

NEWSLETTER

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The myth of the boss and job efficiency

We are victims of a great hoax -- the biggest put-on of all time. Even its perpetrators have been taken in by it.

Parkinson suspected the hoax when he conceived his first law -- work expands to fill the time available for its completion. Peter's principle came close to revealing the hoax by pointing out that employees rise to the level of their incompetence.

J.H. Boren revealed more in his book, *When in Doubt*, Mumble.

We can joke about the hoax, but we have been its victims for so long it has become part of our mythology. Like most firmly embedded myths, belief in it persists against overwhelming evidence of its falsehood.

The myth is that being business-like is equivalent to being efficient. The truth is that being businesslike involves establishing rules and regulations that must be broken to get a job done efficiently, establishing

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A PUBLIC SERVANT DISCOVERS WORKER SELF-MANAGEMENT

Question: "Why don't public servants look out the window in the morning?"

Answer: "Because they want to save something to do in the afternoon."

Public servant jokes seem to have replaced Newfie jokes in popularity. This is probably due to the present economic climate in which government employees seem to enjoy greater security than other workers, and to the stories of bungling on the part of federal, provincial, and municipal governments.

But let's not forget that Fort had its Edsel and General Motors its Corvair and Firenza. The private sector is as capable of making mistakes as the public sector, and some workers are

becoming increasingly alienated from their jobs.

This is particularly true of workers in large-scale enterprises where boredom accompanies specialization, and the traditional hierarchical management system fails to involve the worker. Usually far-removed from the decision-making level, the worker can take little pride or pleasure in the end products of his or her labour. Public servants are no exception.

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The myth of the boss (continued from page 1)

boundaries of authority and responsibility that must be ignored to accomplish anything, and appointing bosses whose main contribution is to obstruct the work and ideas of employees.

I expect you will recognize your own workplace in this description. Perhaps if you are a civil servant you imagine that the inefficiencies you see at work exist because government departments aren't businesslike. It is just the opposite. Government departments are becoming increasingly businesslike, grabbing at each new management technique. The more businesslike they become, the more inefficient they become.

Perhaps because of the myth of business efficiency, you imagine that if you could just replace your boss with someone better, the situation would improve. It wouldn't.

It is not the particular bosses who happen to be in charge that cause inefficiency, antagonism and alienation. It is inherent in being businesslike because being businesslike requires a boss/employee relationship. That relationship is destructive to bosses, employees and efficiency. It is also incompatible with our beliefs in democracy.

I have been involved in an attempt to end the boss/employee relationship and introduce democratic management in a fairly large enterprise. This required me to speak to small, informal groups of employees with jobs as varied as unskilled labour, skilled craftsmen and office

workers. Most of them had difficulty breaking loose from the myth. They felt that it had been ordained that there must be bosses. That was businesslike, and therefore efficient.

I eventually put the same questions to each group. "Who can run your shop or office better -- the bosses or the people doing the work?"

The answer was always the same. The people who do the work know what has to be done and they don't need a boss messing things up.

That gets us to the essence of industrial democracy. The people doing a job make the decisions about how to do it and accept responsibility for their decisions.

Of course the work done by various people has to be co-ordinated, but there is no need for the co-ordinator to be a boss. So, too, workers need technical advice, but there is no need for the adviser to be a boss. In fact, it is far better for co-ordinators and technical advisers not to be bosses, because many workers are reluctant to ask the boss questions. The boss has power over their future and questions may be interpreted as incompetence or ignorance.

You still have doubts about the ability of people to manage their work? Well, look at it this way. You know that you don't need a boss checking on you, giving you orders and generally making it difficult for you to do your job. I'm the same. But what about "them"-- all those other people out there?

It's a funny thing. When you get to know "them" they turn out to be much like you and me.

-- Harold B. Wilson

(This article was first printed in The Ottawa Citizen)

Canadians for a Democratic Workplace

My apologies to all who were wondering why there was such a long delay in getting out this newsletter, since the establishment of CANADIANS FOR A DEMOCRATIC WORKPLACE last Spring at a conference in Sudbury.

Last summer, I started a new job with the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada. Although I have some impressive sounding titles with the Tapirisat (Brotherhood) and associated organizations, I can assure you that they do not lessen my dedication to industrial democracy. Quite the contrary. It is refreshing to work with people who generally consider bureaucratic hierarchical organization to be ridiculous.

But back to the delay. My work enables me to take frequent trips to the Arctic and that has caused my activities in the "south" to lag. About the time you receive this I will be on a two-week trip in the Eastern Arctic and that will be followed shortly by a trip to the Central and High Arctic. As that looks like the pattern for the year ahead, the job of co-ordinating the activities of our group is being taken over by a committee based in Ottawa. I will keep active with that committee whenever time permits.

NEWSLETTER

NEWSLETTER is dedicated to stimulating interest in establishing a democratic workplace for Canadians

Editorial Board

Harold B. Wilson	David Walden
Alan Whitehorn	J.P. Blanc
Ian McClymont	C.M. Rose

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Mailing address: NEWSLETTER
P.O. Box 3793
Station "C", Ottawa
K1Y 4J8

The committee includes:

Alan Whitehorn who has studied industrial democracy, particularly in Yugoslavia. He is now working on a history of Canadian socialism.

David Walden, who is a graduate student at Carleton University studying problems of industrial societies.

Ian McClymont who is an archivist at the Public Archives of Canada.

Now for a few comments on the North which may or may not be relevant to industrial democracy:

On my first visit to Frobisher Bay I was taken on a walking tour of the town by a young Inuk. He pointed to a heated wooden garage beside a house occupied by a white bureaucrat and said, "Do you know how we feel when we see that building used for a car while on the next street, where the same structures are called matchbox houses, they are occupied by Inuit families with five or six children?"

Similar contrasts between what the government provides for white bureaucrats and the local Inuit are apparent in other regional government centres in the Arctic. But when you talk to those white bureaucrats, you find that they are not consciously malicious or racist. They are just victims of a system that sets one person over another and then says that the one at the top knows what is best for the one at the bottom.

One can no more generalize about Inuit than about Europeans but one trait that I seem to find more prevalent in the North than in the South, is the ability of many Inuit to cut through a lot of nonsense (bureaucratic and otherwise) and get to the essence of a question. I think we have much more to learn from the Northerners than we have to teach them. And much of what we have to learn is relevant to industrial democracy.

-- Harold B. Wilson

Growing interest in a democratic workplace

The August issue of The Labour Gazette, a monthly journal of labour affairs published by the federal labour department, deals with the idea of industrial democracy.

It is one of the best and most recent publications of this important subject and is also largely the work of Canadians. It includes articles by union spokesmen, senior newspaper columnists, academics and labour consultants. This particular issue does not contain viewpoints of managerial opponents of the system, but subsequent issues do.

This issue of The Labour Gazette includes a summary of the Connaghan report, the government-commissioned study of the West German system of co-determination. Connaghan is most impressed by the success of co-determination and recommends more study. His suggestions are certainly similar to some of the goals of CANADIANS FOR A DEMOCRATIC WORKPLACE in our efforts to increase the amount of information available to Canadians on this very important topic.

Equally important to collecting information is the need to share ideas about industrial democracy and problems of the workplace. We need more newsletters, more conferences, more pamphlets, more research, and ideally more experiments.

Industrial democracy is an exciting idea. Much more needs to be written about it. We hope that Canadians from across the continent will help us to publish future editions of the newsletter so that we can share our ideas and our experiences. For example, questions asked in the articles published in the August edition of The Labour Gazette include:

What role do unions have in a system of co-determination?

Will industrial democracy lead to less strikes and higher wages?

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West German labour relations -- a model for Canada?

The federal government-sponsored study entitled, "Partnership or Marriage of Convenience?" currently receiving close scrutiny by government officials, unionists and employers alike, heralds the government's first major exploration of worker participation as an alternative to Canada's current labour relations problems.

It was prepared by Charles Connaghan, former president of the Construction Labour Relations Association of B.C. who is now vice-president of administrative services at University of British Columbia.

The report's sub-title explains its potential significance to anyone interested in industrial democracy: A critical examination of contemporary labour relations in West Germany with suggestions for improving the Canadian labour-management relationships based on the West German Experience.

The 102-page document, published by the federal labour department in the Spring of 1976, has received widespread press attention, as has the subsequent debate on related topics by labour leaders, government officials, academics and industrial relations analysts.

These news reports introduced many Canadians to such concepts as works councils, workers on the board of directors, labour input into planning the national economy, and the idea that workers both can and should have more control over their workplace.

A spate of conferences, seminars and statements on related topics have been inspired by the contents of this report.

Nick Hills of Southam News Services in an article published in newspapers across Canada soon after the report was released, predicted that "Connaghan's findings are going to prove very uncomfortable for both business and government and to a lesser extent, organized labour...his detailed and expert outline of the present system suggests that labour runs West Germany in almost equal partnership with business and government."

Ashley Ford, labour writer for the Vancouver Province, wrote, "Connaghan is making a lot of sense. Most of what he is saying will probably come to pass."

The report, which describes in detail the legislative and organizational framework of management-labour-government interrelationships both in the workplace and at the national level is recommended reading to all who are seriously interested in studying this highly-controversial system which so far has largely been denounced by Canadian labour leaders.

The report explains what is being contemplated by government and what may help shape federal industrial relations policies in the past anti-inflation controls era.

The report is available free of charge from:

Public Relations Branch
Labour Canada
Ottawa K1A 0J2

-- C.M. Rose

Growing interest in a democratic workplace (continued from page 4)

Will industrial democracy reduce union freedom?

Will it give workers better chances for promotion?

Will it end boredom and work frustration?

Will it remove many petty abuses by bosses?

Will it reduce needless rules and regulations?

Will it mean that I can work how and at the rate I want?

These are just some of the questions that we need to talk about. Will you give us some of your opinions? Will you help us to mail copies of our newsletter to your friends in factories, offices, and union halls across the country?

Copies of The Labour Gazette are available from: Editor, The Labour Gazette, Labour Canada, Ottawa, K1A 0J2.

-- Alan Whitehorn

A public servant discovers worker self-management (continued from page 1)

Dull, routine, dehumanizing work creates alienation. It is not surprising that workers will try to relieve the monotony or avoid the job completely. This results in lower worker productivity -- both qualitatively and quantitatively.

What is needed is some way of involving the workers themselves in the management of the workplace. One of the advantages of a more democratic workplace is that the unavoidable routine or repetitive tasks could be more evenly distributed among the workers. At the same time, their involvement, in managing their workplace would create greater pride in their work since it would reflect more directly upon them.

It has long seemed to me that we were wasting our human potential in Canada. Each year, our schools, community colleges, universities and job training programs add many more workers to the labour force. The educational and experience requirements for many jobs have increased.

Yet traditional management can't make use of this talent. Instead of stimulating workers to realize their full potential, management introduces even greater specialization and widens the gap between management and employee.

Without knowing it, I have been moving to a position of support for what is called "worker self-management". I have discovered that the idea is not new. In fact, several countries have gone some distance along this road. However, in Canada, we will have to decide our own direction and how we can best introduce democratic management into our workplaces. I think that the public service would benefit by its introduction just as much as our factories, mines, and businesses.

As a newcomer to the movement for a more democratic workplace, I hope this newsletter will provide a place where people can exchange ideas and help to promote a greater interest in examining this promising alternative to traditional autocratic management.

-- Ian McClymont

Typing and Layout
Kathryn McDonald

OFFICE KIW 110
9 VAOU 7506
A WHITENORNI