

Len Krimerman and Frank Lindenfeld, editors
When Workers Decide: Workplace Democracy Takes Root in North America

Reviewer: Richard Evanoff

Corporate capitalism is interested in one thing and one thing alone: profits. The end result is high unemployment, frequent recessions, devastated landscapes, environmental degradation, and abandoned communities. How can workers take back control of their workplaces and thereby take back control of their lives?

The workplace democracy movement is experimenting with new solutions to this old question. Workplace democracy draws more from the mutualist ideas of Proudhon than the revolutionary ardor of Bakunin, and fits in better with the positive goal of building the new society in the shell of the old than the nihilistic project of destroying the old society with the shells of the new. Workplace democracy means workers owning and managing their own companies. While there are half-measures that go under the name "workplace democracy," such as ESOPs (Employee Stock Ownership Plans) that fleece workers by encouraging them to buy stock in their companies but without giving them democratic control and QWL

(Quality of Work Life) programs that get more productivity out of workers by involving them in decision-making but without letting them become full owners, the ultimate goal of the workplace democracy movement is nothing less than full worker ownership and control of the means of production — without, however, the dictatorship of the proletariat, nationalization, state control, central planning, and all the rest.

When Workers Decide is itself a cooperative project. Rather than assume heavy editorial hands, Krimerman and Lindenfeld let the people who are actually involved in the movement speak for themselves. The result is a mosaic of perspectives on the achievements, problems, and potentials of workplace democracy. Despite the plurality of voices, however, the book is tightly organized into nine chapters which give a comprehensive overview of the entire movement. Also included is a resource guide (the editors plan to update it periodically) which includes the names and addresses of worker-owned firms, consultants and technical assistance organizations, funding and financial sources, educational resources, and labor-based/union resources. The bibliography is also one of the most complete on the subject I've seen.

In addition to giving a solid introduction to the background and current status of worker-owned firms, the book examines several major new developments. Before 1975, for example, there were few technical assistance organizations to help worker-owned enterprises; now there are more than fifty. While many workers may be interested in worker-ownership, they often lack the legal knowledge and business expertise necessary to get a

worker-owned company started. The technical assistance organizations provide this knowledge and experience, and also help worker-owned companies link up with each other and with other progressive groups and coalitions.

Creative financing is also making a helpful contribution to the workplace democracy movement. Whereas the big commercial banks typically siphon money out of local communities and invest it in high-return projects elsewhere, new credit unions and loan funds are being created to keep the money within the community. Progressive banks, such as the South Shore Bank in Chicago, invest in local projects that not only improve the community, but also provide much-needed jobs. As the book notes, the idea of local residents pooling their investments for the good of their own communities is hardly new (refer again to Proudhon's mutualism). But since the impoverished areas most in need of financial assistance are looked at by mainstream financial institutions as "poor investments," such alternatives are more necessary than ever.

The attitude of unions towards worker-owned enterprises is also changing. Previously many unions were hostile to the idea of worker-owned firms on the grounds that they would undermine union support — if workers own their own companies, what need is there for a union after all? Some unionists also fear that worker-ownership will lead to competitive struggles between firms rather than labor solidarity across industries. They are also aware that many ESOPs and QWLs co-opt true workplace democracy by simply getting workers to "work harder, produce more for less, and accept concessions," as Pete Leki writes

in an article reprinted from *Labor Today*. But an actual look at what worker-owned enterprises are doing reveals a more positive picture. In some worker-owned firms, the union remains to ensure that all employees in the firm have a democratic voice and that management, even if duly elected, doesn't overextend its prerogatives. Colt Enterprises, a worker-owned textile manufacturer, shows its solidarity with low-wage "competitors" in the Dominican Republic by helping to fund a worker education program for them that emphasizes health, safety, and workers' rights. The goal, says Joan Suarez of the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union, is to "guarantee good working conditions and job stability for all in the long run."

The assessments towards the end of *When Workers Decide* remain guarded but optimistic. It's true that worker-owned enterprises provide greater job security, more empowerment, and often better wages than conventional capitalist firms, but objections remain. In a summary essay, "Taking Stock: Workplace Democracy's Unique Potential for Progressive Change," the editors confront some of these objections head on. On the one hand, they explode the myth that worker-ownership is "impractical" because capitalist firms are presumably more efficient and economically viable. Corporate capitalism is, in the editors' view, "an economic dinosaur dependent for survival on government subsidies, throwaway products that consumers can neither repair nor find alternatives to, and unnecessary and globally destabilizing military production." Conventional capitalist firms become "leaner and meaner" by laying off workers, increasing executive salaries, and paying

workers, increasing executive salaries, and paying higher dividends, worker-owned enterprises become "leaner and meaner" by reducing the number of managers, eliminating absentee stockholders altogether, and paying their employees higher wages. It's not hard to see which type of firm will be more efficient in the long run.

The other objection that Krimerman and Lindenfeld attempt to meet is that worker cooperatives don't go far enough. Marxists and anarchists alike often argue that workplace democracy is still a fringe movement that doesn't sufficiently challenge the powers that be. The editors admit that by itself workplace democracy isn't a quick-fix solution. But they also feel, and argue convincingly, that it's a step in the right direction. "At the very least," they write, "worker ownership provides a unique forum in which to explore and experiment with the ideals of justice, sustainability, and democracy." But workplace democracy could also be much more than this, and on the very next page the editors reveal their higher hopes by writing that "the historically novel features and achievements of the contemporary worker-ownership movement provide an unparalleled opportunity to construct a new and genuinely democratic economy that can rival, perhaps even unseat, corporate capitalism." They admit that workplace democracy is a long-term proposition, not an instant revolution that's going to change the world overnight. But the revolution isn't a necessarily distant event. It's something we can start right now.

When Workers Decide: Workplace Democracy Takes Root in North America, edited by Len Krimerman and Frank Lindenfeld. 308 pp. Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1992. \$16.95 paper.

S. Colman
***Anarchists* [a play]**

Reviewer: Ernest G. Nassar

The two main characters of *Anarchists*, written in the early 1970s by the Detroit playwright, S. Colman, adumbrate economic trends now obvious. Ryan Lamar, an intellectual denied academic status for some of the usual reasons, is forced into the marginal economy as an underemployed operator of a driving school. Francine Vassello, a policewoman, is a liberated female in a formerly exclusive male profession who chafes under the unchanging organizational restrictions of state and society. Lamar and Vassello are brought together by a series of unsolved murders of women, murders for which Lamar becomes the prime suspect. The climax of the play finds the two discovering that beyond mere physical attraction, they share a common bond. Abandoning her job and associate, police lieutenant Audrey Scott, Vassello casts her lot with the intellectual Lamar, who offers her both freedom and affection. In so acting, Vassello also appears to cut her ties to her collegial superior, Lieutenant Scott. Although friends, a subtle class antagonism has developed between the two women, giving rise to feelings of alienation. Complicating the relationship is an unstated undercurrent of lesbianism. Whatever the