalists. Between 1917 and 1920, workers' councils formed in Germany, Poland, Austria, Ukraine, and Ireland, and were matched by revolts by syndicalist unions in Brazil. These uprisings were all crushed. In Italy, which saw some of the most intense conflicts between syndicalists and the Italian state, the occupation of the factories was ended not by the Italian government but by the Italian Socialist Party and their union, the General Confederation of Labor.

The worst defeat of the democratic workers' movement would come—not at the hands of capitalists or social democrats—but from Lenin and the Bolsheviks, the very party that the workers' councils had put in power. Lenin began to undermine the soviets within days of taking power. Published mere days after the October Revolution, his *Draft Decrees on Workers' Control* stated in no uncertain terms that real power and authority lay with the new state and the Bolshevik-dominated trade unions.[8] In the face of massive and unexpected resistance from the workers' councils, the decrees needed to be modified before they could be implemented.[9] But while publicly declaring his support for the workers' councils, Lenin contin-

[7] Oskar Anweiler, *The Soviets: The Russian Workers, Peasants, and Soldiers Councils, 1905–1921.* Pantheon Books, 1975.

[8] Maurice Brinton, *The Bolsheviks and Workers' Control 1917–1921: The State and Counter-Revolution.* 69. 1970.

[9] Brinton, *The Bolsheviks and Workers' Control*, 70–72.

ued to chip away at their power until he finally admitted his real position on democracy in the factory in 1918 in "The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government":

> Unquestioning submission to a single will is absolutely necessary for the success of labor processes that are based on large-scale machine industry… today the Revolution demands, in the interests of socialism, that the masses unquestioningly obey the single will of the leaders of the labor process.[10]

Lenin was more candid about what one-man rule in the factory would entail than most but if his prose was more direct, the result was little different than one-man rule in any other political system. Bolshevik rule *in the factory*, then, would be no different than capitalist, social democratic, or even fascist rule. The movement for democracy in the factory now faced four implacable enemies willing to put aside their ideological differences to ensure that workers would not run their workplaces directly—as the 20s bled into the 30s, the movement seemed to have all but disappeared.

The instinct of the workers' movement

Unfortunately for the Leninists, no matter how many workers they killed, the demand for democracy in the factory simply refused to die. For over 100 years, the development of the mass factory system and the logistical infrastructure necessary to support it—perhaps most importantly coal mines and the railroads used to transport them—generated an especially militant working class that saw democratic control over the workplace as the fundamental aspect of its liberation. Ideologically, this manifested in a set of interlocking beliefs about the nature of the working class and class

[10] Brinton, *The Bolsheviks and Workers' Control*, 130.

society, all of which were necessary for the instinctive formation of workers' councils to manifest itself in moments of revolutionary crisis. In the midst of the rapid technological expansions of the second and third industrial revolutions, workers came to see themselves as the creators of the new world. This produced the second belief that drove the classical workers' movement: The producers of the new world should also be its inheritors. Thus, the goal of the workers' movement was to take control of production itself and manage it for the common benefit of the workers themselves.

These two beliefs in and of themselves were not unique to the democratic wing of the workers' movement, they broadly comprised the ideology of the movement as a whole—from social democratic trade unionists to the intellectual heads of the Leninist vanguard parties.[11] What made the democratic wing unique was its concern with the fundamental alienation of factory life, with the condition of being reduced to an object by bosses who simply used workers as human tools. For the Leninists and social democrats, alienation was simply a product of ownership or distribution. The liberation of the working class would be found in its productive capacity, not in its innate humanity and creativity. But for the democratic wing of the workers' movement, this solved nothing. As long as the fundamental reduction of being an object of one-man rule in the factory persisted, changes in ownership structures and health benefits missed the entire point. That degradation could only be solved by returning agency and autonomy to the working class—by giving the class itself control over the production processes that had for so long controlled them.

In 1936, Spanish workers decided to take matters into their own hands and seized control over their workplaces unprompted en masse. The Spanish Revolution, as it later became known, would become the largest and most extensive experiment in democratic workers self-management before or since. Everything from public

[11] Endnotes 4, 97–98.