

The Congress of Workers' Councils, Yugoslavia

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The official from the American Embassy knew what to think about the Congress of Workers' Councils which was to be held in Belgrade from June 25th to 27th. He was certain that it would have nothing to do with industrial democracy. How could one take democracy seriously in Yugoslavia? In every bar, as he correctly observed, one is confronted with portraits of Tito. There is Tito as Statesman; Tito as Thinker; Tito as Admiral; Tito as Sportsman. He explained that it would be the President and his immediate entourage, rather than the workers, who would figure at the Congress and that its business would be with international, rather than with industrial relations.

In this opinion the American was not altogether mistaken. However, his lack of experience of conditions in other East European countries and his indifference to detailed problems of economic organisation had led him to a conclusion which was far from adequate.

Sure enough, Tito dominated the opening session of the congress and his remarks were largely directed to foreign critics. He administered—with a show of judicious impartiality—sharp rebukes to East and West alike. But in fact it was the Russians who were most severely reprimanded. To speak of the necessity of maintaining good relations with Yugoslavia while issuing inside instructions to party members that the country was seething with revisionism and going for a mixture of anarchism and capitalism was, said Tito, a new method of "comradely criticism" which had very uncomradely tendencies.

Not only the first, but also the last session of the Congress was of a character which could be used to support the American interpretation of its significance. The session lasted approximately five hours and four of these were taken up with speeches by some of the large contingent of "fraternal delegates". The 1,700 representatives of workers' councils did not appear to take exception to this arrangement, but their spirited response to each speaker's remarks left him no doubt as to what they thought about him. By and large representatives of the Western Labour Movement were received with polite attention: the Afro-Asian group with enthusiasm; and the Polish delegate rapturously. The

Russians and their satellites were applauded when they expressed their greetings to the Yugoslav workers, but the repetition of uninformative statistics about production in Bulgaria or Rumania sent the delegates back to their newspapers or into informal discussion groups. The drabness and predictability of the speeches made by the apologists from Czechoslovakia or Hungary certainly contrasted sharply with the much richer, idiom current among the Yugoslavs themselves.'

However, an awareness of the implications of the Congress for Yugoslavia's foreign relations need not betray anyone into supposing that it was merely a convenient platform for Tito or that the workers' Councils are no more than elegant facades designed in the interests of ideological independence. Whether or not these Councils are instruments of democratic control is a proper subject for discussion, but it is beyond question that they occupy a central position within the new economic structure which has been under construction since 1949. Since that time the councils have passed from consultative to controlling bodies: their legal position has been assured and their economic importance has greatly increased.

The master idea of the Yugoslav socialists is the development of a form of market economy within the framework of state ownership. Instead of the entire economy being planned by top heavy central administration sending out directives to enterprises, it is left to the enterprises themselves to decide what they are best suited to produce. The Workers' Councils and the Management Committees which they elect are the organs through which these decisions are taken. The funds left in the hands of an enterprise after it has met its costs and other liabilities are disposed in accordance with the wishes of the Council. In conjunction with the local authority, the Commune, each Council controls the appointment and dismissal of its director.

The Yugoslavs admit that these new relationships carry a danger of "local particularism" and even monopolistic extortion. If these vices are not checked by socialist consciousness there will be administrative intervention to fix maximum prices and protect the consumer. However, since the basic law on workers' councils was passed seven years ago, the tendency has been towards less and less administrative control and more and more independence for the councils. Central planning has become a matter of providing a general perspective and detailed control by state departments has been replaced by associations of councils organised territorially and industrially to co-ordinate policy. There is no question of the Councils being mere consultative machinery set up to perform the impossible task of giving workers a sense of participation in plans drafted in some remote department in Belgrade.

Considered from an economic standpoint, the workers' councils seem to be functioning remarkably well. They have produced

a new concern with the demands of the consumer and freed the country from some of the burden of costly bureaucratic machinery. They have also exposed and helped to correct the concealed unemployment which was a feature of the administrative¹ socialism of the earlier period. At their congress the workers made it plain that they want no return to earlier methods and delegate after delegate demanded greater autonomy for the Councils and a reduction in their liabilities to the central and local authorities.

It is a much more difficult matter to determine how far the workers' councils are instruments of democratic control. They vary from one enterprise to another: each having its own constitution and standing orders. In an office in Belgrade there is a stack of reports which the councils sent in on their individual histories and problems. These reports suggest that there are considerable differences between the experiences, preoccupations and attainments of one council and another. Weaknesses were dealt with at length. One report from a munitions factory declared that relations were strained there and had become so bad that no fewer than three managers had left and gone to employment elsewhere. Other reports indicated that there were some workers who were not interested in the proceedings of their council. They felt incapable of taking part in discussion or felt that if they made criticisms the director might find ways of making it hot for them. These reports generally concluded by stating that such problems either belonged to the past or were on the way to being overcome.

The Congress itself gave some rough indication of the extent to which a democratic spirit and procedure is characteristic of the Councils. The delegates spent most of their time in one or other of the six commissions which were set up to deal with such problems as the business operations of workers' councils and other bodies and organisations. Although these commissions managed to make some amendments to the general resolution which was placed before congress, they were really too large to be effective working bodies. Speakers from the floor came with prepared statements on a wide variety of subjects and this precluded the cut and thrust of sustained debate. Moreover, the time at the disposal of the ordinary delegates was necessarily restricted. One delegate declared that since he would be limited to ten minutes, he would cut out the essentials and get down to the superficialities.

On the other hand speakers did make serious and independent contributions on controversial issues. Thus, on the question of organisation of workers' councils there was much division of opinion on the question of whether councils which met during working hours and paid members at certain rates were encouraging "professionalism" and making a service to the collective the object of interested ambition. There were different views on whether or not qualifications for membership of the councils should

be introduced and as to the frequency with which elections should be held. In other commissions there were opposing views on wage and salary policy, the problem of consumer consultation: the position of seasonal workers and so forth. Nor were delegates incapable of resorting to some familiar forms of free expression. When they lost patience with a boring speaker they simply started to clap him until, in despair, he sat down.

It is a mark of the maturity of the Yugoslavs that they are ready to admit that the workers' councils themselves may become subject to bureaucratic tendencies. It is one of the functions of the trade unions—functions which are both complex and imperfectly defined—to protect the worker from the results of any such deviation.

The Congress of Workers' Councils made this much clear: in Yugoslavia there is a sense of the limitations of any interpretation of democracy which is couched exclusively in terms of development of one common purpose. In practice, it is acknowledged that democracy also involves making provision for the expression of diverse interests. How to provide a theoretical justification for this departure from the monolithic conception is a question which does not trouble Yugoslavs over much. They emphasise that their approach is, in part, an empirical and pragmatic one. If the workers' councils are successful, what does it matter whether or not they are in conformity with the edicts of Holy Church? (In private conversation, Tito allowed that there might be something to be said for analogies with the Reformation).

However, as Marxists, the Yugoslavs cannot fail to appreciate that socialist and democratic relations in production can only be developed and sustained upon the basis of a rapid and continuous expansion of the productive forces. The relative backwardness of their economy and the youthfulness of their working class are seen as the sources of most of the difficulties with which the Workers' Councils are confronted. This is the common denominator of many different problems: the problem of the peasant-workers who simply quit the factory in the Spring and Summer and return to the land; of securing participation from people with a very low educational level; of exerting effective control over technical personnel who possess skills that are in desperately short supply.

A brave attempt is being made to cope with these difficulties. To the extent that it is successful, the State may, indeed, begin to show signs of "withering away". For socialist relations in industry will surely require that the equality of man should find expression in all spheres of life. The omniscient political leader may yet prove to be the first and last of his line.