

Book Review

Immanuel Ness and Dario Azzellini, Ours to Master and to Own,
Chicago: Haymarket, 2011, pp. 443 pages.

Reviewed by Eugene Jones,

*Social Science Program, Mahidol University International College,
Salaya, Nakhon Pathom, Thailand*

**Corresponding author. E-mail address: iceugene@mahidol.ac.th*

The fact that the publisher is Haymarket Publishers indicates that the book under examination is concerned with labor studies. This particular book is an anthology of twenty-two articles by various authors who specialize in labor movements or the history of workers' organizations. The central argument that runs through the entire work is three fold. First, workers' councils tend to take a similar form and that form was the type of organization established by Paris workers when they seceded from France in 1871 and governed through elected assemblies of laboring men and women. Second, workers' councils, following the Paris model, are more democratic than capitalist systems of government. Third, there are common aspects of this form that make for greater democracy. Those aspects are direct election of workers by workers, instant recall of delegates if they do not act in the interest of workers and the absence of separate branches of government. Most of the authors also expressed the belief that networks of workers' councils could serve as a more centralized national or international government.

The book under consideration here is a valuable tool for interpreting and understanding current political phenomena in the contemporary world. It is, therefore, recommended for any scholar who would understand such recent events as the Arab Spring uprisings, the "Occupy" movements in Europe and America, the pro-democracy demonstrations in Russia and the student protests in Latin America. All

these phenomena demonstrate that throughout the world, workers and the poor are taking the lead in demanding new social structures and new conditions that would lead to a more just world order and a more fair distribution of the world's resources. However, these same conditions are what laboring people have been demanding since the beginning of the industrial revolution. By studying the history of labor councils, one can better comprehend why the world is now in such turmoil.

To aid that understanding, this anthology contains a series of articles tracing the history and development of workers' councils and evaluating their relative successes. Beginning with the Paris Commune in 1871, the first attempt at a workers' state, through the Chartist movement in early 19th century Britain and the Soviets of revolutionary Russia to the post war workers' anti-colonial initiative in Java, Indonesia and workers' control of the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela, the laboring masses have been in the forefront of liberation movements and, when left to their own initiative, have been ingenious at creating council movements that achieve their objectives.

Although the book has a unifying theme, there are articles for various interests. For students of Asian and, particularly, Southeast Asian politics and culture the articles by Jafar Suryomenggolo, "Workers' Control in Java, Indonesia, 1945-1946" (210-27) and Arup Kumar Sen, "Workers' Control in India's Communist-Ruled State: Labor Struggles and Trade Unions in West Bengal" (356-64) would be of particular interest and would add greatly to their body of knowledge in these areas. Although there are no articles concerned precisely with Thailand, Thai Sociologists and Thai Studies specialists would benefit by these two articles as well as by the entire process outlined in the book as it explains the grievances and aspirations of working people. It would, for example, be a valuable tool in understanding the growth, increased activity and possible future political involvement of the "Red Shirt" phenomenon.

Furthermore, the excellent composition by Donny Gluckstein, "Workers' Councils in Europe: A Century of experience" (pp. 32-47) outlines the history of worker's councils from the Paris Commune to the

end of World War II. This work is a sequel to his authoritative book on the Paris Commune, *The Paris Commune: A Revolution in Democracy* (2006). Gluckstein, shows the similarities in organization, policy and structure of the various workers' council movements in Europe during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Alberto R. Bonnet's essay, "The Political Form at Last Discovered: Workers' Councils against the Capitalist State" (66-81) provides an argument that the workers' councils of Europe demonstrated an ability on the part of wage-earners to overcome the division between the economic and political spheres of society. His commentary complements Gluckstein's claim that workers have proven themselves able to govern and to create an administration that is more democratic and egalitarian than found in capitalist states.

Dario Azzellini's expose, "Workers' Control under Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution" (382-99) argues that during the administration of Hugo Chavez, Venezuelan workers have successfully used the councils to supply the government with feedback and advice on the needs and expectations of the laboring classes and that this has provided a model of accomplishment for workers' councils and proven that workers, if not hindered by government, have, in fact, found the model of organization that best suits the needs of a democratic and egalitarian society.

In addition to the articles just mentioned, David Mandel's history of the Soviets (pp. 104-30) provides an insightful analysis of a successful model of workers' councils becoming government. This same conclusion gains support from the essay by Shiela Cohen (pp. 48-65) on how such councils can translate into revolutionary action. One final contribution that needs to be mentioned, as it puts adds caution to the idealistic enthusiasm of Mandel and Cohen is Gabriela Scoedeller's article "Limits and Possibilities of Workers' Control Within the State (pp. 248-62). Using Argentina as a model, Scoedeller argues that worker councils have to take account of and work within the capitalist institutions as they are not capable, acting alone, in supplanting capitalist institutions and structures.

The other essays in the book are more nation-state specific and of less general interest. However, they advance the central argument and overall theme of the work and all are both interesting and insightful. But due to the nature of this review, I have considered in detail only the eight most characteristic or relevant articles to that argument and theme.

While the book is highly relevant to students of sociology, economics and labor theory, there are a few weaknesses or, at least, omissions. First among these weaknesses is the fact that each and every contributor to this anthology has dealt primarily with workers' councils in the political sphere. Not one author considered in any great detail other elements of workers' councils such as their effectiveness as organizing tools for civic and social events. Related to this is the second weakness which is that there are no essays concerned with the cooperative, non-political role of workers' councils in Northeast Asia in the late 20th century. Yet Japanese, Korean and Taiwanese workers' have been quite successful in using councils that do not confront government or use industrial action for political purposes but still improve the quality of life and the working conditions of laborers. These councils should be evaluated in a subsequent work. Lastly, there is no consideration throughout the book of the present day use of social media rather than personal interaction to organize workers' councils for political purposes. But the internet has been used lately to mobilize workers across geographical barriers and industrial trades for movements that promote their interests. One example of this use of social media is the current "recall" movements in the USA using Facebook and Twitter in which elected officials that are believed to be anti-labor are criticized and organizations are formed to work for their dismissal. Another example is the use of the internet to organize demonstrations against such anti-labor institutions as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Trade Organization (WTO).

Despite some weaknesses and omissions, however, *Ours to Master and to Own* is such a fine contribution to socio-economic history that it should be required reading for all people in the field of social theory.